

Against Jackson on the Existence of Mental Objects

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In 'The Existence of Mental Objects'¹ Frank Jackson argues in support of the view that there are bodily sensations and after-images and that they are mental objects. He claims that we appear to talk as if there are such things, and argues that each of the most plausible ways of explaining away this appearance faces considerable difficulties. Presumably he thinks that if we can't explain away this appearance then we must accept that we really do talk as if there are such things, and so must accept that there are such things if we think that this talk is true.

I have two objections to Jackson. First, I don't think it's at all clear that we appear to talk of bodily sensations and after-images as mental objects. Second, even if we do, I think there are very plausible ways of explaining away this appearance that he does not consider.

I

Jackson says:

We talk as if there were mental objects: '*There is a pain in my foot*', '*This after-image is brighter than that one*', and so on.²

These are bad examples for him to choose. I agree that by saying either of these things I appear to be talking about objects - about a pain in the first case and about two after-images in the second. But I don't agree that I appear to be talking about *mental* objects. I take it, and I can't see any other sensible way to take it, that for an object to be mental is for it to exist in a mind - that to the question, "Where is the object?", ought to come the answer, "In S's mind", for someone S. If there are mental objects at all then my beliefs and desires are prime candidates. And how do I respond to the question, "Where are they"? I don't reject the question as nonsensical. I say "In my mind", or, if I think that the connection between my mind and my brain is close enough, "In my head".

When I say, "There is a pain in my foot", I appear to be talking about a pain. Where is the pain? The natural reply is, "In my foot", and not, "In my mind". So I do not *appear* to be talking about a mental object - I *appear* to be talking about an object in my foot. Of course, someone might convince me, rightly or wrongly, that if I didn't have a mind then I wouldn't have a pain and hence that the pain must really be in my mind rather than in my foot. But it does not matter where I might reflectively say that the pain is. My point is that when I say, "There is a pain in my foot" it is not, contrary to what Jackson seems to think, natural to take it that I am talking about a mental object. It's a bad example.

When I say, "This after-image is brighter than that one", I appear to be talking about two after-images. Where are they? This time there seems to be no natural reply. I can't point to the objects of which they are images and say, "There", because there are no such objects. I can't point to the places that those objects used to be and say, "There", because there is nothing there, particularly not after-images. I might point to my eyes and say, "There", but it would be strange to think that in doing so I was

¹ In Jonathan Dancy, ed., *Perceptual Knowledge* (OUP, Oxford, 1988), pp. 113-26.

² p. 113.

pointing to the after-images. After all, they *look* as though they're out in the world, not in my eyes. I might, after reflecting upon the difficulty of finding somewhere that I can point to as being where they are, say that they're in my mind. That would indeed be to claim that they are mental objects. But, again, it does not matter where I might reflectively say that the after-images are. My point, again, is that when I say, "This after-image is brighter than that one", it is not, contrary to what Jackson seems to think, natural to take it that I am talking about mental objects. It's not quite as bad an example, but it's still a bad example.

The situation in which I am most likely to talk as if bodily sensations are mental objects is when I experience pain in a phantom limb - a phantom foot, say. If we do talk of pain as an object in such cases, then surely we talk of it as a mental object - where else could we think that such a pain is but in the mind? But *do* we talk of pain as an object in such cases? It is *not* natural to say that there is a pain, because I don't believe that there actually *is* one - it's an illusion. It *is* natural to say that it *feels like* there is a pain, but that is not to say that there actually is one. I might say that I'm having a painful experience, but that is not obviously to be using the phrase "a painful experience" as a name rather than as a description of a state. I might say that there is a pain in my mind, but that seems rather unnatural - more the product of reflection than an intuitive description of the situation. My point is that even in situations like this, in which we are most likely to think of bodily sensations as mental objects, the way we talk is not *naturally* taken to be as if they are mental objects. And I could make a similar point in the visual case.

Jackson claims (i) that we talk as if bodily sensations and after-images are mental objects, and (ii) that such talk cannot be explained away. In this section I have called into doubt the truth of (i). In the next section I'll grant Jackson the truth of (i) and raise doubts about the truth of (ii).

II

Jackson wants to defend the view that statements like the following commit us to the existence of sensations as mental objects:

- (1) I have a throbbing, painful sensation in my knee.

(This is one of his examples.) The idea is this: (i) the logical form of (1) is $(\exists x)(I \text{ have } x \ \& \ x \text{ is a sensation} \ \& \ x \text{ is painful} \ \& \ x \text{ is my knee})$, where a sensation is a mental object; (ii) (1) is sometimes true; and (iii) (1) can only be true if $(\exists x)(x \text{ is a sensation})$. There are several ways to argue against this view, each of which Jackson considers. It could be argued that (1) is never true, which Jackson rejects as obviously mistaken. It could be argued that being a sensation is not being an object (and so not being a mental object) but being a complex of physical objects, which Jackson takes to be implausible for what he claims are familiar reasons. Or it could be argued that the logical form of (1) is not the one given, but rather one that does not commit us to the existence of any mental object. The idea behind this last strategy is that although we appear in (1) to be attributing properties to a mental object, we are actually doing something else. It is this last strategy that Jackson is concerned to undermine in his paper. He considers several versions of the last strategy and argues against each. I agree with him that each faces what seem to be insurmountable difficulties, at least as he presents them. But there are

two strategies, ones that he calls the “state theory” and one that he calls the “adverbial theory” which I think can be presented in a way that he does not consider, and it’s a way that I think shows them to have some promise.

According to the state theory, to say that I have a painful sensation is to say that I am in a particular state (sensation) which has a particular property (being painful). The word “painful” expresses a property of the state rather than of any object. The only object referred to is me, and in making such a claim I am not committed to the existence of anything over and above myself. The logical form of the statement is similar to that of “I am hot”, in which I am said to be in a particular state (temperature) which has a certain property (being hot), and in which the only object referred to is me. To say that I have a throbbing, painful sensation in my knee is, according to the theory, to say that I am in the sensation state and that it is throbbing, painful and in-my-knee (a property, not a location). Against this Jackson raises two objections. The “many properties” objection is that to say that I have a throbbing sensation and a painful sensation and an in-my-knee sensation is, according to the theory, to say that I am in the sensation state and that it is throbbing, painful and in-my-knee. That is, it is the same as saying that I have a throbbing, painful sensation in my knee. But that’s wrong - the one can be used to say quite a different thing from the other. It is no use to point out that if I have a throbbing sensation and a painful sensation then I have a throbbing sensation *here* and a painful sensation *there* (that is, each sensation has a location), which according to the state theory is to say that I am in the sensation state and that it is throbbing and here and painful and there. The problem remains: to say, instead, that I have a throbbing sensation *there* and a painful sensation *here* is, according to the state theory, to say the same thing, which is wrong. The “complement” objection is that it is possible to say that I have throbbing sensation and a non-throbbing sensation (if, for example, one is in my knee and one is in my foot). But according to the state theory that is to say that I am in the sensation state and that it is both throbbing and non-throbbing, and there is no such state because nothing can have both a property and its complement. So according to the theory I shouldn’t be able to say this. The problem for the state theory is that it can only allow me to be in one sensation state. To be in more than one is for those states to be objects to which I stand in relation, and that is just the ontological commitment that the theory is trying to avoid. But a single state doesn’t seem to have enough structure to be what our sensation talk is about - I don’t talk about what *I* feel like, but about what various *parts of me* feel like.

The adverbial theory closely resembles the state theory. According to it, to say that I have a painful sensation is to say that I am doing something (sensing) in a particular way (painfully). The word “painful” serves to individuate the way in which I am sensing. The only object referred to is me, so in making such a claim I am not committed to the existence of any object over and above myself. The logical form of the statement, according to the theory, is similar to that of “I am running quickly”, in which I am said to be doing something (running) in a particular way (quickly), and in which no object is referred to apart from me. Jackson considers three ways that the theory might construe the statement that I have a throbbing, painful sensation in my knee. First, as saying that I am sensing throbbingly painfully in-my-kneely, along the lines in which I might say that I am writing astonishingly slowly. Second, as saying that I am sensing [(throbbing)-(painful)-(in-my-knee)]-ly in which the adverb here is structureless. And third, as saying that I am sensing throbbingly and painfully and in-my-knee-ly, along the lines in which I might say that I am writing slowly and carefully. Against the first

two he argues that they do not license the inference from “I have a throbbing, painful sensation in my knee” to “I have a throbbing sensation in my knee”, and they should. Against the third he raises objections analogous to those raised against the state theory. The “many properties” objection is that to say that I have a throbbing sensation and a painful sensation and an in-my-knee sensation is, according to the theory, to say that I am sensing throbbingly and painfully and in-my-kneely. That is, it is the same as saying that I have a throbbing, painful sensation in my knee. But that’s wrong, for reasons given above. The “complement” objection is that it is possible to say that I have a throbbing sensation and a non-throbbing sensation, but according to the adverbial theory (under its present construal) that is to say that I am sensing throbbingly and non-throbbingly, and I cannot do that (just as I cannot run quickly and non-quickly). So according to the theory I shouldn’t be able to say this. The problem for the adverbial theory is similar to that faced by the state theory – it can only allow me to be engaged in one act of sensing at a time (just as I can only be engaged in one act of running at a time). But a single act of sensing doesn’t seem to have enough structure to be what our sensation talk is about – rather than thinking of it as talk about what *I* am doing, we really need it to be about what *parts of me* are doing (or if there are no such parts, as in the case of phantom pain, about what parts of my mind are doing). But that would involve ontological commitments that the theory is trying to avoid.

I agree with Jackson about the problems faced by the state and adverbial theories as he presents them. But I think that both can be modified to deal with them. According to the state theory, to say that I have a throbbing, painful sensation in my knee is to say that I am in the sensation state and that it has the properties of being throbbing, painful and in my knee. According to the adverbial theory (construed in the third way) it is to say that I am sensing throbbingly and painfully and in-my-knee-ly. I suggest, instead, that the state theory takes it to say that I am in the sensation state and that it has the property of, “There is a throbbing pain in my knee”, and that the adverbial theory takes it to say that I am sensing “There is a throbbing pain in my knee”-ly. Perhaps more naturally, I suggest that the state theory takes it to say that I am in the sensation state that *p*, and that the adverbial theory takes it to say that I am sensing that *p*, where *p* is the proposition expressed by “There is a throbbing pain in my knee”. What I am suggesting is that instead of trying to describe my sensation state using properties expressed by predicates like “throbbing” and “painful”, we describe it using propositions expressed by sentences like “There is a throbbing pain in my knee”. And instead of trying to describe the manner in which I’m sensing using properties expressed by adverbs like “throbbingly” and “painfully”, we describe it also by using propositions. I think this is quite a natural suggestion: we are already used to describing belief states and believings using propositions, so why not sensation states and sensings?

The suggestion meets both the many properties and complement objections to the state theory. Saying that I have a throbbing sensation and a painful sensation is different, according to the modified theory, from saying that I have a throbbing, painful sensation – the first says that I am in the sensation state that there is a throb (here) and a pain (there), whereas the second says that I am in the sensation state that there is a throb and a pain (here). And to say that I have a throbbing sensation and a non-throbbing sensation is not to contradict myself – it is to say that I am in the sensation state that there is a throb (here) and a non-throb (there). Similarly, it meets both the many properties and complement objections to the adverbial theory as well. The advantage gained by both theories is that they retain their modest ontologies (they are still only

committed to the existence of the sensing subject), yet by using propositions they can much more finely individuate properties of sensation states and modes of sensings.

I think, then, that both the state and adverbial theories can be re-presented in a way that answers Jackson's criticisms, so he has not successfully established that our seeming to talk of sensations as mental objects cannot be explained away.