

Audible Independence and Binding

Casey O'Callaghan

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In “What We Hear,” Jason Leddington (ms) argues against two claims about sounds and hearing. The first is that sounds are proper objects of hearing—that sounds are inaccessible to other senses. The second is that only sounds are heard directly—one hears sound sources only in virtue of hearing sounds. Leddington’s main target is the second claim, so it is my focus.

Leddington’s case against the second claim turns on arguing against *Phenomenological Independence*, the claim that, as presented in auditory experience, sounds seem independent from ordinary material things and happenings. He claims that auditory experiences present sound *sources* as being available for primitive demonstrative reference (*Phenomenological Intimacy*) and that this tells against the Phenomenological Independence of sounds from sound sources. He also argues that Phenomenological Independence is incompatible with *Phenomenological Binding*, the claim that auditory experiences present sounds *as bound to* their sources.

Since Phenomenological Independence fails, Leddington argues, we do not hear ordinary material things or sound sources indirectly by or in virtue of hearing the sounds they make (*the Berkeleyan view*). Instead, he advocates *the Heideggerian view*, according to which one hears sources *in* hearing their sounds and, therefore, “hearing a sound involves an unmediated experience of its source” (ms 6).

Leddington thus argues from a claim about the apparent relations among objects of auditory awareness to a conclusion about the relations among auditory experiences—from the claim that audible sounds and audible sources seem bound and not independent to the claim that one hears sources in hearing sounds.

My work on sounds and hearing has emphasized the possibility of audition-based demonstrative reference to sound sources, as Leddington mentions (ms 13). I also have argued that locational hearing involves hearing sounds to be located at or near their sources. Notably, audible sounds do not audibly seem to travel in relation to their sources. I also have argued that sounds and their sources audibly may seem bound or fused. But if I therefore accept what Leddington calls Phenomenological Intimacy and Phenomenological Binding, must I reject Phenomenological Independence?

It is worth pointing out that Phenomenological Intimacy and Phenomenological Independence in fact are consistent. One might hear sounds, hear sound sources, and hear them to be independent; and one might also be auditorily acquainted with and possess the capacity to refer demonstratively to sound sources. With the addition of

Sonicism, however, Leddington claims that Phenomenological Intimacy cannot be reconciled with Phenomenological Independence. *Sonicism* is the claim that hearing is “through and through” a matter of hearing sounds. In light of this, Leddington claims that the Berkeleyan view and the Heideggerian view exhaust the options—we hear things that are not sounds either *in virtue of* hearing sounds or *in* hearing sounds. Thus, even hearing a sound source directly constitutively involves or depends upon hearing a sound. Leddington thinks Sonicism is not negotiable. Since he holds that the Berkeleyan view requires Phenomenological Independence, Leddington sides with Phenomenological Intimacy and the Heideggerian view. My view is that Sonicism is attractive, but it is not mandatory, so one option is to reject Sonicism. I will return below to this suggestion and to the plausibility of Sonicism.

Even if we assume Sonicism, however, accepting Phenomenological Intimacy does not require rejecting Phenomenological Independence.

Leddington distinguishes *Strong Phenomenological Independence*, the claim that sounds are heard *as* independent from sound sources, from *Weak Phenomenological Independence*, the negative claim that auditory experiences do not present sounds as dependent upon their sources. Since the former implies the latter, Leddington argues only against Weak Phenomenological Independence.

Leddington characterizes Weak Phenomenological Independence as the claim that “sounds do *not* auditorily seem compresent with their sources” (ms 7), where compresence is interpreted as the relation that visible qualities such as colors visibly seem to stand in to the objects that bear them. Thus, Weak Phenomenological Independence holds that “the sort of phenomenological compresence evident in vision is absent from audition” (ms 7). I accept this claim because I hold that sounds are particular audible *individuals* to which audible qualities such as pitch, timbre, and loudness belong, and that audible sounds are not *identical* with ordinary material objects or events. Sounds audibly occur or unfold over time; sounds audibly persist through time and survive changes to their qualities. Since sounds audibly are persisting individuals that bear the familiar audible qualities, sounds themselves do not audibly appear to qualify ordinary material things and happenings. Thus, sounds are not identical with ordinary material objects or happenings, and sounds do not audibly appear to qualify ordinary material things *in the way that* colors visibly appear to qualify ordinary material surfaces and objects or in the way that textures tactually do. This is the force of the following passage of mine quoted by Leddington (ms 8): “Sounds are unlike ordinary tables and chairs—you cannot grasp or trace a sound—and sounds are not heard to be properties or qualities of tables and chairs, since sounds do not seem bound to ordinary objects in the way that their colors, shapes, and textures do. Auditory experience presents sounds as independent from ordinary material things, in a way that visual and tactual features are not.”

Does accepting Leddington's Weak Phenomenological Independence license a view that captures the spirit of Phenomenological Independence? Plausibly, yes. Suppose sounds audibly are *distinct* from sound sources. Distinctness may suggest physical separateness, but it also is fair to say that individual things are distinct if they differ, are not identical, or are distinguishable. Thus, if we can hear individual sounds, if we can hear individual sound sources, and if hearing does not present sounds as identical with sound sources, then this grounds a relatively uncontroversial version of Phenomenological Independence.

One objection is that such apparent distinctness does not suffice for *apparent independence* because non-identical things might nonetheless appear to depend upon each other in some way or another. For instance, one thing can appear to depend causally upon another. One thing might appear to depend for its present existence upon another. And so on. In each case, apparently distinct things do not appear to be wholly independent from each other. So, even though a sound audibly is distinct from its source, if the sound is heard as depending causally upon its source, then it is not phenomenologically independent from the source. By Phenomenological Independence, therefore, one might have in mind something stronger than *apparently distinct individuals*—perhaps the claim that sounds are not ever heard as being dependent for their present existence upon ordinary material things, or that sounds invariably are heard as autonomous from their sources.

Are sounds in any way heard as being dependent upon their sources? Some evidence suggests that sounds are available for attention and demonstrative reference in ways that do not involve attention or demonstrative reference to their sources. Scruton's (1999) discussion of "acousmatic experience" is one example of an attempt to show that this is possible. We can listen or attend to musical sounds in a way that does not obviously involve hearing their sources. In such listening, sounds are not clearly auditorily experienced as bound to their sources or as having source-relative attributes. This is the point of musical listening, according to Scruton. That this is not the normal listening mode does not show that it is impossible. This suggests that sounds are capable of being heard independently from their sources in certain forms of listening; it therefore suggests that we sometimes are capable of hearing sounds in a way that does not present them as being dependent upon their sources.

That this is a possible listening mode does not mean that it is the usual listening mode. It also is plausible that in run-of-the-mill hearing, humans may auditorily experience both sounds and sources, and also may experience sounds as having sources. It is plausible that we do not commonly hear sounds as being wholly distinct from or as completely independent from their sources and, thus, that hearing commonly presents sounds as in some manner dependent upon their sources. Ordinary embedded hearing typically does not involve auditorily experiencing sounds as wholly autonomous with respect to their apparent sources.

Thus, while I accept Leddington's Weak Phenomenological Independence, I prefer to reject his suggestion that its advocates maintain that sounds are "*not* heard as in any way fused with or dependent on the material particulars that make them" (ms 7). Just as there are a number of respects in which we can say that one thing is dependent upon another, there are a number of respects in which we can say that one thing is independent from another. Sounds are not heard as fused with or dependent upon material things and events *in the manner in which visible qualities are seen as fused with or dependent upon visible objects*. The audibly apparent distinctness of individual sounds from individual sources explains what is attractive about Phenomenological Independence without advocating the complete or wholesale phenomenological independence of sounds from sources in each episode of hearing.

Suppose that sounds audibly are distinct from ordinary material things and happenings that are sound sources. And suppose that we accept Weak Phenomenological Independence—the claim that audition does not present sounds as bound with ordinary material things in the manner in which visible colors appear to qualify material surfaces and objects. If we also accept Sonicism, must we therefore reject Phenomenological Intimacy—the claim that hearing presents sounds as available for primitive demonstrative reference rather than mere deferred ostension?

In the case of seeing surfaces and objects, Bermúdez (2000) accepts near visual analogs of Weak Phenomenological Independence, Phenomenological Intimacy, and Sonicism. Bermúdez maintains that one sees three-dimensional objects in a way that is mediated by seeing their facing surfaces, but he nevertheless maintains that vision presents objects as available for demonstrative reference in a manner that is epistemically direct. He therefore accepts a mediated account of seeing ordinary objects but does not reject Phenomenological Intimacy, as Leddington suggests adherents to the Berkeleyan view must (ms 14).

One obstacle to endorsing an auditory account of this type is puzzlement about how awareness as of an individual sound could ground acquaintance with, or epistemically direct awareness as of, a sound source that is distinct from it, so that the sound source is available for demonstrative reference without deferred ostension. This strikes me as Leddington's primary concern. And it leads him to endorse Phenomenological Binding, the claim that we hear sounds "as bound to, or fused with, their sources" (ms 14).

I endorse Phenomenological Binding. Phenomenological Binding does capture the intimacy with which we experience sounds to be related to their sources, and it does help to explain how awareness as of a sound could furnish awareness as of a sound source. It does so because it helps to explain how being aware of a sound could enable one to differentiate a sound source from its surrounding environment, which is

a plausible requirement on perceiving a particular. That is why seeing a facing surface may ground acquaintance with and enable demonstrative reference to its object.

To see how Phenomenological Binding in fact is compatible with Weak Phenomenological Independence, it is helpful to distinguish two varieties of perceptually apparent binding. First, properties may be perceptually experienced as belonging to or as bound to their bearers. One sees the redness as qualifying or as spread out across the surface of an object. One feels the texture as being an attribute of the surface. One tastes the flavor as belonging to or as being instantiated by the apricot. But, as discussed above, sounds are not heard as properties or qualities of ordinary material objects or happenings in the way that other straightforwardly sensible qualities are perceptually experienced as belonging to sensible individuals. Instead, sounds are audible individuals to which qualities such as pitch, timbre, and loudness audibly belong.

There is, however, another way in which non-identical things can appear bound or fused. The parts of an object can appear bound or fused to compose a single compound object to which those parts appear to belong. When you see a complex object, such as a table or a chair, its distinct perceptible parts—the legs, the seat, the top...—may be visually experienced as being fused or bound together into a single perceptible whole. When you see the facing surface of a table, you may visually experience it to belong to, or to be bound or fused to, a larger object, some of whose parts are hidden from view.

How could this apply to the case of hearing sounds and sources? Sounds are heard as bound to or fused with their sources in the sense that sounds are heard as being mereological parts of complex environmental events that in fact involve sounds. For instance, take the event of an automobile collision. Such an event could occur in a vacuum. When it occurs in a surrounding elastic medium, however, a broader environmental event or happening occurs that includes a sound. The sound is part of an event that involves cars colliding in an elastic medium. One hears the sound, and one hears the broader event that involves the cars and the colliding and the disturbing of the medium. One could not have heard the broader event if not for its sound—had it occurred soundlessly, it would have been inaudible. This is part of the reason some may say one hears the crash in or in virtue of hearing the sound, since hearing the sound enables one to discern the crash from its surroundings. On this account, however, one hears the sound as being a constituent part of the broader collision event. The audible sound is akin to the visible facing surface of the table—the sound determines the audible appearance of the broad environmental event that includes the material objects and happenings that we count among its sources.

This allows that sounds and sound sources audibly are distinct individuals, and it allows that sources are heard in or in virtue of hearing their sounds. It allows that

sounds are heard as bound with their sources in the manner of perceptible parts and wholes, but it does not accept that sounds are heard as audible properties or qualities bound to their sources. So, it captures the spirit of Phenomenological Independence while accommodating Phenomenological Binding and Phenomenological Intimacy. And it is compatible with Sonicism.

Should we accept Sonicism? Recall that *Sonicism* is the claim that hearing is “through and through” a matter of hearing sounds and, thus, that hearing a non-sound is an *aspect* of hearing a sound (ms 10). According to Leddington, Sonicism implies that humans hear sound sources only *in* or *in virtue of* hearing sounds, so the Heideggerian view and the Berkeleyan view exhaust the options. Using Leddington’s terms, the direct experience of a non-sound is “immanent in” the experience of a sound, or the indirect experience of a non-sound occurs “in virtue of” the experience of a sound. Sonicism, so understood, implies that every episode of hearing a non-sound constitutively involves or depends upon a concurrent episode of hearing a sound (silence may be addressed as a special case).

This is an attractive line of thought. Whenever we hear some ordinary material thing or occurrence, invariably a sound exists to which we are able to direct our auditory attention should we attempt it. This encourages the thought that hearing something (other than silence) always is grounded in hearing a sound and, thus, that each episode of hearing a non-sound constitutively involves or depends for its occurrence upon a concurrent episode of hearing a sound.

But that thought is not mandatory. We need not say that every episode of seeing a material object depends for its occurrence upon seeing its facing surface. Instead, we may simply see an object that possesses a visible facing surface. Similarly, we may simply hear things and happenings that include or possess audible sounds. We need not say that every episode of hearing a non-sound is an aspect of hearing its sound. It may be a necessary condition on hearing an event that it includes an audible sound, or on seeing an object that it possesses a visible surface, but this does not imply that one hears an event in or in virtue of hearing its sound, or that one sees an object in or in virtue of seeing its surface. Sonicism, as Leddington characterizes it, is negotiable.

This raises a deeper concern. As mentioned earlier, Leddington uses claims about phenomenology that concern the apparent relations among objects of auditory awareness to draw a conclusion about the nature of the relationship that holds between auditory experiences of those objects. In particular, the conclusion (the Heideggerian view) is a specific claim about the nature of the dependence that holds between an auditory experience of a sound source and the auditory experience of a sound: one does not experience a non-sound *in virtue of* experiencing a sound; the experience of a non-sound is *immanent in* the experience of a sound.

Whether distinct objects of awareness appear compresent, bound, fused, overlapping, causally related, or otherwise dependent does not, however, have immediate consequences concerning the specific nature of the relationship that holds between the experience of the one object and the experience of the other. In particular, phenomenology that concerns the apparent relations among objects of awareness may be compatible with a range of views about whether and how the perceptual experience of one thing constitutively involves or depends upon the perceptual experience of another. One's account of the perceptually apparent relations among audible sounds and audible sound sources, therefore, lacks immediate or obvious consequences concerning the nature of the relationship that holds between auditory experiences of sounds and auditory experiences of sound sources.

This lesson does not just apply to the decision between the Heideggerian view and the Berkeleyan view—to whether one hears non-sounds *in* hearing sounds or else hears non-sounds *in virtue of* hearing sounds. It extends to the decision about Sonicism—to whether or not one hears non-sounds *in or in virtue of* hearing sounds. That is, to the question whether or not an episode of hearing a non-sound constitutively involves or depends upon a concurrent episode of hearing a sound.

Phenomenological claims concerning the apparent objects of auditory awareness and their audibly apparent relations thus are compatible with an account that is neutral about any relation of priority or dependence that holds between an auditory experience of a sound and an auditory experience of its source.

References

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