

ARTICLE

Empty Space, Silence, and Absence

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Abstract

The idea that we can perceive absences is becoming increasingly popular in contemporary philosophy of mind, and seeing empty space and hearing silence are alleged to be two paradigmatic examples. In this paper, I remain neutral over the question of whether empty space experiences and experiences of silence are genuinely perceptual phenomena, however, I argue that these experiences do not qualify as absence experiences. Consequently, our experiences of empty space and silence cannot be appealed to as proof of the perceptual view of absence experience.

Keywords: Perception; perceptual experience; cognitive phenomenology; absence; silence; empty space

1. Introduction

Several philosophers have recently argued that we can perceive absences. For example, Anya Farennikova (2013) claims that when we return to our table in the café and find that our laptop is missing, we will quite literally *see* the absence of our laptop. She provides other examples of cases where (allegedly) we perceive absences in the visual modality: discovering that there is no milk in the fridge, noticing that one's colleague is not present at a meeting, and searching for (and failing to find) one's keys in the drawer. She also gives examples from other perceptual modalities: smelling the absence of exhaust fumes in the air, tasting the absence of chlorine in water, and the sensation of missing a step while going down the stairs. Tom Roberts (2016) has argued that we can smell the absence of odours, and Dan Cavedon-Taylor (2017) has argued that we can tactually perceive the absence of our tooth after the dentist has performed an extraction.

In previous work, I have argued that although we can experience absences, and although our absence experiences are often triggered by perceptual experiences, absence experiences are not themselves a perceptual phenomenon (Gow 2021). I defend a view according to which absence experience consists in a kind of cognitive phenomenology, namely, 'intellectual seemings.' On my view, when we return to our table in the café and experience the absence of our laptop, we visually experience the tabletop, our coffee mug, (and so on) and this triggers an intellectual seeming with content like 'my laptop is gone!'.¹ However, the present paper is not about absence experience. Instead, it is about two experiences which some philosophers have claimed (mistakenly, as I will argue) to be paradigmatic examples of absence experience: the experience of empty space and the experience of silence (see Phillips 2013; Richardson 2010; Sorensen 2008; Soteriou 2011).

Experiences of empty space and silence support the view that absence experience is perceptual on the assumption that the following two statements are true:

¹Note: having an intellectual seeming with such content does not require that one tokens this content in inner speech.

- (1) We can perceive empty space/silence.
- (2) Empty space experience/silence experience are kinds of absence experiences.

My aim in this paper is to argue that premise two is false; neither experiences of empty space nor experiences of silence are absence experiences. Consequently, even if we can see empty space and hear silence (something I'll remain neutral on for the sake of this paper), such experiences cannot be used in support of the perceptual view of absence experience.

2. Empty space and silence

When asked to think about the kinds of things we can perceive, our minds will naturally turn first to the everyday physical objects in our local environments: tables, chairs, trees, coffee mugs, laptops and so on. However, some philosophers of perception have highlighted the important role that empty space plays in visual perception. (Cassam 2007; Martin 1992) They have argued that not only do we see ordinary physical objects like tables and chairs and so on, we also see the empty spaces surrounding these objects. As Michael Martin says:

We can think of normal visual experience as experience not only of objects which are located in some space, but as of a space within which they are located. (1992, 189)

Matthew Soteriou and Louise Richardson both take Martin's view as their starting point. We are aware of having a visual field which is defined as the area within which objects are visible. The visual field is a structural feature of visual experience, and results from our having an awareness of our sensory limitations. That is, experiencing vision as having a field involves our awareness that objects located outside our visual field are not visible to us (well, not unless we change the direction of our gaze). The space surrounding the visible objects in our visual field is experienced as empty precisely because it is a region *within* the visual field, and so it is a region in which if there were objects, they would be visible. Soteriou writes:

[T]here is a sense in which one experiences a spatial region as a region within which objects *can* be seen. This is what accounts for the sense in which, in vision, one can be consciously aware of a region of space as a region within which there are no objects to be seen, but within which objects potentially can be seen.

So the correct explanation of the respect in which we can be consciously aware, in vision, of absence—e.g. of regions of space as empty of visible objects—will sometimes need to appeal to relatively invariant structural features of such conscious awareness. (2011, 195)

And Richardson:

I see the place between the bookends as empty in that I see it as a place in which if some visible object were there, I would see it. (2010, 237)

The majority view, which is represented by these quotations, is that empty space experience is a kind of absence experience: experiences of empty space consist in seeing particular regions as places where objects could be (Martin 1992; Richardson 2010; Soteriou 2011). The previous quotation from Martin continues thus: "The space is part of the experience in as much as one is aware of the region *as a potential location for objects of vision*" (1992, 189; my emphasis). Continuing in the same vein, Richardson argues that "to see a region of space as empty, is to see it as empty of visible objects" (2010, 237). Experiencing an area in our local environment as an area of empty space consists in experiencing the absence of visible objects in that area.

Soteriou extends this account of seeing empty space to the auditory experience of silence:

In the case of auditory perception one can be consciously aware of an interval of time as an interval within which sounds can potentially be heard, even if no sounds can actually be heard to fill that temporal interval... . When we hear silence we hear an interval of time as empty of audible sounds, just as in vision we can see regions of space as empty of visible objects. (2011, 198)

And Roy Sorensen states: “Hearing silence is successful perception of an absence of sound” (2008, 267). Both hearing silence and seeing empty space are therefore held to be types of absence perception.

A clarification is in order. It is important to understand precisely why these philosophers hold that experiences of empty space and silence are absence experiences. Their view isn’t just that we see empty space and, since empty space is as a matter of fact an area within which there are no visible objects, we see an absence. The claim is that seeing empty space requires seeing it *as* absent of objects; that seeing an area of space as absent of objects just is what it is to see empty space. Similarly, the idea isn’t that we hear silence and, since silence is as a matter of fact an interval of time during which there are no audible sounds, we hear an absence. The idea is that hearing silence requires hearing an interval of time *as* absent of sounds. It is only if seeing empty space requires seeing a location as absent of objects (and it is only if hearing silence requires hearing an interval of time as absent of sounds) that these experiences will qualify as absence experiences.

Let me emphasise this important point by offering an illustrative analogy. Observe the scene in front of you. It is safe to say that this scene does not, as a matter of fact, include Socrates riding a unicorn. However, it doesn’t seem right to conclude that part of what you are aware of is the absence of Socrates riding a unicorn. The fact that the observed scene involves neither Socrates nor a unicorn isn’t enough to make the experience an absence experience. So, to reiterate, the fact that seeing empty space involves (as a matter of fact) an area within which there are no visible objects isn’t enough to make this experience an absence experience. The view under discussion, which I aim to refute in the next section, is the view that seeing empty space requires seeing it *as* absent of visible objects, and that hearing silence requires hearing an interval of time *as* absent of audible sounds.

3. Experiences of empty space and silence are not absence experiences

The view I am challenging is that experiences of empty space or silence consist in experiencing the absence of visible objects or sounds. It is worth pointing out what should be the obvious point that absence experience doesn’t require experiencing empty space and silence; one can experience the absence of a sound without hearing silence, and one can experience the absence of a particular object without experiencing empty space. One may fail to find one’s keys in a cluttered drawer, and the fridge may be full even if it doesn’t contain milk. Indeed, consider one of the most well-known descriptions of absence experience:

It is certain that the café by itself, with its patrons, its tables, its booths, its mirrors, its light, its smoky atmosphere, and the sounds of voices, rattling saucers, and footsteps which fill it—the café is a fullness of being ... When I enter this café to search for Pierre, there is formed a synthetic organization of all the objects in the café, on the ground of which Pierre is given as about to appear ... But now Pierre is not here. (Sartre 1943, 33–34)

Sartre experiences the absence of Pierre in what seems to be an extremely busy café. The question of whether experience of empty space and silence are needed to have absence experience was easy to settle, so let’s turn to the more difficult question of whether experiences of empty space and silence consist in experiencing an absence.

To avoid any confusion, let me emphasise that my view is not that empty space experiences are always unrelated to absence experiences; indeed, some empty space experiences may *cause* absence experiences. Consider the following example:

STOLEN CAR: You've parked your car in its usual spot in the train station car park. You catch your train home from work, and then make your way through the rows of parked cars in the car park. You reach your spot, but it's empty—your car is not there.

In this case, your experience of the empty car parking space will cause an absence experience—you will experience the absence of your car. On the view I advocate, though won't defend here, your perceptual experience of the tarmac and the surrounding cars causes an intellectual seeming with content like 'My car is gone!' (Gow 2021). Again, I can remain neutral here on whether the perceptual experience in question is simply an experience of the surrounding cars and the tarmac or whether it involves perceiving empty space. Crucially, on the account I defend, the absence experience itself is an intellectual seeming which is caused (but not constituted) by the perceptual experience.

Regardless of whether empty space experience is perceptual, STOLEN CAR provides an example of an empty space experience giving rise to an absence experience. And there are other examples: seeing a gap between two books on a bookshelf may cause one to experience the absence of a book at that location. However, even though empty space experiences sometimes *lead* to absence experiences, in what follows, I will argue that empty space experiences are not themselves absence experiences. Indeed, far from constituting absence experience, the vast majority of everyday experiences of empty space are entirely unrelated to absence experience.

I'd like to begin my argument against the idea that empty space experience is an absence experience by focusing very carefully on the phenomenology of empty space experience. Recall, the view to be rejected is that experiencing empty space just is experiencing the absence of visible objects in that space. That is, the phenomenology of empty space experience is captured by the idea that we experience these regions *as places where visible objects could be*. Now, if this view is correct, then we should be able to describe without hesitation *what kinds of objects* could be present in the empty space around us. In other words, if experiencing empty space requires experiencing it as a place where visible objects could be, it shouldn't be too difficult for us to come up with some examples of the kinds of objects that could be present within that space—the kinds of objects the absence of which we are (allegedly) currently experiencing.

I should point out here that although I think we (adult human beings) should be able to *name* the visible objects we are said to be experiencing the absence of, this isn't essential to my challenge. After all, young infants and animals can experience empty space, although (as pre or nonlinguistic subjects) they wouldn't be able to name which objects they are experiencing the absence of. The important point is, if my opponent is correct and experiencing empty space requires experiencing this space as being absent of visible objects, then we should have some idea about *which* visible objects we are experiencing the absence of. And typically, if we, as adult human beings, have an idea about the kinds of visible objects we are experiencing the absence of, we are generally able to name or describe them.

As it turns out, trying to come up with examples of absent objects is actually rather difficult. Take the empty space above your head in the room you are in right now. Which objects could be present in this space? Which objects are you experiencing the absence of? Note, the challenge isn't simply to produce examples of would-be visible objects which are not in fact present in the space: a goldfish, a copy of *Catch-22*, an armchair, your neighbour's cat, and so on. Nor is the challenge to come up with some sensible suggestions of objects that could feasibly have been present in the space; this is difficult enough—low-hanging lights, perhaps? Recall, on my opponent's view we experience empty space *by* experiencing it as absent of objects. The challenge is therefore to identify those objects the absence of which is what our empty space experience (allegedly) consists in. The fact that we need to

give the matter a lot of thought and exert our imaginations even to come up with some suggestions of objects which we might be experiencing the absence of tells against the idea that our experience of the empty space consists in experiencing the absence of these objects. It is very difficult to understand how experiencing the absence of visible objects can be what explains the empty space experience if we have no immediate idea of what objects we are experiencing the absence of. If empty space experience *consists in* experiencing the absence of visible objects, then coming up with some answers to the questions above should be automatic and immediate.²

The same reasoning applies to the idea that the experience of silence consists in experiencing the absence of sounds. Again, it may be that some experiences of silence give rise to absence experiences. Here is one example:

SILENT DISCO: You have been watching people dancing through a nightclub window and decide to go into the club. You go through the doors and are immediately struck by the silence as you enter the room.

In this situation, your experience of the silence in the club will give rise to an absence experience—you will experience the absence of loud music. (Again, on my own view, this absence experience is constituted by a type of cognitive phenomenology; an intellectual seeming with content like ‘there’s no music!’.) However, the majority of our experiences of silence do not involve the experience of absence at all. Consequently, experiences of silence cannot be absence experiences; absence experience cannot be what experiences of silence consist in.

Think about waking up in the middle of the night and going to get a glass of water. Depending on where you live, you may experience silence on your way to the kitchen, but it doesn’t seem right to think that you’ll experience this silence *as* the absence of sounds. (Again, I’m not denying that silence, as a matter of fact, involves the absence of sounds. I’m just denying that our experiences of silence must involve an experience of an absence.) If we did experience this silence as the absence of sounds, then we should have an idea of the sounds we are (allegedly) experiencing the absence of during our nocturnal journey to the kitchen. After all, my opponent claims that we experience silence *by* experiencing the absence of sounds. Again, although I think we can produce some examples of sounds that could have been present (birdsong, traffic noise, a boiling kettle), it will require some effort of imagination, and our suggestions will be forced and rather contrived. This fact significantly undermines the idea that experiencing silence consists in experiencing a temporal location *as* absent of sounds.³

My argument so far has relied on the idea that if we experience silence and empty space by experiencing the absence of objects and sounds, then our experience must be as of the absence of specific objects and specific sounds.⁴ By specific objects and sounds I mean objects that would be experienced as being particulars if they were in fact present. So an experience as of the absence of a specific object would be an experience as of the absence of a would-be particular, such as a car, a book, an apple, and so on. I’ve argued against this view by pointing out that if it is correct—if we experience empty space and silence as the absence of specific or would-be particular objects and sounds—then we should have a clear and immediate idea of which objects and sounds we are

²Remember, my opponent claims that *all* experiences of empty space and silence are absence experiences. My argument is, therefore, that it should always be possible to quickly come up with examples of the kinds of objects which are absent.

³The clarification I made earlier—that my challenge doesn’t rely on the ability to *name* the objects that we (allegedly) experience the absence of, but just to have an idea of them—also applies here. Of course, adult human beings should be able to name the sounds they experience the absence of if my opponent is right.

⁴I add the qualifier ‘as of’ here as a reminder that I can remain neutral on the wider metaphysical questions regarding these experiences, such as whether they have representational content, whether they are essentially relational, and whether absence experience would require realism about absences. My argument in this paper relates to the phenomenology of empty space and silence experience. My opponent claims that these are experienced as absence experiences, which I deny.

experiencing the absence of.⁵ After all, it is meant to be in virtue of experiencing their absence that we experience empty space and silence. I have argued that we don't have anything like a clear and immediate idea of which objects and sounds we are (allegedly) experiencing the absence of during an experience of empty space or silence. I've tried to prove this by showing how difficult it is even to come up with some forced and contrived examples of objects which could be candidates for the objects we are meant to be experiencing the absence of.

There are two ways my opponent can respond to my challenge: they can deny that experiencing the absence of specific objects/sounds entails having an idea of what specific objects/sounds are absent, or they can deny that experiencing the absence of visible objects/sounds entails experiencing the absence of *specific* visible objects/sounds. In the remainder of this paper, I'll explain why these responses are unsuccessful.

3.a Option one: deny that experiencing the absence of specific or would-be particular objects/sounds entails having an idea of what objects and sounds are absent

To the extent to which there are, as a matter of fact, a huge number of objects that are not part of the scene in front of us (recall Socrates and the unicorn from earlier) it might seem understandable that we wouldn't have an idea of, nor be able immediately to name, which objects are not present. After all, the vast majority of the objects that are not present in our local environment simply won't occur to us. (Try to think of all the objects that are not present in your local environment!) And so, in this sense, it would be true to say that the absence of specific objects doesn't entail our having an immediate idea of the objects which are absent. However, a response along these lines simply isn't available to my opponent. Their view is that we experience empty space by *experiencing* the absence of visible objects, and so, what they must deny is that *experiencing* the absence of specific objects/sounds entails having an idea of what those objects and sounds are, and this is far from obvious.

One way to try to make this idea plausible could be to point to apparently similar situations such as having a word on the tip of your tongue, or a memory just out of reach. One might argue that here we are presented with cases where there is the sense of something highly specific which is missing, but no clear idea of what it is.⁶ If these cases are analogous to our alleged capacity to experience the absence of specific kinds of objects without having an idea of which specific kinds of objects are absent, then perhaps it wouldn't be implausible for my opponent to make this response. However, I think it is clear after some consideration that these cases are not analogous at all. When we are searching for a particular word, we know that we know it—we know that we have a particular word in mind, we just can't quite get ourselves into a state where we can name it. The same is true of the memory example. This is demonstrated by the fact that we'll experience a "eureka" moment when we finally arrive at the word or memory we were searching for. When we do think of the right word, we know immediately that *that* was the word we were looking for. However, when we are presented with the challenge of coming up with the objects that we are meant to be experiencing the absence of, we don't (well I don't) have any sense that we know what the relevant objects are. Proof of this is provided by the fact that we don't experience any sort of eureka moment when we do manage to come up with some candidate objects. (Does it really seem to us that we are experiencing the absence of low-hanging lights in the space above our heads?) I maintain, then, that if we really do experience

⁵I think this is true even if we are nonconceptualists about perceptual experience. Visually experiencing an object entails that it seems a certain way to us, even on a nonconceptualist view—it seems to be a certain size, colour, texture, and shape, for example. If my opponent is going to explain empty space experience as perceptually experiencing the absence of a specific/would-be particular object, then we would have to have some notion of the object we are (allegedly) experiencing the absence of even if we don't have the relevant word or concept to identify or name it. If we really have no notion whatsoever of the specific object we are experiencing the absence of, then our assertion that we are experiencing the absence of a specific object just wouldn't seem credible.

⁶I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for this suggestion.

the absence of specific kinds of objects, then we should automatically have an idea about which specific objects they are. The same reasoning applies to our experiences of silence.

3.b Option two: deny that experiencing the absence of visible objects/sounds entails experiencing the absence of specific or would-be particular objects/sounds

The second way my opponent can respond to my challenge is by denying that experiencing the absence of visible objects/sounds entails experiencing the absence of *specific* visible objects/sounds. Initially this sounds much more plausible than the first option, although ultimately it proves to be unsuccessful. Making this response to my challenge would require my opponent to fine-tune their position and say it's not that we need to perceive the space as empty of specific objects—would-be particulars like cars, chairs, low-hanging lights, and so on—but as empty of visible objects in general. Empty space is experienced as a place where visible objects in general could be, and likewise for silence—it's experienced as a temporal interval where sounds in general could be located.

There are two problems with this response. First, it's not obvious that it would solve the problem: we should find it easier than we do to come up with examples of objects that could be located in the space even if it's true that seeing empty space is just a matter of seeing the absence of objects in general. That is, if our experience consists in experiencing the absence of objects *at all*, it should be easy enough to quickly think of some examples of the kinds of objects that are absent. The fact that it is so difficult to come up with examples of objects to (imaginatively) fill the empty space around us strongly suggests that experiencing empty space cannot be analysed as experiencing the absence of objects in general. Exactly the same considerations apply to the idea that it's the absence of sounds in general which we experience during experiences of silence.

Second, making this move from the specific and would-be particular to the general threatens to undermine the idea that silence and empty space experiences can be appealed to in support of the perceptual view of absence experience. One of the distinctive features of perception, and something that differentiates it from thought, is its particularity. (Gomes and French 2016; Schellenberg 2016; Soteriou 2000) That perception seems at least to be the awareness of particulars (particular objects, sounds, odours and so on) is widely agreed on. (See Montague [2011] for an interesting discussion.) In short, if my opponent concedes my point that we don't in fact experience empty space and silence by experiencing the absence of specific or would-be particular objects (or sounds), and instead claims that we experience the absence of visible objects (or sounds) in general, then they would seem to be in danger of contravening the particularity of perception. Of course, I can *think* about the space around me as being absent of objects in general, but I don't know what sense can be made of the idea that I can *see* the empty space around me as being absent of objects in general. How can one *see* the absence of objects in general? If it turns out that experiences of empty space and silent aren't perceptual, then they cannot be appealed to in support of the perceptual view of absence experience.

My opponent would now seem to have two responses available to them. First, they could deny that perception really does essentially involve particularity. Second, they could argue that the absence experiences they claim constitute our experiences of empty space (or silence) have particularity even though they're constituted by experiences of the absence of visible objects (or sounds) in general. I'll consider each of these responses in turn.

The first option is quickly seen to be a nonstarter, not because it isn't feasible to deny that particularity is an essential feature of perception (it is—most representationalists deny it), but because my argument doesn't require a commitment to particularity as a metaphysical fact about perceptual experience. All that I require is that perceptual experience has *phenomenal particularity*; our perceptual experiences *seem* to involve particulars. Susanna Schellenberg gives the following definition:

A mental state manifests phenomenological particularity if and only if it seems to the subject that there is a particular present. So a mental state instantiates phenomenological particularity

if and only if the particularity is in the scope of how things seem to the subject. (Schellenberg 2016, 28)

This claim is much harder to deny than the claim that perception in fact depends on particulars. This latter idea is generally restricted to veridical (or at least nonhallucinatory experience) but even hallucinations *seem* to involve particulars. Indeed, the kinds of experiences which are said to challenge the metaphysical particularity claim evidently have *phenomenal* particularity. Consider just one example. Imagine seeing a single yellow cube reflected in a mirror. In fact, the image seen is the product of two yellow cubes being reflected by two mirrors and projected onto the mirror you are viewing. Since each yellow cube is sufficient to cause your experience of a single yellow cube, it is unclear which particular yellow cube your experience is actually of.⁷ This may present a challenge to the claim that perceptual experience is always metaphysically particular, but it doesn't challenge the idea that perceptual experience always *seems* to be of particulars. Your experience of the yellow cube will seem to be an experience of a particular yellow cube regardless of what we say about its metaphysical particularity. We would therefore need a very good, and nontheory-driven, reason to deny that phenomenal particularity is a feature of all perceptual experiences.⁸

Let's consider the second option my opponent can take when faced with particularity as a phenomenological feature of all perceptual experiences. This option involves endorsing the phenomenal particularity claim for all perceptual experiences, including experiences of silence and empty space, even though the latter are constituted by experiencing the absence of visible objects (or sounds) in general. This is an interesting move, but it is ultimately unsuccessful. To begin with, it is difficult to believe that such experiences would in fact have phenomenal particularity—how could the experience of particularity arise from an experience of generality? One option here might be to define 'objects in general' in terms of all, or a huge number of, specific objects.⁹ If by 'experience of the absence of objects in general' we really mean 'experience of the absence of all specific objects' then perhaps phenomenal particularity could be preserved. However, this would simply be a version of the first way of understanding the claim that empty space and silence experiences are absence experiences: that they involve the experience of the absence of specific/would-be particular objects. Again, if we really did experience empty space as the absence of specific objects (one, many, or all), then we should have an immediate idea of the objects we're experiencing the absence of. In addition, I wonder whether such an experience is possible. Although we can perceive many objects at once, the number is, of course, limited—we can't perceive all objects at once. Similarly, I'm not sure it is feasible to think that we could perceive the absence of all specific objects. This option is therefore shown to be unsuccessful. Even if it can make good on the phenomenal particularity claim, there is reason to doubt whether such an experience is possible; and if it is possible, it would be an experience of the absence of specific objects, and I have explained why this way of characterising experiences of empty space and silence fails at the beginning of section three.

There is a further worry with the idea that experiences of empty space and silence involve an experience of the absence of visible objects or sounds in general while exhibiting phenomenal particularity. It is difficult to understand how we would be able to individuate particular empty space experiences if they are all constituted by the same thing—the absence of visible objects in general. Recall that, for my opponent, experiencing empty space just is experiencing the absence of

⁷I would like to thank an anonymous referee for this example.

⁸Incidentally, this line of reasoning can also be used to argue against the perceptual view of absence experience. Although many absence experiences will involve our experiencing the absence of particular objects—our laptops, our keys, our colleagues, our teeth—many won't. We may enter a familiar room and have the impression that something is missing without being able to specify precisely which object is missing. The fact that this seems to contravene the particularity of perception principle suggests that absence experience isn't a genuinely perceptual phenomenon.

⁹I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for this suggestion.

visible objects. Understandably, one would therefore predict that we can individuate different empty space experiences according to the different absence experiences they are constituted by. However, if all empty space experiences are constituted by the absence of visible objects in general (rather than by specific or would-be particular objects), then all empty space experiences are, to this extent, the same.¹⁰ It doesn't seem feasible to try to individuate empty space experiences in terms of the objects which are present in the area, since these objects can change and yet the empty space experience will persist. Imagine experiencing the empty space in the areas above the customers' heads in a café. One can continue to experience the empty space while the customers come and go. Similarly, it is difficult to see how we could individuate different experiences of silence if they are all constituted by the absence of sounds in general. And yet, if these experiences really are perceptual experiences exhibiting phenomenal particularity, then we would expect to be able to individuate them.

It's true that phenomenal particularity doesn't automatically guarantee our ability to individuate our experiences.¹¹ Two token experiences can be qualitatively the same if they seem to be of the same particulars in the same viewing conditions. However, in our everyday experience, it is only very rarely that the phenomenal particularity of our perceptual experiences fails to permit their individuation. If my opponent wanted to appeal to this fact, they would have to maintain that the phenomenal particularity of our empty space and silence experiences never allows us to individuate between different token experiences. This would make perceptual experiences of empty space and silence quite unlike our other perceptual experiences. And of course, taking this route assumes we can make sense of the idea of experience of generality having phenomenal particularity in the first place.

Although I have remained neutral on the question of whether empty space experiences and experiences of silence are perceptual, we can see that if my opponent claims that empty space experiences are constituted by an experience of the absence of visible objects in general, and that silence is constituted by an experience of the absence of sounds in general, then it will no longer be reasonable to uphold the phenomenal particularity claim. At the very least, rejecting phenomenal particularity would put pressure on the absence view of empty space and silence to explain why we should think that these experiences are perceptual in the first place. Moreover, we would need a very good, independent (i.e., nontheory-driven) reason to reject the idea that perceptual experiences all have phenomenal particularity. Until we are provided with such a reason, empty space and silence experiences cannot qualify as perceptual on this version of my opponent's view. Consequently, taking this route would mean that empty space experiences and experiences of silence would not support the perceptual view of absence experience.

4. A sketch of alternative views

If my argument has been successful, then we should no longer consider empty space experiences and experiences of silence to be kinds of absence experience. This is a significant conclusion since such experiences are widely held to be paradigmatic examples of absence experience. Of course, it also invites the question: How do we experience empty space and silence if not as absences? Although I don't plan to answer this question here—the aim of this paper has simply been to overturn the dominant theory that such experiences are absence experiences—it will be interesting to consider what the alternative options are. In this final section, I shall offer a brief outline of three

¹⁰I am assuming that we want to be able to individuate our empty space experiences—that experiencing the empty space above our heads is different from experiencing the empty space in the sugar bowl. Of course, my opponent could deny this assumption and claim that all empty space experiences are (qua empty space experiences) qualitatively the same.

¹¹I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing out the significance of this.

alternative views. My aim is not to defend, or even to motivate, any of them, but simply to demonstrate that there are alternative views available.

The first option we can consider is that experiences of empty space and silence are indeed perceptual in nature, but they involve the experience of positive entities, not absences. Clare Mac Cumhaill has developed a view along these lines for empty space. She defends a realist understanding of space, and so empty space is a positive entity in its own right which can affect the phenomenal character of our perceptual experiences (2015). Of course, we now think about space and time in terms of *spacetime*. This makes it easy to extend Mac Cumhaill's idea so that it can accommodate experiences of silence as well. Recall Soteriou's theory that hearing silence is hearing an interval of time as empty of audible sounds. (Soteriou 2011, 198) I have already argued that we can experience silence without experiencing it as an absence of sounds, however, we can preserve Soteriou's insight that hearing silence involves hearing an interval of time. If we couple this idea with spacetime substantivalism (the view that spacetime is an entity in its own right), we arrive at a view according to which hearing silence is hearing an interval of spacetime—a positive entity. (See Baker [2005] for an argument for spacetime substantivalism.)

A qualification is in order here. The view I have challenged in this paper is the view that we experience empty space and silence *as* absences. For the approach outlined above to provide a genuine alternative, the idea couldn't just be that, as a matter of fact, what we are aware of during experiences of empty space and silence are regions of spacetime. If we are going to appeal to spacetime substantivalism to generate an alternative account of empty space and silence experience, the view would have to be that we experience empty space and silence *as* experiences of a positive entity—spacetime.

I suspect it is unlikely that anyone who isn't well-versed in contemporary physics will experience empty space and silence as experiences of spacetime. However, I think a case can be made for the idea that our experiences do seem to be of something positive—a something rather than a nothing—even if this something is rather nebulous. So far, I've followed the existing literature by focusing on visual experiences of empty space, but tactile experiences lend credence to the view that empty space is experienced as a positivity. When we walk or run or wave to someone, we feel the movement of air around us and, as a result, perhaps experience the empty space around us as something positive. After all, it's probably true to say that we don't experience ourselves as being surrounded by a vacuum. In a recent paper, Błażej Skrzypulec has argued that experiences of silence have egocentric, directional spatial content. In other words, during silence we hear empty spatial directions (2021). The idea that experiences of empty space and silence are both, in some sense, experiences of space (a positive entity) is probably more plausible phenomenologically than the view described above. At this point, I should reiterate that my aim is simply to sketch the possible views we could adopt towards empty space and silence experience, not to defend them. With this in mind, let us move on to our second option.

The second option would be to agree that experiences of empty space and silence are perceptual in nature, to deny that they are absence experiences, but also deny that they involve the experience of something positive. In other words, these experiences are perceptual but the perceptual phenomenology is silent when it comes to the metaphysical status of empty space and silence. Empty space and silence are not experienced as absences, but nor are they experienced as something positive. This move is perfectly possible since our project is to analyse the phenomenology of these experiences. While it is true that *entities* must either be metaphysically positive, like the everyday objects around us, or metaphysically negative, like absences, the phenomenology of our experiences can remain noncommittal on the issue. I think this option would be worth pursuing. If the argument I have provided against analysing these experiences as absence experiences is successful, then we can be confident that we do not experience empty space and silence as being negative entities, and although option one above hasn't been ruled out, I suspect it won't be phenomenologically adequate.

The third option I'll consider denies not only that experiences of silence and empty space are absence experiences, but also denies that they are perceptual experiences. It would be possible to develop an account on which experiences of empty space and silence involve cognitive rather than perceptual phenomenology. I have already referred to my own account of absence experience according to which absence experience is an intellectual seeming. When we return to our table in the café to find that our laptop is no longer there, we perceptually experience the tabletop and our coffee mug, and have an intellectual seeming with content like "My laptop is gone!". The idea would be that empty space and silence, while not absence experiences, are still to be accounted for by intellectual seemings, and so our experiences of empty space and silence are cognitive experiences. It might seem that experiences of empty space and silence are more obviously perceptual than the examples of absences we find in the absence literature, and so should be explained by perceptual rather than cognitive phenomenology. However, Indrek Reiland has appealed to cognitive phenomenology in his account of our experience of kind properties, like being an elm tree—experiences that have also typically been thought of as distinctly perceptual in nature (2014). So the possibility remains open. Indeed, Brian O'Shaughnessy provides an account along these lines:

There is no such thing as the hearing-of silence: there is merely an absence of hearing-of anything, occurring in a self-conscious setting which is such that a cognitive experience occurs whose content refers to the prevailing silence. (2002, 333)

I expect it would be possible to build a good case for any of these positions. However, a thorough investigation into the viability of these alternative views will have to be a challenge for another time. My aim in this paper has simply been to establish that experiences of empty space and silence, whether perceptual or not, are not absence experiences.

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