

Knowledge, Objects, and the Objective NOW
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In his response (Holbrook 2014) to my discussion (Butler 2014) of his work (Holbrook 2015), Dwight Holbrook's primary counterpoint is a rejection of my account of phenomenal knowledge. He claims that knowledge requires an object, thereby rejecting the possibility of phenomenal knowledge as a distinct kind of knowledge in which there is no object that stands apart from the knowing subject. In his words, "**knowledge iff subject and object are differentiated**" (Holbrook 2014, 37).

It is standard across many instances of knowledge that subject and object are differentiated. When I know that my cat is in my lap, that President Obama is from Honolulu, Hawaii, or that the sun is a burning star mostly composed of hydrogen, there are in such cases identifiable objects (broadly construed to include things, persons, events, facts, states of affairs, etc.) to which I am epistemically related as a distinguishable knowing subject. I fully grant this. However, it simply does not follow from such cases that all kinds of knowledge necessarily entail a subject / object dichotomy.

Does Knowledge Always Require An Object?

Of course, one could simply define knowledge such that it necessarily requires an object. Indeed, Holbrook does so (or comes very close to doing so, at least) in his definitions 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.) By "object" I simply mean that which makes knowledge possible, in contrast to the adjustments, distortions, and processes that are purely mind based (37).

Defined as such, it would seem that knowledge requires a known object that stands apart from one's mind, the knowing subject. While this may sit well with many, and perhaps even most, instances of knowledge, what happens when the purportedly distinct object of knowledge is one's own mind itself? When the knower and the known are one and the same, the subject / object dichotomy may fall apart as a salient demarcation, especially when we are concerned in particular with phenomenal knowledge, knowledge of the character of one's own consciousness as an experiential subject.

Some are inclined to posit introspection as a kind of inner observation here, as a knowledge-generating faculty that takes in one's own mental states as objects. I, however, argue that this is a mistake and favor the reconceptualization of phenomenal knowledge as a distinct kind of objectless knowledge (Butler 2013). When a knowing subject knows the qualitative character of an experience she is having, such knowledge is not constituted by the experience itself appearing or standing to the subject as an object but rather through the knower undergoing the experience as a subject.

For instance, to pick an example in line with Holbrook's approach to NOW (the present moment), my phenomenal knowledge of what it is like for me to be present in this moment, NOW, does not consist of the present moment itself appearing to me as an object. Even though the material world may be understood as an object that becomes knowable through my acquaintance with it in the present moment (a point which I fully concede to Holbrook), this relation between my knowing mind and its acquaintance with the known world should be distinguished from my knowledge of what the experience of the present moment is like for me, as the subject undergoing the experience of being here now, in this particular moment. Both acquaintance knowledge of the world and phenomenal knowledge of my experience are at play in my epistemic situation in this moment, but they should be distinguished if we are to carefully and accurately map out the tricky epistemic terrain involving knowledge of both the world and our own experience.

To be clear, my knowledge of the world through my acquaintance with it in the present moment can be plausibly understood in terms of subject / object relations between me and the things that I know. In fact, as I have already argued (2014), I think that this is the best approach to knowledge of NOW with regard to the issues that Holbrook seeks to address. Moreover, I may conceptually represent both my experiences themselves and the things I know in the world in propositional terms, generating instances of propositional knowledge that refer to both my experiences themselves and the things that I experience as knowable objects. My phenomenal knowledge of what the present moment is like, however, consists in the temporal flow of my occurrent experience itself, which is not an object that stands apart from me as a subject but rather is an aspect of my subjectivity itself. Although this is a quite subtle distinction, it is crucial to distinguish phenomenal knowledge of occurrent experience from both acquaintance knowledge and propositional knowledge here. Phenomenal knowledge is a kind of knowledge that does not have a differentiated object that stands apart from the knowing subject, to be distinguished from any acquaintance knowledge or propositional knowledge that I may have through my experience of the world in the present moment.

I have argued elsewhere for rejecting the subject / object dichotomy in the case of phenomenal knowledge (Butler 2011 and 2013), so I will not belabor the point here. Suffice it to say that defining knowledge such that it requires a differentiation between subject and object is a conceptual possibility, but it does not provide a content-bearing argument against the possibility of a kind of knowledge that does not exhibit the standard subject / object distinction. It merely rules out the possibility by default, through a tautological construction, when in fact knowledge, across its myriad forms, may escape such a singular characterization. Insofar as it is possible (if not also plausible and preferable) to regard phenomenal knowledge as a form of objectless knowledge, it serves as a counterexample to a strict adherence to understanding all kinds of knowledge in terms of subject / object relations.

Objectivity Without Objects

Leading up to his claim that knowledge requires an object, Holbrook poses the following two questions:

(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? (Holbrook 2014, 37)

He answers “no” to the first question and “yes” to the second, adding further that I will agree upon acceptance of his definitions of “knowledge” and “object.” Given that I reject his definition of knowledge, however, as explained above, it should be no surprise that I approach these questions somewhat differently. I think phenomenal knowledge can be both objective and without an object, and I allow that NOW either being or lacking an object depends on how we define things (and, importantly, what kind of knowledge we are considering).

Before I explain my position here, however, it is important to clarify that phenomenal knowledge, as I understand it, is not “necessarily accurate” by its very nature. I do say that phenomenal knowledge is infallible, but only in the deflationary sense that it contains no propositional content by which it could possibly be fallible, or inaccurate (Butler 2013, 63-64). Phenomenal knowledge contains no propositional content that could be either accurate or inaccurate, as it is an entirely distinct kind of knowledge from propositional knowledge. It is thus infallible simply by default, in the sense that it could not possibly be in error, but it does not follow that it is necessarily accurate either. To say so is to misapply a standard criterion of propositional knowledge to a non-standard kind of knowledge. Phenomenal knowledge, as the purely qualitative knowledge of what it is like to undergo an experience, simply contains no truth-evaluable assertions in itself (though we do construct truth-evaluable assertions about it, as I am doing now in this commentary, but that pertains to propositional knowledge rather than phenomenal knowledge).

With this clarification at hand, I will now explain how phenomenal knowledge can be understood as an objective feature of the world, despite the fact that it is an objectless kind of knowledge. When I say that my phenomenal knowledge of my own experience is not an object but rather is an aspect of my subjectivity itself, I do not mean that the knowledge is subjective in the sense of being inaccurate with regard to the objective world. Instead, my subjectivity, including the fact that I subjectively experience it as the particular conscious being that I am, is itself a feature of the objectively real world, of which I and my experiences are a part. Consequently, phenomenal knowledge is an objective feature of the world, in the sense that it exists in the world as a feature of my embodied existence as a subject, despite the fact that it does not contain a distinguishable object apart from my experience.

We must be very careful here with what we mean by subjectivity and objectivity. The existence of experiential knowing subjects should not be conflated with the common understanding of subjectivity as being somehow tainted by personal perspective, unreflective of the objective character of the way things really are, as Holbrook’s descriptors “confabulations” and “distortions” suggest above in reference to the mental

constructions he posits on the subjective side of the subject / object dichotomy. Subjectivity, in the sense of distorted confabulations that misrepresent objective reality, pertains to the fallible conceptually-mediated constructions we generate in our attempts to propositionally describe things, extending beyond the parameters of simply being a subject of experience that pertain to phenomenal knowledge. In other words, the kind of subjectivity that might be a problem for objective knowledge is distinct from the kind of subjectivity involved in being an experiential conscious subject.

Subjects are objectively real beings in the world, even if, as I maintain, their phenomenal knowledge of their own experiences does not stand apart from them in the form of differentiated objects. In fact, this feature of phenomenal knowledge is itself an objective feature of the world, given that we knowing subjects ourselves are beings in the world (and not, say, transcendental egos that stand apart from the objective material world). Arguing for the fact that we exist within the material world extends well beyond the present considerations, so I will not attempt to do so here. Let it suffice to say that there is no contradiction between positing phenomenal knowledge as an objectless kind of knowledge and simultaneously asserting that this knowledge itself is an objective feature of the world, so long as we properly understand what we mean and distinguish objective existence from the presence of epistemic objects.

Back to NOW

Not only does this distinction between epistemic objects and objective existence help clarify my particular take on phenomenal knowledge, but it may also help Holbrook maintain that NOW can be both an objectively real feature of the world while also simultaneously being objectless in the sense of not being a “measurement or objectified configuration” (Holbrook 2015, 123). If my phenomenal knowledge of NOW consists in the character of my subjective experience, with that experience itself being understood as a feature of the objective world, there is a sense in which it is objectively real despite not appearing to me as a distinct object in my experience. Moreover, if I am acquainted with the world through this experience, such that NOW itself is the relational acquaintance I bear between my mind and the world, then the world itself becomes a knowable object, even though my experience itself (including my phenomenal knowledge of NOW) is not a distinct object of acquaintance itself. Moreover, once I engage in conceptual representation of these experiences and objects, I may (if I get it right... this is where error may enter into the picture) obtain propositional knowledge of anything I have the conceptual resources to represent accurately, whether they be my experiences themselves or objects in the world.

The take-home lesson here is that we must carefully distinguish between these various kinds of knowledge and their distinct epistemic properties if we are to accurately describe the epistemic parameters of NOW. While seemingly a simple occurrent event in the flow of time, the present moment is a multi-faceted phenomenon that we can easily misunderstand through tacit assumptions, simplifications, and misrepresentations. Teasing apart the subtly different epistemic dimensions of NOW, however, we can discern how it is something we know in virtue of our experiences themselves (phenomenal knowledge), how it is an objective feature of our embodied existence in the

world at a particular time and place (acquaintance knowledge), and how it is a phenomenon that we may accurately describe in our conceptually-mediated propositions about the world (propositional knowledge). Holbrook should get most of the credit for these observations, given that it is his take on NOW that established the basic approach from which we have been working. I have simply helped map out and refine the epistemic territory. I thank Holbrook for the opportunity to develop these ideas in relation to his work, and look forward to reading his forthcoming book for the rest of the story on the nature of NOW.

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