

***Phenomenal Knowledge, Dualism, and Dreams***  
**Jesse Butler, University of Central Arkansas**

Dwight Holbrook (2015b) expresses misgivings that phenomenal knowledge can be regarded as both an objectless kind of knowledge and an objective feature of the world. He attributes a problematic dualism to my account of phenomenal knowledge, suggesting that my treatment of phenomenal knowledge as a kind of objectless knowledge sets it apart from the objective world, creating a dualistic divide between phenomenal knowledge and the objective world of which I claim it is a part.

In response, I will argue here that this is a misconstrual of my account of phenomenal knowledge. Properly understood, phenomenal knowledge can be both an objectless kind of knowledge and an objective feature of the world. There is no problematic dualism here. Instead, my understanding of phenomenal knowledge leads to a fundamentally non-dualistic epistemology, such that we knowing subjects and our experiences are regarded as inseparable components of the objective world, rather than as outside observers that stand apart from the known world.

Moreover, this understanding of phenomenal knowledge may help overcome a kind of dualism that is implicit in Holbrook's own view, as revealed in his treatment of dreams. Rather than being an experiential domain that stands apart from the objective world, dreams can be understood as events in the objective world, subject to the same spatiotemporal parameters as waking experiences. Experiences, and our knowledge of them, are real features of the objective world, even if the phenomenal knowledge of an experience itself contains no discernable epistemic object that stands apart from the knowing subject.

**What is Phenomenal Knowledge?**

Phenomenal knowledge is knowledge of the qualitative character of conscious experience, knowledge of "what it is like" to undergo an experience of some sort or other. The nature and implications of this kind of knowledge have been a matter of significant debate (e.g. Alter and Walter 2006), resulting in a wide variety of views on the topic. Most accounts of phenomenal knowledge attempt to relate it to other kinds of knowledge, but I have argued that phenomenal knowledge is a unique kind of knowledge that should be distinguished from other kinds of knowledge (Butler 2011 and 2013).

One central feature of my account, which I call the existential constitution model of phenomenal knowledge, is that phenomenal knowledge does not consist of an epistemic relation between a knowing subject and a distinct known object, as is the case with other kinds of knowledge (e.g. propositional knowledge and acquaintance knowledge). Instead, phenomenal knowledge consists of the knowing subject's own experiences themselves. I thus accept phenomenal knowledge as a kind of objectless knowledge, in the sense that it does not contain an epistemic object that stands apart from the knowing subject. In the case of phenomenal knowledge, where a knowing subject knows the character of her own experiences, there is no subject/object distinction between the knowing subject and the known experience. The subject/object distinction itself bottoms out here, so to speak,

dissolved in the unity of embodied conscious experience. I believe this is our best way of making sense of phenomenal knowledge and the distinct epistemic character it exhibits.

Being a physicalist, I also believe that everything that exists is ultimately a part of the objective physical world. This includes our own experiences and our knowledge of them as well, both of which are objective events in the world we share with other minds and objects. Phenomenal knowledge, like everything else, exists in objective physical reality. In fact, by my account, it is constituted by our embodied existence in the world as experiential subjects. Consequently, despite the fact that it does not contain an epistemic object that stands apart from the knowing subject, phenomenal knowledge itself, along with the experiences of which it is composed, is a feature of the objective world. Phenomenal knowledge is an objectless kind of knowledge that is itself an objective feature of reality.

This may appear contradictory if one takes “objectless” and “objective” as competing descriptors of knowledge and experience, but as I have explained before (2015) and will clarify further below, this would be an erroneous equivocation of two separable claims. Describing phenomenal knowledge as an objectless kind of knowledge is a claim about the epistemic structure of phenomenal knowledge, in contradistinction with other kinds of knowledge, while describing phenomenal knowledge as an objective feature of reality is a metaphysical claim about the status and location of phenomenal knowledge and the experiences of which it is composed. They are distinct but compatible claims, which together embody a non-dualistic perspective on knowledge and its place in the world. It is non-dualistic in both an epistemic and metaphysical sense: there is no duality between the knower and the known in the case of phenomenal knowledge (setting aside the structure of other kinds of knowledge here), and the knowing subject is herself a part of the objective physical world, rather than a non-physical thing or property that somehow outstrips or stands outside of physical reality.

### **Holbrook’s Dilemma: Where is Experience?**

Holbrook has drawn upon aspects of my account of phenomenal knowledge in his work on NOW, the present moment (2013), which has been the background basis for our recent exchanges here in the *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* (Butler 2014 and 2015; Holbrook 2014 and 2015b). While there is some fundamental shared agreement between us, as Holbrook acknowledges in his most recent reply (2015b), he has continued to express resistance to certain features of my views, particularly with regard to my claims about knowledge, objects, and objectivity. Most recently, he expresses this resistance through a question about the location of experience, along with a related dualism he attributes to my account (2015).

As I understand them, Holbrook’s misgivings may be summarized in terms of a dilemma concerning the location of experience and the problematic position of phenomenal knowledge between the subjectivity of the mind and the objectivity of the external world:

Where are the experiences we know through phenomenal knowledge?

1. Experiences must be either in our heads or out in the world.
2. If experiences are in the head, phenomenal knowledge stands apart from the external objective world and is thus objectless but also thereby lacking objectivity.
3. If the experiences we know through phenomenal knowledge are out in the world, phenomenal knowledge extends to the objects we know through sensory experience and thus is not objectless. It is a part of the objective world and thereby contains external things as its object.
4. So, phenomenal knowledge is either objectless and lacking in objectivity or it contains objects and is thereby connected to the objective external world.

In the examples he discusses (e.g. sensory experiences and dreams), Holbrook seems to allow for both conditionals (premises 2 and 3) in the dilemma outlined here. Perhaps there are objectless experiences we know purely within the internal domain of our own heads, and perhaps there are objective experiences that put us in contact with the objects of the world, but by Holbrook's lights you cannot have both at the same time. This, I take it, is Holbrook's core complaint against my account of phenomenal knowledge.

This dilemma presents an interesting argument, highlighting Holbrook's reasoning to my best estimation. It is also rather weak however, resting on problems that reveal erroneous assumptions in Holbrook's thoughts on the topic. First, the idea that experiences must be either in our heads or out in the world is a false dichotomy, rendering the first premise false. Experiences could be construed as relations between heads and the world, for instance, in which case they could not be neatly divided between things in the head and things in the world. Moreover, heads themselves are a part of the world, so to describe them as distinct from the external world is metaphysically disingenuous, revealing a tacit dualism between mind and world.

The location of experience is an interesting and controversial topic, as Holbrook mentions, but my account of phenomenal knowledge need not take a stake in the debate. I am sympathetic with (but not committed to) extending the scope of experience beyond the confines of the head, leaning towards an understanding of conscious experience as an interactive state embodied through engagement between oneself and one's environment, but as far as my account of phenomenal knowledge goes, all I am saying is that phenomenal knowledge consists in us undergoing our actual embodied experiences as subjects, whatever and wherever those experiences may be between the head and the world. Even if the experience itself is isolated to the head (as in the case of a dream, for instance), the head itself is a part of the world rather than a separate second location that stands apart from it.

The second premise is also arguably false, and could itself only be true if this same problematic dualism between the head and the world is maintained. The only way that experiences in the head could stand apart from the "external" objective world is if the

head itself is somehow outside the world. I disagree that heads, minds, thoughts, experiences, or anything else of such ilk exist outside the objective physical world, so I fundamentally disagree with the premise. Since two false premises are more than enough to demonstrate the unsoundness of an argument, I will leave analysis of the remainder of the argument as an exercise to the reader (though I will bring up some considerations that are pertinent to the third premise later, in the concluding section). The main underlying problem though has already been revealed: Holbrook is the dualist here, not me!

### **Dreams and Dualism**

The dualism implicit in Holbrook's critique here is perhaps most apparent in his discussion of dreams. Here is what he says about dreams:

One category of experience that can be defended as objectless knowing is clairvoyant dreams in that they shun the immediate sensory experience we open our eyes to when awake. Of course ordinary dreams are fantasy. They are our fabrications. But what about lucid dreams or altered states of mind where it is claimed that the experiencer wakes up to a reality that is not the everyday world? ... It seems what this actually translates to is neither objectless knowing nor subjectivity in a pejorative sense but exposure to a metaphysical reality of some kind that comes to the experiencer, just as the everyday world we are awake to comes to us via sensory means. So we end up in this case with neither sealed off subjectivity nor sealed off objectless knowing, but knowing that impinges upon and is impinged upon by some kind of an outside world and its objects. After all, what is lucidity if not awakening to a world of some kind (59-60)?

On the one hand, Holbrook seems to grant that dream experiences could be a kind of objectless knowing, due to the fact that there are no real objects corresponding to them. On the other hand, he seems to think that dreams could possibly pertain to real objects in a metaphysical reality that exists apart from the experiences within the dreamer's mind. There would thus seem to be two kinds of dream experiences: those which are mere fantastical fabrications of the mind and thus objectless, and those which are genuinely in contact with objects of an alternative metaphysical reality.

For this portrayal of different kinds of dreams to make sense, experiences and objects must be distinct, otherwise the distinction between objectless illusory dreams and dreams of metaphysically real dream objects would collapse. For there to be a genuine distinction here, even if it is a distinction we cannot discern from a first-person point of view (suppose it is difficult, if not impossible, to know whether your dream is a mere fantasy or an entry into an external dream world), experiences and objects must somehow stand apart, metaphysically speaking. But this, then, is the same kind of dualism between experiential minds and external objects that underlies the problematic argument analyzed above as well. In both cases, Holbrook holds tight to a distinction between experiences and objects, between minds and worlds, revealing a rather strong and problematic dualism.

I find this mind/world dualism problematic because it erroneously sets us apart from the objective physical world of which we are a part. This is particularly apparent in Holbrook's approach to dreams, prompting him to posit the possibility of an alternative metaphysical reality, but it is problematic in the case of ordinary waking experience as well, leading to a false and unnecessary divide between ourselves as experiential subjects and the world as knowable objects.

### **Dreams and NOW(s)**

The mind/world dualism in Holbrook's treatment of dreams also brings up a problem with his account of NOW, the present moment. As discussed in his original article on the present moment (Holbrook 2013) and my reply to it (Butler 2014), Holbrook claims that the present moment, NOW, is both objectively real and the foundation of all knowledge of the public material world, in contrast to those who would say that the present moment is merely a subjective property of experience, relative to the observer's point of view. On this account, there is a single objectively-real present moment: NOW. But if dream experiences stand apart from the objective material world, then Holbrook seems to be setting himself up for an even more problematic dualism that undercuts his main objective here, allowing for experiences that are detached from the objective NOW and/or relativizing NOWs to differing experiential standpoints (and thereby also multiplying NOWs beyond necessity).

Consider the present moment in which you are awake, right NOW. In this same moment, there are people sleeping and dreaming, presumably experiencing a present moment within their dreams. Are their experiential present moments occurring in the same moment as your present moment? An objectivist about the common NOW would seem to be committed to answering yes here, on the basis that there is an objective public moment that is constitutive of our shared existence in the world, whether we are asleep or awake. By Holbrook's own account, there is a shared public moment that we are all currently in NOW, in this moment.

But if a dreamer's experience somehow stands apart from the objective material world and also thereby this current present moment, as Holbrook's mind/world dualism would imply, then this would run against his core aim of defending the objective reality of the common NOW. The mind/world dualism applied to dreams seems to require a lack of a real NOW in the case of objectless illusory dreams and a plurality of relative NOWs in the case of alternate world dreams, both of which are in direct conflict with the idea of a singular objective NOW that we all share as members of the public material world.

The only way I see to get around this problem is to reject the mind/world dualism that Holbrook has built up in his critiques of my account of phenomenal knowledge. Minds and experiences should be regarded as components of the objective material world, even when it comes to dreams. The fact that our phenomenal knowledge of what these experiences are like is an objectless kind of knowledge does not entail that this is a kind of knowledge that stands apart from the objective material world and the objects it contains. Indeed, as I will explain below, instances of phenomenal knowledge may

themselves be material objects, even though they do not have a distinct subject/object structure epistemically-speaking.

### **In Conclusion, One More Try**

As a final entry point into our disagreement here, let us suppose that objects exist only in the material world and ask: what might experiences and our knowledge of them be, in relation to these objects in the world? For the sake of argument, let us entertain the possibility that an experience itself is an object in the world. To keep things simple, suppose an experience just is a brain state inside one's head, for instance, as a simple matter of brute identity. Now, by definition, phenomenal knowledge is knowledge of an experience. From these considerations, one may seem to derive the conclusion that phenomenal knowledge is knowledge of an object, that object being the experience constituted by a brain state (recall premise 3 in the dilemma above). This could be another way to frame Holbrook's problem with my view, deriving the idea that all knowledge requires an object from straightforward physicalist assumptions.

The problem, however, is once again a conflation of epistemology with metaphysics. To be clear, I can accept the physicalist metaphysics just described and still be justified in maintaining that phenomenal knowledge is a kind of objectless knowledge. When I say that phenomenal knowledge is objectless, I am describing the epistemic character of the knowledge, and not its metaphysical nature. A known experience could itself be an object (e.g. a particular brain state) while the structure of phenomenal knowledge of the experience lacks an epistemic divide between a knowing subject and a known object.

In fact, this point can help explain Holbrook's puzzlement about the location of experience. He asks about the location of experience as an attempt to problematize my view, but perhaps the real reason the location of experience is controversial and puzzling is due to the fact that our phenomenal knowledge of what our experiences are like does not occur in the form of a distinguishable epistemic object that we can localize. We know our experiences (in the phenomenal sense) as experiences we undergo as subjects, rather than as objects with which we are acquainted and/or about which we construct propositional descriptions (as in the more standard cases of acquaintance and propositional knowledge). In the case of phenomenal knowledge, the knower and the known are identical. They may both simply be a brain state, as an object in the world, but this fact would not conflict with the description of phenomenal knowledge as objectless. The phenomenal knowledge is objectless in a purely epistemic sense, with regard to the structure of an arguably unique state of knowledge (a knower knowing the character of her own experiences), without implication for its metaphysical nature.

Holbrook has conflated metaphysical objects with the epistemic notion of known objects to which a knowing subject is related, but it is crucial to distinguish between these two very different senses of the word "objects" if we are to accurately negotiate the tricky territory surrounding phenomenal knowledge. Since Holbrook makes use of phenomenal knowledge in his own work, I think he could take this point into account to his overall benefit. I have attempted to portray this in our exchanges already, but hopefully this latest attempt will get the point across more effectively. Regardless, these considerations

concerning knowledge should not be taken to negate Holbrook's core ideas about the objective nature of NOW. As I expressed in my original review (2014), I am sympathetic with much of what he says about the objective reality of NOW and offer my thoughts in service of epistemic refinement toward his broader aims.

**Contact details: [jbutler@uca.edu](mailto:jbutler@uca.edu)**

## **References**

- Alter, Torin and Walter, Sven, eds. *Phenomenal Concepts and Phenomenal Knowledge: New Essays on Consciousness and Physicalism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006.
- Butler, Jesse. "Introspective Knowledge of Experience and its Role in Consciousness Studies." *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 18, no. 2 (2011): 128-145.
- Butler, Jesse. *Rethinking Introspection: A Pluralist Approach to the First Person Perspective*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.
- Butler, Jesse. "Knowledge and NOW: What Is the Epistemic Standing of the Present Moment?" *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 3, no. 10 (2014): 5-11.
- Butler, Jesse. "Knowledge, Objects, and the Objective NOW." *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 4, no. 2 (2015): 21-25.
- Holbrook, Dwight. "What is an Object?" *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 3, no. 11 (2014): 35-38.
- Holbrook, Dwight. "Is Present Time a Precondition for the Existence of the Material and Public World?" *Social Epistemology* 29, no. 1 (2015a): 118-144.
- Holbrook, Dwight. "Closing in on Dualism." *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 4, no. 3 (2015b): 57-62.