

What is an Object? Dwight Holbrook

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I offer the following response to Jesse Butler's critique "Knowledge and the NOW: What Is the Epistemic Standing of the Present Moment?", his paper being a review and reply to my essay "Is Present Time a Precondition for the Existence of the Public and Material World?", published in *Social Epistemology*.

First, I want to commend the acuity of thought and analysis in Butler's review. My response will focus on his two points of disagreement, the first of which figures essentially as a call for clarification and epistemic distinction, a suggestion well articulated and well founded to which I raise only a tangential concern. With regard to his second point of contention, I have rather substantive reservations which I express below.

Butler's first matter of contention relates to the distinction he brings out between, on the one hand, the emphasis I put in my essay on – as he expresses it – "the conscious act of knowing" together with its necessary connection to "the present moment in which it occurs" and, on the other hand, knowledge itself. (Butler, p. 3) He points out that the latter, while originating in acts of knowing as stated above, should be treated as categorically (or epistemically) distinct and on its own terms – the acts of knowing that originate or sustain knowledge being irrelevant to the knowledge itself. (We presumably understand by this word "knowledge" its being a repository of true beliefs and factual knowledge.) Hence, $2+2=4$. We treat it as a proposition true regardless of when, or by whom, the knowing of that fact occurs or has occurred. I yield to Butler on this distinction between knowledge and acts of knowing, and perhaps I should have been more explicit about the verbal aspect of knowledge I had in mind than to merely rely on the participial form "knowing" to convey the intended epistemic aspect. I will add, however, that this knowledge vs. knowing distinction touches on a more profound problem exposed by the philosophic school of presentism, a branch of time theory that argues that only the present, the NOW, exists. Presentism poses the question: Is there anything more certain than the knowledge we have that we are present? From that starting point, one may speculate: Does knowledge, when conceived as putatively distinct – i.e., as repository of that which the past (or memory) bestows on the present – rest on a fatal contradiction in failing to come to terms with the contingency of its existence on present time? Or does the transtemporal flaw rest with presentism? Bourne poses the problem this way: "[I]f restricted to times that exist (present time), then laws do not extend beyond the present, and thus cannot determine the truth-values of statements about the past and future." (Bourne, 48). We need not go into his solution except to pose the question of how the concreteness of the present affects the meaning of "knowledge", which is another way of asking how the past relates to the present. Is the epistemic

distinction between knowledge and knowing all that clear and justified? The answer may depend on what ontology we assign to past tense and measured time, but I go along with Butler in limiting ourselves from that issue in this discussion. (Butler, 2)

Let us proceed to Butler's second point of contention, the issue (as I understand it) of my conflating acquaintance knowledge of the NOW with "the phenomenal knowledge we have of our own experiences", a conflation brought about by my suggesting that *knowing* by acquaintance is such that a distinction between a knowing subject and a known object does not exist. (Butler, 5)

First of all, it should be pointed out that in his differentiation of acquaintance knowledge from phenomenal knowledge – i.e., from "introspective knowledge of our own mental states" as he describes it in his book *Rethinking Introspection* (*Rethinking*, p. 62) --, Butler embarks on a pioneer direction here that diverges from the view others hold that acquaintance encompasses phenomenal knowledge, a directional shift on his part that he himself avows to. (*Rethinking*, p. 58-9, 166, n. 4) This shift is not over the issue of propositional content. Butler construes both acquaintance and phenomenal knowledge as correctly non-propositional, as characterized for example by the knowledge that comes with just seeing the color red without formulating any truths about it. Rather, the issue is over whether such visual experience constitutes a dichotomy or not: that is to say, whether the experience is better described "in terms of the knowing subject obtaining an epistemic relation with a distinguishable known object" or whether I know the experience by being in it – the knower and known are one and the same. (*Rethinking*, p. 63) Butler takes the second answer to be correct and thereby categorizes the sensory experience of red as phenomenal knowledge.

So, if I understand correctly, his contention is that phenomenal knowledge has to do with "objectless" knowledge (my term) which nevertheless has a claim to infallibility (*Rethinking*, p. 63), the very notion of which gets highlighted when one reads a counter-claim, such as Dennett's, which makes propositional truth the sole criterion for infallibility: "I let Nagel have everything he wants about his own intimate relation to his phenomenology *except* that he has some sort of papal infallibility about it; he can have all the ineffability he wants; what he can't have (without an argument) is *in principle* ineffability. It would certainly not be neutral for me to cede him either infallibility or ineffability *in principle*. In objecting to the very idea of an objective standpoint from which to gather and assess phenomenological evidence, Nagel is objecting to neutrality itself." (Dennett, p. 211; italics his)

That leads us to the crux of Butler's second contention, which is my mistakenly describing the acquaintance knowledge of something I ascribe to nature – an object we call present time or the NOW – as if it were objectless phenomenal knowledge. The issue here, as I see it, is really over the meaning of "object" and "objective".

I take it, as a starting point, that despite the thicket of obscurity and debate over the meaning of that word “knowledge”, if there is to be knowledge at all, whether it be phenomenal or any other, depends on the assumption that we humans can escape from the cul-de-sac of solipsism, subjectivity, illusion, radical constructivism, whatever name you give it. In other words, something is out there (an object), perceivable to some extent, however limited our knowledge of it might be. Something is out there which does not reduce to our mental conceptualizing or objectifying to make it subjectively seem that something (an object) is out there. Butler goes along with this, I believe. On the one hand, he points out that mental objectifying and conceptualizing of an experience doesn’t itself turn the experience into an object distinct from one’s phenomenal state. (*Rethinking*, p. 61-2) On the other hand, he talks about something our mental capabilities do not perpetrate on their own. He talks about the taste of chocolate (i.e., the *real* taste, not the seeming taste), the perception of redness, the experiencing something for the first time, thereby obtaining “a genuine kind of knowledge that we did not have before”. (*Rethinking*, p. 66, 73) He distinguishes, for example, the accurate knowledge of what it is like to be Jack, a person with poor self-understanding, from Jack’s own illusions and lack of knowledge about the facts concerning his emotions. (p. 71) So the issue boils down to this: (1) Can phenomenal knowledge which by its very nature is necessarily accurate, be both objective and without an object? and (2) Can present time, or the NOW as I describe it, be both an “object”, given one sense of that word, and “object”-less, given another sense of that word?

My answer to the first question is “no” and to the second question “yes”. Furthermore, I believe Butler will agree with me on this score, given this clarification I offer of “knowledge” and “object”. By “knowledge” I simply mean one’s exposure to that which comes to oneself, apart from one’s own confabulations and mental constructions (That taste of wasabi is not an invention of one’s mind.¹) By “object” I simply mean that which makes knowledge possible, in contrast to the adjustments, distortions, and processes that are purely mind based. Briefly put, **knowledge iff subject and object are differentiated.**

Having clarified my intended understanding of those terms “knowledge” and “object”, I must agree that Butler is emphatically right in his view that it has been my aim to defend the thesis that present time is an object in nature, that in other words it is not a subjective phenomenon but is as objectively valid as any object of nature that science seeks to shed light on. My point, however, is that knowledge of this NOW comes to us by first-person means and that therefore it is misleading (even if frequently done) to treat the first-person perspective as “subjective”, as opposed to the putative third-person “objective” perspective. (classifications according to Butler, p. 72) I go into this further in my forthcoming book *Material Nature Captured in the Momentary NOW*. It is enough here to

¹ Try tasting wasabi without wasabi. On the other hand, it would seem one can suffer depression solely as a state of mind – unless depression translates into how one sees one’s mood-tinged world and surroundings, in which case they become the object of such a state. Our intimate connection with the concrete world is, I presume, something of what it means to be embodied.

suggest from that title that, coming by first person means, the NOW bears remarkable resemblance to the kind of *object*-less status of phenomenal knowledge that I believe Butler really has in mind in that both the NOW and phenomenal knowledge have to do with knowledge that is truly there (i.e., non-subjective) *yet not material* – that is, not in the class of identifiable measured entities in space and time. On the other hand, the NOW is not limited to conscious states per se. It is foremost about nature.

References

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