

Hearing That It Is Silent: How to Hallucinate a Non-Perception

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Abstract: What do we perceive when we experience silence? The traditional position denies that experiences of silence are perceptions because to perceive is to perceive *something*. If this is the case, then it does not seem possible to hallucinate silence because there would be no object of the hallucinatory perceptual experience. Yet our ability to hallucinate silence is intuitively plausible. In this paper, I develop an account of the traditional view on which the hallucination of perceptual absences is possible. Utilizing a disjunctivist notion of hallucination, I emphasize one's epistemic access to the relevant perceptual information rather than their perceptual object to account for the experience of silence for a hearing person in both veridical and hallucinatory cases.

Discussion surrounding our experience of silence centers around the debate between whether or not it is possible to *perceive* silence. The traditional position asserts that we do not, in fact, hear silence because when there is no sound (silence), there is nothing to be heard (Phillips 335). This claim rests on the object-exclusivity principle stating that to hear is to hear a sound (338). Instead, the experience we describe as "hearing silence" should be rephrased as "hearing *that* it is silent," rendering the act cognitive rather than perceptual. For this reason, this view is also called the "cognitive theory" of silence perception.

The cognitive theory is challenged by placing pressure on the reasons why we intuit that we hear silence. Many of these reasons are expressed by Ian Phillips in his paper “Hearing and Hallucinating Silence,” in which he defends the view that we can hear silence. Phillips relates the emphasis Roy Sorensen (in his book *Seeing Dark Things*) places on the qualitative aspect of experiential states of silence (339). Phillips himself argues by citing our ability to attend to the potential for sound as well as our ability to listen to silence (352, 357).¹ Objections to the cognitive theory along these lines can ultimately be expressed by the challenge that we seem to be able to hallucinate silence, a phenomenon which the cognitivist dismisses. That is to say, our seeming ability to hallucinate silence provides support for treating silence as a “perceptual object,” yet this notion of silence is precisely what the cognitive theory refutes.

Phillips argues that the cognitive theory cannot provide an account of hallucinating silence. If “hearing silence” is nothing more than an experience of (or perhaps more strongly, an awareness of) a lack of auditory stimuli, then there is nothing to distinguish the experiences of a hearing person in a silent environment and that of a profoundly deaf person. For this reason, the cognitive theory must posit some additional “cognitive attitude” that is a necessary condition of hearing *that* it is silent. Phillips asserts that because this attitude cannot feature in the hallucination of silence, it is not possible, on the cognitive theory, to hallucinate silence (336).

This is illustrated as follows:

1. Hearing that it is silent necessarily involves a cognitive attitude (such as knowing or believing that it is silent)

¹ Another attempt to defend the claim that we hear silence is provided by the contrast view, which argues that we may hear silence *in virtue* of hearing sound. On this view, we hear silence in the form of pauses or gaps in sound (341).

2. Hallucinations and veridical perceptions result in the same mental state in the subject
 3. Hallucinating silence necessarily involves this cognitive attitude —by (1) and (2)
 4. Hallucinating silence cannot involve this cognitive attitude
- C. A contradiction —by (3) and (4)

It is clear why a cognitive attitude of knowing that it is silent cannot be a component of hallucinating (a non-veridical perceptual experience) silence. Believing that it is silent is not compatible either because we may readily imagine someone experiencing a hallucination of silence who does not actually believe that it is silent (perhaps because they are aware of the fact of their own hallucination). Phillips takes the fact that formulating “hearing that it is silent” as the experience of a lack of auditory stimuli alongside a requisite cognitive attitude leads to a contradiction when applied to cases of hallucination to conclude that it is not possible for a person to hallucinate silence on the cognitive theory.

The second premise of Phillips’ argument is taken from the common-kind conception of hallucination which asserts that when a person is experiencing a hallucination they are in the very same mental state as they would be if the experience were a veridical perception (Macpherson 10). This view lends itself to global skeptical arguments such as the brain-in-a-vat scenario or the Cartesian demon. That is, the cognitive process that a person undergoes when they are veridically perceiving is the same as when they are hallucinating. In the case of hallucination, it is because of a “tricky” cause, such as a mad scientist (or evil demon) artificially stimulating the brain. Phillips adopts this view of hallucination in order to support his conclusion.

I will refute Phillips' objection by providing an account of hallucinating silence on the cognitive view. Utilizing an alternative conception of hallucination called disjunctivism, which denies the second premise of Phillips' above argument, I will delineate an important epistemic distinction (beyond mere veridicality) between the case of hearing that it is silent and hallucinating silence. This defining condition of hearing that it is silent will serve to provide a reading of the requisite cognitive attitude for the perceptual experience of silence which not only allows us to establish the case of hallucinating silence, but also respond to a further challenge to the cognitive theory from infant and animal cognition. I would like to further note before continuing that I will be following the convention of using the term "perception" (and related, e.g. "perceiving," "hear/ing") to refer to veridical perceptual experiences of the world and the term "perceptual/experiential state" to refer to the mental state induced in the subject. Thus, because a hallucination is not a perception of the world, I will speak only of the state that the subject experiences. Further, because the cognitive theory rejects the notion that silence can be perceived, "hearing that it is silent" will also only be referred to by the resulting mental state.

A disjunctivist view contrasts with the common-kind conception of hallucination. There are many variations on this stance, but at its core disjunctivism refutes the claim that the perceptual state engendered by a hallucination is the same mental state as that of a veridical perception (19). While the common-kind view maintains that the cognitive processes that result in the perceptual experience remain the same, where an abnormal stimulus is the cause of a hallucination, the disjunctivist argues that when a person is hallucinating their cognitive system is operating abnormally. As a result, the mental state induced by a veridical perception is distinct from the mental state induced by a hallucination. The distinction between the common-kind and

disjunctivist view can be illustrated by imagining the cognitive-perceptual system as a telescope. On the common-kind view, a person's telescope is always correctly focused on the world. A hallucination is described as an incorrect image being held in front of the telescope such that it blocks out the correct image of the world and create a false perceptual experience. In contrast, a disjunctivist describes hallucination as a case in which a person's telescope is incorrectly focused on the world.

Phillips reduces the cognitivist's ability to account for the hallucination of silence to contradiction on the assumption that the mental state produced by a hallucination is the same as that of a veridical perception. However, if we allow that these two mental states are different, his conclusion does not follow. Most simply, on a disjunctivist conception of hallucination, it may be a requirement of a veridical perceptual experience of silence that the experience of a lack of auditory stimuli is accompanied by a certain cognitive attitude, while this attitude is absent from the hallucination of silence.

However, it still seems possible that one's hallucination of silence could involve this cognitive attitude (so long as the attitude is not "knowing that it is silent"), even if it is not necessary that it does. Further, on simply this imagining of the hallucination of silence, where it is merely the non-veridical experience of an absence of sound, then it would be the case that the profoundly deaf are perpetually hallucinating silence. Thus, it is necessary to explicate how exactly the two mental states differ. Doing so will further provide an answer to what, more precisely, is the "cognitive attitude" that enables a veridical perceptual experience of silence on the cognitive theory.

On the cognitive theory, when a hearing person is in a situation in which they (veridically) hear that it is silent, they do not merely experience the absence of sound, but moreover this experience indicates to them something about their current environment.² This is necessitated by the fact that if the veridical experience of silence were not accompanied by this epistemic qualifier, then there would be nothing to distinguish the experiences of a hearing person in a silent environment with the experiences of a profoundly deaf person, which is intuitively unsatisfactory.

However, in keeping with a disjunctivist conception of perceptual experiences, this epistemic qualifier may be left simply as the necessary condition that the subject must be in a certain epistemic position to the world. Put another way, the subject is capable of epistemic gain regarding auditory information. A person hallucinates silence when there is the perceptual experience of a lack of sound and they are in a position such that auditory information is “blocked off.” We can imagine that in the former case of veridically hearing that it is silent, the subject’s “telescope” is focused correctly on the world (making auditory information epistemically accessible), while in the latter case of hallucinating silence, the subject’s “telescope” is not focused correctly on the world. Because their telescope is unfocused, auditory information is rendered epistemically inaccessible.

While this account of silence perception on the cognitive theory eliminates the need to fulfill the requisite cognitive attitude with anything as strong as “knowing” or “believing” that it is silent and makes possible the hallucination of silence on the theory, left here it is still unclear

² An objection to the notion of our ability to hear silence (or hear that it is silent) is that it is, in actuality, impossible for a hearing person to be in a situation in which there is a complete lack of auditory stimuli because, at a minimum, our very auditory systems themselves produce noise. One response to this objection is to consider the perception of silence as the perception of localized silences, such as the ceasing of the sound of running water from a faucet (Phillips 348). The following analysis is equally applicable to a reformulation of the discussion along these lines.

how the mental state of a hearing person hallucinating silence is any different from the position of a profoundly deaf person. Thus, we must note an important way in which the epistemic inaccessibility of auditory information is different for a hearing person hallucinating silence and a profoundly deaf person's daily experiences. For a hearing person, auditory information is perceptually meaningful in a way beyond its objective epistemic accessibility for that person at a given time. In a sense, a hearing person is perceptually "attuned to" or "aware of" their auditory circumstances (I say this irregardless of the fact of whether or not the person is aware that they are hallucinating).³ It is this awareness that provides us with the ability to turn towards auditory cues as a source of information for acting within the world. Importantly, this ability holds even in cases concerning the lack of a cue, as this is still an indicator of one's environmental circumstances. For a profoundly deaf person, not only is auditory information epistemically inaccessible, but it holds no similar perceptual meaning. A profoundly deaf person lacks this "auditory awareness." For this reason, it cannot be said that on this conception of hallucination under the cognitive theory, the deaf are rendered perpetually hallucinating silence.

There remains a concern that a disjunctivist interpretation does not maintain the assertion that defines the cognitivist's position: namely, that experiential states of silence are not perceptions because to perceive is to perceive *something*. Given the core claim that silence is not perceivable, is it possible to coherently assert that one can hallucinate it? Although neither experiences of silence on the cognitive theory nor hallucinations are considered perceptions, this does not prevent either of them occurring as "perceptual experiences." The concern arises by considering a perceptual experience as the experience of a "perceptual object" (regardless of the

³ Phillips utilizes a similar notion of an "auditory consciousness" in support of his argument for our ability to *hear* silence from a Moorean analysis of objectless consciousness (357).

veridicality of the case). For the cognitivist, silence does not figure as a perceptual object, and for this reason could neither be hallucinated nor perceived. However, in light of the previous discussion we may reconsider a perceptual experience not as fulfilled by a perceptual object but instead defined by the uptake (or attempted uptake, in the case of a hallucination) of situational information. Granted this, we have a view upon which the profoundly deaf are not capable of either hearing or hallucinating silence, while a hearing person may hear, or hallucinate, *that* it is silent.

It is now time to address an important upshot of this conception of silence perception and silence hallucination on the cognitive theory brought on by eliminating the need to posit a necessary “knowledge” or “belief” that it is silent. Firstly, this conception of hallucinating silence is not impeded by whether or not the subject is aware of their own hallucination (a potential difficulty pointed out by Phillips (336)). Secondly, Phillips argues against the cognitive theory by noting that the perceptual experience of silence is denied to creatures that are unable to possess a cognitive attitude of knowing or believing that it is silent, such as babies and (at least some) animals. It seems much more plausible that babies and animals can be considered to be in a position of epistemic gain (including an auditory awareness), in some sense, regarding auditory information than it is to require that these beings be capable of “knowing” or “believing” that they are hearing silence. Thus, by eliminating the need to posit anything as strong as knowledge or belief that it is silent, the ability to have a perceptual experience of silence can be more widely granted.

I have defended the conception of silence perception on a cognitive theory; specifically, the ability for this theory to provide an account of hallucinating silence. Doing so answers, at

least in part, to the objections from the intuition that we can perceive silence which are embodied in the attraction of positing a view which can support our ability to hallucinate silence. I provide an account of hallucinating silence on a disjunctivist conception of hallucination, where the mental state induced by a veridical perceptual experience of silence and a hallucinatory perceptual experience of silence importantly differ with respect to the subject's epistemic relation to auditory information. I first clarify that this epistemic relation is not merely described by the veridicality of the perceptual experience, but also encompasses an auditory awareness which lends additional meaningfulness to the information conveyed by the perceptual experience. It is on this distinction that the experience of a hearing person hallucinating silence is distinguished from that of a profoundly deaf person, thus avoiding the conclusion that the profoundly deaf are perpetually hallucinating silence. I then address the important upshot that this analysis allows for silence perception by babies and animals by rejecting the necessity to posit anything as strong as the capacity to "know" or "believe" to satisfy the requisite cognitive attitude. It is on both of these fronts that the foregoing analysis secures intuitive favor for the cognitive theory.

References

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