In *Sense and Sensibilia* J.L. Austin mounts a polemical assault on a philosophical view of perception that is now rarely endorsed (the sense-datum theory), and much of Austin’s discussion is taken up with the attempt to dismantle an argument that few now take seriously (the ‘argument from illusion’). So it might be thought that if one wanted to salvage from that work ideas relevant to current philosophical concerns about perception, one would do well to look past the negative, critical remarks that Austin makes about the sense-datum theory, and focus instead on trying to distil from his comments the positive philosophical theses with which he sought to replace it. However, while I don’t want to suggest that there are no such positive theses to be uncovered in *Sense and Sensibilia*, I do think that if we were to adopt that approach, we would risk losing sight of some of the important lessons that Austin hoped we could learn from his lectures. Austin himself suggests as much at the end of his first lecture. There he says that the negative exercise of “unpicking one by one, a mass of seductive (mainly verbal) fallacies, of exposing a wide variety of concealed motives” can teach us “something positive in the way of a technique” – a technique for “dissolving philosophical worries (some kinds of philosophical worry, not the whole of philosophy)” (1962: 4-5).

One might be tempted to dismiss the “technique” that Austin is alluding to here as yet another outdated relic that is irrelevant to current mainstream philosophical debates about perception. For one might suspect that the technique in question amounts to no more than an application of the sort of unfashionable ‘ordinary language’ philosophy with which he was to become associated. However, if we look to the negative, critical remarks that Austin actually makes in his discussion of sense-datum theories, we find that where he does mention ordinary language, and where he does allude to what the ‘plain man’ might say, this merely seems to be in the service of exposing the philosopher’s susceptibility to “oversimplification”, and in the service of unpicking the “tidy-looking” but “bogus dichotomies” that often structure philosophical thinking. Moreover, when pressing home those critical points, Austin does not restrict himself to presenting arguments that focus pedantically on the use of words and phrases in ‘ordinary’ language. For example, in his attempt to expose “oversimplification” and disrupt “bogus dichotomies”, Austin often brings to our attention the perception of phenomena that philosophers tend to ignore when they construct and present their positive accounts of perceptual experience – perceivable phenomena that are not the sort of “moderate-sized specimens of dry goods” that philosophers frequently cite in when giving the “same small range of *jejune* ‘examples’” (1962: 3). For instance, he mentions the perception of rainbows, mirror images, shadows, rivers, people’s voices, images on the screen at the cinema, vapours, and gases.

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1 For discussion of the idea that Austin did not think that an investigation of language use was more than a preliminary to theorising in philosophy, see Longworth 2015, and Martin (online manuscript).
My aim in this paper is to extract something of this Austinian technique, and explore ways in which its application may be relevant to some current philosophical debates about perception – and in particular, current debates about auditory perception and the objects of auditory perception. In one respect my application of the technique is somewhat negative in intent. It will be used to suggest that there are gaps in some of the arguments that philosophers of auditory perception have offered in support of their proposals about sounds and the content of auditory perception. But the more positive aim is to suggest that the application of the technique can also open up alternative ways of thinking about the variety of entities that we encounter in auditory perception, which in turn may “dissolve” certain philosophical puzzles, or worries, that have been discussed in the literature. I shall also be making some general remarks about how such matters bear on the broader issue of the way in which philosophers classify our perceptual experiences as ‘veridical’ and ‘illusory’.

I

Early on in his lectures, Austin complains about what he sees as the unwarranted tendency of philosophers to count as illusory a number of perceptual experiences that the ‘plain man’ would not regard as in any way deceptive. One might think that it should be possible to resolve disagreements about whether any given perceptual experience is an illusion by simply determining, in any such disputed case, (a) what the objects of perception are, (b) what our senses are telling us about those objects of perception, and (c) whether there is any reason to think that the testimony of our senses is misleading. And one might further assume that where the philosopher and ‘plain man’ disagree over whether a perceptual experience is an illusion, this is to be accounted for by the fact that the ‘plain man’, in his naivety, is trusting the misleading testimony of his senses. For perhaps it takes philosophical reflection, or at least scientific investigation, to uncover the various ways in which our senses can deceive us. In effect, this would be to suggest that the ‘plain man’ may be unapprised of some of the considerations that are relevant to determining (c).

However, Austin suggests a rather different view of things. Austin’s criticism is directed at the philosopher, rather than the ‘plain man’; and in particular, Austin appears to suggest that the philosopher’s notion of illusion departs from that of the plain man in part because the philosopher is susceptible to a rather naïve, or at least oversimplified, understanding of (a) and (b). As far as (a) is concerned, Austin seems to think that the philosopher needs reminding that “There is no one kind of thing that we perceive but many different kinds” (1962: 4). And as far as (b) is concerned, Austin suggests that the philosopher needs reminding that the phrase ‘deceived by our senses’ is a metaphor, and that the same metaphor is taken up by the expression ‘veridical’. For literally speaking, there is no ‘testimony of the senses’. “Our senses do not tell us anything, true or false” (1962: 11).

I shall be considering Austin’s remarks about (b) towards the end of the paper, but for now I want to focus on the point he makes about (a) – i.e. his suggestion that the philosopher needs
reminding that there is no *one* kind of thing that we perceive, but many *different* kinds. Part of the context of Austin’s reminder is his rejection of a dichotomy that he finds in certain versions of the argument from illusion — a dichotomy between ‘sense-data’ and ‘material objects’. The question ‘do we perceive material objects or sense-data?’, he notes, is “too simple”, and indeed “entirely misleading” (1962: 4). Moreover, he suggests that these two terms, ‘sense-data’ and ‘material things’ “live by taking in each other’s washing — what is spurious is not one term of the pair, but the antithesis itself” (1962: 4). Having noted some of the many different kinds of thing that we perceive, he urges that “we are *not* to look for an answer to the question, what kind of thing we perceive” (1962: 4).

One might well think that Austin’s warning is pretty irrelevant to current philosophical debates about perception. It is hard to think of many who now seriously propose that we only perceive *one* kind of thing, or who assume that our task should be to determine the *one* kind of thing that we perceive. And one might in any case suspect that in these remarks, Austin is just pedantically picking up on a sloppy, or ill-advised, formulation of a perfectly legitimate philosophical concern that can survive in a reformulated guise. However, I think one does still find something like a “one kind of thing” assumption in discussions of auditory perception. Not quite the assumption that we only hear one kind of thing, but a close cousin of that thought. Namely the assumption that there is one kind of thing that we always hear whenever we hear, namely sounds.

Sometimes that assumption is merely implicit in debates and arguments about auditory perception, but often a closely related claim is made explicit. For example, Matthew Nudds suggests that “All auditory perception involves the perception of sounds, and whatever we hear that is not a sound we hear by hearing the sound it makes” (2015: 1). Casey O’Callaghan likewise claims that “if we successfully hear anything at all, we hear sound. Whatever else we hear, such as ordinary objects or happenings in the environment, we hear by way of or in virtue of hearing the sounds it makes. So sounds are in this relatively innocuous sense the immediate objects of auditory perception” (2007: 13). These remarks appear to be entirely plausible and, as O’Callaghan suggests, relatively innocuous. And the plausibility of such remarks can tempt one to assume that there must be *one kind of thing* that we hear whenever we hear — namely sounds. And then with that assumption in play, namely, that sounds are one kind of thing, the obvious question to ask is: what kind of thing is that?

I think it’s fair to say that there is no general consensus on how to answer that question. A variety of different proposals have been made. For example, that sounds are properties of material objects (e.g. Pasnau 1999), that sounds are monadic events happening to material objects (e.g. Casati and Dokic 2009), that sounds are medium-disturbing events (e.g. O’Callaghan 2007 and 2009), that sounds are waves (e.g. O’Shaughnessy 2009 and Sorensen 2009), that sounds are patterns or structures of frequency components instantiated by sound waves (e.g. Nudds 2009), that sounds are secondary objects that are ‘pure events’ (e.g.

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2 An objection to these claims, which I don’t have the space to discuss here, is that we can hear silence. For discussion of that idea, see Sorensen 2009, Soteriou 2011, and Phillips 2013.
Scruton 1997 and 2009). Although these proposals differ in a number of significant respects, some common assumptions appear to be made by their advocates: the assumption that sounds possess audible, acoustic features, such as timbre, pitch and loudness (and so the assumption that a sound is not a property that is identical to any one of those audible features); and the assumption that sounds are one kind of thing (and so the assumption that sounds cannot, for example, be monadic events happening to material objects and pure events, and so on).

With that set of assumptions in play, the following general picture emerges as the common background upon which debates about auditory perception and sounds are conducted:

There is one kind of thing that is the bearer of audible acoustic features, such as timbre, pitch and loudness – namely sounds. When it comes to determining what sounds are, we should be able to focus on any case in which a sound is heard. The kind of thing that is heard in that case will be the one kind of thing that is always heard, no matter what else is heard.

It is worth noting that philosophers nowadays tend not to make analogue assumptions about visual perception and the visible realm. That is to say, they tend not to assume the following:

There is one kind of thing that is the bearer of visible sensory qualities, such as colour. Call the bearers of such visible sensory qualities ‘visibilia’. When it comes to determining what visibilia are, we should be able to focus on any case in which a visibile is seen. The kind of thing that is seen in that case is the kind of thing that is always seen, no matter what else is seen.

Is it only material objects, or perhaps surfaces of material objects, that are the bearers of such qualities? What about liquids, vapours, flashes of light, reflections, rainbows, holograms and so on? Should we deny that they can possess colours? And if not, does that mean that we must assume that they are all one kind of thing? They all fall under the category of the visible, but that does not lead us to assume that each such entity belongs to some common metaphysical category or kind that we should seek to uncover. Those who reject sense-datum theories tend not to assume that there must be one kind of thing that is the bearer of visible sensory qualities. So why should we make the analogue assumption in the case of auditory perception? That is, why should we assume that there must be one king of thing is the bearer of audible, acoustic features, such as timbre, pitch and loudness, such that we can then ask: what kind of thing is that? In what follows I want to explore ways in which debates about auditory perception and sounds are affected if that assumption is rejected.

The assumption that the bearers of acoustic features (timbre, pitch and loudness) must be one kind of thing, often seems to be in play in arguments that are directed against the suggestion that environmental events that we can visually perceive (such as collisions, strikings, the shattering of glass, and so on), can be the bearers of those acoustic features. O’Callaghan and Nudds suggest that “It is plausible that sounds are perceived only through the sense of
hearing” (2009: 4). In a similar vein, Scruton claims that “Sounds are absent from the world of the deaf person in the way that colors are absent from the world of the blind” (2009: 57). If we accept such claims, and we also assume that sounds are the bearers of acoustic features (timbre, pitch, loudness), then we will be led to hold that the bearers of such acoustic features cannot be seen. Since events like collisions, strikings, the shattering of glass &c., can be seen, it follows that they cannot be the bearers of acoustic features.

The claim that sounds are perceived only through the sense of hearing may seem plausible if we assume that (i) sounds are the bearers of audible acoustic features (pitch, loudness, timbre), (ii) there are bearers of those acoustic features that we cannot see, and (iii) sounds are one kind of thing. However, if we don’t assume that the bearers of acoustic features (timbre, pitch, loudness) must be one kind of thing, then the existence of bearers of such acoustic properties that we cannot see does nothing to establish that there aren’t bearers of such acoustic properties that we can see. And so it does nothing to lend support to the suggestion that environmental events, such as collisions, cannot be the bearers of acoustic properties.

Here is a further line of thought that might be raised against the proposal that environmental events that we can see (such as collisions) can be the bearers of acoustic features:

Sounds are the bearers of audible acoustic features (timbre, pitch, loudness). The event of two objects colliding cannot be identical with a sound, for a collision can lack all acoustic features, whereas a sound cannot.

The assumption that sounds are entities that cannot lack audible qualities is something that O’Callaghan deploys in his argument against the view that sounds are properties of material objects (a view held by Pasnau 1999), and against the view that sounds are monadic events happening to material objects (a view held by Casati and Dokic 2009). The latter two views allow that sounds can exist in the absence of a transmitting medium (i.e. in a vacuum), and this is something that O’Callaghan rejects. O’Callaghan writes, “A sound, if anything, is the bearer of the properties of pitch, timbre, and loudness. Suppose we could establish that there is neither pitch, nor timbre, nor loudness when the bell is struck in the vacuum. We could then reasonably conclude that there is no sound. The bell struck in a vacuum has no sound because it has none of the qualities necessary for the existence of a sound” (2009: 34). And elsewhere O’Callaghan suggests that “Transactions by or among objects could occur soundlessly, as in a vacuum, below audible levels, or well muffled. This distinguishes sounds from events such as collisions and vibrations” (2011: 380). On the assumption that sounds are the bearers of the acoustic properties (timbre, pitch, loudness), the latter claim suggests that events such as collisions are to be distinguished from those events that are the bearers of acoustic properties. So collisions themselves cannot be the bearers of acoustic properties.

In response one could say the following. An event of the kind ‘collision’ can lack all acoustic properties – as when two objects collide in a vacuum. But that does not mean that an event of the kind ‘collision’ cannot be the bearer of acoustic properties. We might be led to that
A similar response can be made to the following line of thought that O’Callaghan invokes: “particular audible occurrences such as hand clappings, and trombone playings typically have features sounds lack, such as changing colours, a stinging quality, spittle and a brassy odour. Thus audible sounds are not identical with such events…” (2011: 380). On the assumption that sounds are the bearers of acoustic properties, then O’Callaghan’s argument would again suggest the conclusion that events such as hand-clappings cannot be the bearers of acoustic properties. The claim that sounds cannot possess such features as a “stinging quality” can look plausible when we assume that sounds (thought of as the bearers of acoustic properties) are one kind of thing. However, it doesn’t look so obvious if we allow that different kinds of thing might bear acoustic properties – including events that have a stinging quality, such as an overenthusiastic hand-clap.

Once it is assumed that environmental events that we can see (such as collisions), cannot be the bearers of acoustic properties (timbre, pitch, loudness), then one might be led to ponder the following questions. Can we hear events that we can see (e.g. collisions)? And if we can, then how do we hear them? Do we hear such events by hearing the sounds they produce? Does the content of auditory experience represent events that are the ‘sources’ of sounds, as well as the sounds they produce? If so, what relation between sounds and their ‘sources’ is represented in auditory experience? Is the relation causal? Part-whole? Sources of sounds (e.g. collisions) may have spatial locations, but is the location of the source of a sound the same as, or near, the location of the sound it produces? What is the actual location of a sound and where is it experienced to be located, if at all?

These questions have been answered in a variety of different, interesting, and ingenious ways. But it isn’t clear to me that we have yet been given sufficient reason rule out a far simpler view. The view that the so-called ‘source’ event – e.g. the collision – is an event that bears audible acoustic features (timbre, pitch, loudness); in auditory perception we can hear such events and their audible features; such events have spatial locations; and in some cases, perhaps not all, we perceive their spatial locations.

Casati, Di Bona and Dokic claim that “The collision you hear is the sound you hear. There is no difference between the sound and the event source” (2013: 463). That proposal may look

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as if it is more or less equivalent to the simple view that I have just outlined. However, to accept the simple view is not to accept the Casati and Dokic view of sounds – i.e. the view that sounds are monadic events happening to material objects. The simple view does not commit to any such generalisation. For the simple view does not rest on the assumption that sounds (thought of as the bearers of acoustic properties) are one kind of thing.

I suggested earlier that once we reject the assumption that there is one kind of event that is the bearer of acoustic properties, then it may be open to one to accept the following: there can be event-kinds (e.g. collisions) that have some instances that bear acoustic properties, and also some instances that lack them. Accepting that much does not commit one to a claim that Casati, Di Bona, and Dokic endorse – the claim that “sounds can exist in a vacuum” (2013: 464). That claim rests again, I think, on the questionable assumption that the bearers of acoustic properties are one kind of thing. If one grants that collisions can be the bearers of acoustic properties, and one also holds that sounds, as bearers of acoustic properties, are one kind of thing, then one might be led to hold the following: since events like collisions can occur in a vacuum, then sounds must be events of a kind that can exist in a vacuum. But I think the latter claim isn’t one we should endorse. For that claim would appear to be inconsistent with the following proposal: there are event-kinds which have acoustic properties and which cannot lack acoustic properties. In the next section I shall discuss the merits of that particular proposal.

3

In the literature on auditory perception and sounds, the phrase ‘source of a sound’ is often used to refer to a visible event, such as a collision, which is thought to be an event that does not itself bear acoustic properties, but which causes a distinct individual (a sound) that does bear such properties. However the phrase is also sometimes used to refer to objects participating in such events (e.g. the objects involved in a collision), as well as agents generating audible events (e.g. the dog that barks). According to the ‘simple’ view that I outlined in the previous section, events such as collisions can bear audible acoustic features (timbre, pitch, loudness), and in auditory perception we can hear such events and their audible features. That view leaves open exactly what one might want to say about the auditory perception of the ‘sources’ of such events, where that term is understood as referring either to the objects participating in such events, or to the agents of such events. I don’t propose to explore that issue here. But one point I do want to note is that the simple view allows that agentive acts, such as walking on floorboards, may be the bearers of acoustic properties. It doesn’t assume that only the effects of such agentive acts can be the bearers of acoustic properties. In the case of an audible, agentive act like walking on floorboards, we seem to have an instance of an act-type that has acoustic properties, but which could have lacked them. However, there may be reasons for thinking that not all audible agentive act-types fit that description. Footsteps and the barking of a dog have this in common: they are both acts of agents that can be heard. But while the former is an act that can be performed
silently, the latter is not. A dog’s attempt to bark can be silent, but the dog’s barking cannot be.

Some act-types are essentially audible. Typically these will be audible act-types that are expressive or communicative – i.e. acts in which something is expressed/communicated through audible features of those acts. Our interest in occurrences of these audible act-types is not usually governed by an interest in the physiological events involved in their performance (e.g. the motion of vocal chords). Our interest in such occurrences is, rather, primarily, or principally, determined by our interest in the kind of communicative/expressive act performed by the agent. Audible features of the act reveal that to us. But not by revealing the nature of the physiological events that are involved in the performance of the act. This leads us to categorise such act-types (at least in part) in terms of their audible features. So categorised, they are acts of a kind that cannot lack audible features. When one hears such an act, the occurrence that is revealed to one in auditory perception is not the occurrence of an event-kind that just so happens to have audible features but which could have lacked them. What is revealed to one is, rather, the occurrence of an act-type that is essentially audible.

Once we have in play the notion that there are event-kinds (act-types) that are essentially audible (i.e. which have audible features, and which cannot lack audible features), then we are a short step away from the notion of occurrences that can only be perceived through auditory perception. Events that are pure audibilia. That is a conception of sounds that Roger Scruton has argued for. According to Scruton, sounds are ‘secondary’ events, rather than secondary qualities. They are ‘pure events’ – occurrences that happen but which don’t happen to anything.

When defending this proposal, Scruton suggests that in auditory perception we can attend to sounds in isolation from their sources. He writes, “Sounds can be detached completely from their source, as by radio or gramophone, and listened to in isolation” (2009: 58). Other philosophers have made similar claims about the phenomenology of auditory experience and auditory attention. O’Callaghan writes that “sounds may be audible independently from sources. A particular sound may be heard without hearing its source. This readily explains a variety of attention and demonstrative reference to particular sounds that does not involve attending or referring demonstratively to their sources” (2011: 380). Martin suggests that “we can single out just the sound among the things we hear, without thereby supposing ourselves to have latched on to the object or event that produced it” (2012: 344).

One’s assessment of such claims will of course depend on one’s prior understanding of what ‘sounds’ are, and what is being referred to by the ‘sources’ of sound. If one has a relatively neutral understanding of ‘sounds’ as events that are bearers of acoustic features, then one will take Martin’s suggestion to be that we can hear events that are the bearers of acoustic features

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4 Although, of course, it may not be if we have no notion of what is being expressed or communicated – as is the case for many of us, e.g., when we hear birdsong.
without thereby supposing ourselves to have latched on to the object or event that produced it. That understanding is consistent with an interpretation of Martin’s suggestion that allows that we can hear collisions without thereby supposing ourselves to have latched on to the object or event that caused the collision. Similar remarks apply to the quotes from Scruton and O’Callaghan. But I take it that is not the proposal these authors had in mind.

Consider Scruton’s specific example of hearing sounds on a radio. In this case it might be said that we can attend to the sounds produced by the radio without taking ourselves to be any the wiser about events going on in the radio that are involved in the production of those sounds. (Compare my earlier suggestion that our interest in occurrences of certain communicative/expressive audible act-types is not usually governed by an interest in the physiological events involved in their performance – e.g. the motion of vocal chords). The mechanical behaviour of the radio is not revealed to one in auditory perception. But neither do we take the radio to be an agent performing audible act-types. Given those points, there is a respect in which the radio itself is not an object of our interest in auditory perception. That doesn’t quite entail that we can listen to the sounds produced by the radio without listening to the radio, as I think Scruton seems to suggest. However, it does offer some support for the idea that we can focus on sounds in auditory perception without taking ourselves to be latching on to events we can see, and while having no auditory interest in the visually perceivable object producing such sounds.

So I think there is some plausibility to the suggestion that auditory perception does seem to afford the opportunity for what Scruton labels the ‘acousmatic’ experience of sounds – the experience of sounds in which sounds are “emancipated from their causes”, and are “experienced as independent but related objects, which form coherent complexes with boundaries and simultaneities, parts and whole” (2009: 58). The possibility of such experience, Scruton argues, is fundamental to the art of music.

The suggestion is that in the case of this form of auditory experience we treat the events that bear acoustic properties as “pure audibilia”. Events we could not perceive through any other modality. Scruton makes a comparison with our visual perception of rainbows. He proposes that rainbows are “real and objective”. They are “located, but not precisely”. They are “objects of sight that are not objects of any other sense”, and “their existence, nature, and qualities are all determined by how things appear to the normal observer” (2009: 58). And he goes on to suggest that “There is every reason to treat sounds as audibilia, in just the way we treat rainbows as visibilia”. (2009: 60) “They occur, but stand alone, and can be identified without identifying any individual that emits them” (2009: 61-62).

The view of sounds proposed by Casati and Dokic leaves no room for the existence of such audible events. 5 For according to Casati and Dokic, the bearers of acoustic properties (all of

5 And one could of course say the same for the Pasnau (1999) view of sounds.
them) are monadic events happening to material objects. But likewise Scruton’s proposal about sounds appears to leave no room for the suggestion that events we can see, such as collisions and the shattering of glass, can be the bearers of acoustic properties. For these are events that happen to objects. However, were we to reject the assumption that the bearers of audible acoustic properties (timbre, pitch, loudness) must be one kind of thing, then it may be open to us to accept that some bearers of acoustic properties are events we can see, such as collisions, and others are pure audibilia – Scruton’s ‘secondary’ events.

That catholic approach would allow one to preserve something of the following suggestion, made by Martin: “One can make some sense of the idea of an audible world containing just the sounds that one hears or could hear. Such a world would stand apart from and in contrast to the physical realm of concrete objects and the happenings which befall them” (2012: 344). As Martin notes, “In part, the fantasy of the sound world that Strawson employs in Individuals, chapter 2, exploits the intelligibility of this” (2012: 344). In a similar vein, Nudds suggests that “There appears to be nothing intrinsic to the sounds that we actually hear to connect them with the world of sight and touch” (2001: 215). And Scruton similarly suggests “It would be quite possible for us to be surrounded by sounds, like Ferdinand on Prospero’s Isle, which we individuate, order, and interpret without assigning to any of them a physical process as origin or cause” (2009: 62). According to the catholic approach, these suggestions exploit the possibility of envisaging a world that contains just a subset of the bearers of acoustic properties – the pure audibilia. But from this we cannot draw any general conclusions about the bearers of acoustic properties. In particular, we cannot draw the conclusion that acoustic properties (timbre, pitch, and loudness) cannot be borne by events that we can see and feel.

Earlier on I noted that in Sense and Sensibilia Austin complains about what he sees as the unwarranted tendency of philosophers to count as illusory a number of perceptual experiences that the ‘plain man’ would not regard as in any way deceptive, and that part of his complaint rests on the thought that the philosopher is susceptible to an oversimplified understanding of what the objects of perception can be. In the next section I shall discuss how philosophical assumptions about the illusory nature of certain of our auditory experiences might be likewise affected by the adoption of what I have called the more ‘catholic’ view of the bearers of acoustic properties.

Casati and Dokic (2009) suggest that prima facie objections to their view of sounds tend to either misconstrue the phenomenology of auditory experience, or beg the question against their proposal. When illustrating that claim, they consider the objection that echoes provide a counterexample to their view. The objection has it that on their view, an echo does not

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6 See also Scruton’s example of the ‘Music Room’ in his 1997.
perceptually seem to be where the sound is. For according to their view, sounds are monadic events happening to material objects, whereas an echo does not perceptually seem to occur where (and one might add, when) the event happening to the material object occurs. Their response is to suggest that “This is a clear case of misrepresentation, comparable to seeing an object in a mirror” (2009: 99).

O’Callaghan offers a similar response when considering whether the existence of echoes presents a problem for his account of sounds. According to O’Callaghan’s account of sounds, “sounds are the events in which a medium is disturbed or changed or set into motion in a wave-like way by the motions of bodies… Medium-disturbing events are what we hear to have particular pitch, timbre, loudness, and location” (2009: 36). The potential problem that echoes present for that account of sounds is the following. An echo appears, in auditory experience, to be an individual that is distinct from the original medium-disturbing event – i.e. distinct from the original audible event of which the echo is an echo. However, although the echo seems distinct from the original audible event, the reflection of sound waves (off, say, a brick wall) that is responsible for the experience of the echo does not introduce a distinct disturbance into the surrounding medium. So, as O’Callaghan puts it, his view “appears to have no sound to identify as the echo” (2009: 44).

O’Callaghan’s proposed solution is to say that when we hear an echo of a sound, we really hear just one sound – the original sound – over again, “albeit with distortion of place and time” (2009: 44). Like Casati and Dokie he invokes, by way of analogy, cases of seeing objects and events in a mirror. He writes, “Mirrors facilitate our seeing the very objects and events that occur in front of them, albeit with distortion of place. Likewise, reflecting surfaces allow us to hear the very sounds that occur in front of them, albeit with distortion of place and time, which results from the speed of sound waves. If the mirror analogy is correct, just as there are not distinct visible objects located at the surface of mirrors, echoes are not distinct sounds that occur at surfaces that reflect sound waves” (44).

While I think there is something to the analogy between echoes and reflections in a mirror, I don’t see that the analogy supports the view of echoes that O’Callaghan, and Casati and Dokie propose. O’Callaghan suggests that “there are not distinct visible objects located at the surface of mirrors” (2009: 44). But does this mean he is committed to the claim that we don’t see reflections when we see mirrors? Or is the view, rather, that we do see reflections, but that we don’t see any of their visible features? Or is the view, rather, that reflections are identical to the objects that they are reflections of? It is not clear why we should accept any of those claims. It may be true to say that we can see the object that is reflected when we see its reflection in a mirror, and it may also be true that there can be occasions when we fail to realise that we are seeing a reflection of an object, rather than just seeing the object that is reflected. But I don’t see that this warrants the conclusion that we don’t see reflections when we look at a mirror – where reflections are thought of as entities that have visible features, and that are not identical to the objects that they are reflections of. Reflections can have

7 See also the discussion in O’Callaghan 2007, Ch. 9.
visible features not possessed by the objects they are reflections of. (Think, for instance, of distorting mirrors). Moreover, reflections cannot be perceived by the blind, whereas (at least some of) the objects they are reflections of, can be. At a time there can exist more than one reflection of an object, and we can count those reflections. In counting them we are counting visible entities that are distinct from the object of which they are reflections. 8

So one might think that the suggested analogy between echoes and reflections in a mirror should really lead us to something like the following view. It may be true to say that we can hear the original, ‘primary’ sound when we hear its echo. And it may also be true that there can be occasions when we fail to realise that we are hearing an echo, rather than just hearing the original primary sound. But this doesn’t warrant the conclusion that we don’t hear a distinct bearer of acoustic properties when we hear an echo of a primary sound. Echoes are audible individuals in their own right. They are not identical to the sounds that they are echoes of. Moreover, they can have audible features not possessed by the primary sounds that they are echoes of. The latter point is something that Martin notes when he writes, “sounds reflected off surfaces to create what we classify as echoes often have characteristics which we do not attribute to the original sound that has been propagated: the echo has a reverberation which the original sound lacked, for example” (2012: 347).

That view of echoes isn’t consistent with the accounts of sound proposed by O’Callaghan, and Casati and Dokic. And so to maintain the consistency of their accounts, they propose that our experience of echoes involves some kind of illusion – a distortion of place and time. They don’t opt for that stance because they are unconcerned to preserve the general idea that our experiences of sounds are veridical. Quite the contrary. They take it to be part of the phenomenology of our experience of sounds that we experience sounds to be located at, or near, the so-called ‘source events’ that many to take to be the causes of sounds. 9 And they opt for versions of ‘distal’/‘located event’ accounts of sounds, because they are concerned to preserve the idea that, normally, sounds are located just where we experience them to be located. However, the commitments of the accounts that they thereby propose ensure that they cannot countenance distinct bearers of acoustic properties that can be the individuals that we hear when we hear echoes.

These difficulties are dissolved if one adopts the ‘catholic’ approach to the bearers of acoustic properties that I outlined in the previous section. For that approach can countenance both events such as collisions as the bearers of acoustic properties, and also events that are pure audibilia. So that approach allows one to say that echoes are, indeed, very much like mirror-images of objects, but without having to commit to any of the implausible claims about either echoes, or mirror-images, that Casati and Dokic and O’Callaghan appear to be committed to.

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8 For discussion of the claim that the fact that we can count echoes presents problems for O’Callaghan’s view of echoes, see Fowler 2013.

9 Indeed for Casati and Dokic, of course, the sound is the so-called source event.
Nudds suggests a view of echoes according to which we “re-encounter” a particular sound when we hear its echo (2001: 222). But he doesn’t commit to the kind of illusory account of our experience of echoes that O’Callaghan, and Casati and Dokic, propose. For according to Nudds’ account, sounds are individuals that can be instantiated at more than one place and time. They are ‘abstract individuals’. A similar proposal is suggested by Martin. He writes that an “echo preserves the original sound through reproducing it in another sound” (2012: 347). And “If sounds can be reproduced they fall into the category of abstract particulars”. For “The sound is multiply located wherever it is reproduced” (2012: 345). Martin applies this idea in providing an account of the respect in which we can encounter sounds that were once recorded when we hear recordings of them many years later. He suggests that “Auditory reproduction gives us a connection to the past event, not just through using a mechanism to produce a recognizably similar sound, but by managing to give us the original sound once more” (345).

This proposal – i.e. the proposal that sounds are abstract particulars/individuals – looks to be inconsistent with suggestion that events such as collisions can be the bearers of acoustic properties. Martin at one point says “The sensible dimensions of the auditory world are all borne by sounds” (2012: 344). If we add to that the proposal that sounds are abstract particulars, then it would seem that we are precluded from holding that events such as collisions can be the bearers of acoustic, sensory properties, unless we also hold that collisions are abstract particulars. But we don’t think of collisions as abstract particulars. And we do not think that we ‘reproduce’ the original collision when we play back a recording of one. Does this mean that if we want to maintain a view that allows that events such as collisions can be the bearers of acoustic properties, then we will be forced to deny that we can re-encounter sounds that were once recorded when we listen to recordings of them?

I don’t think that it does. If we pursue the analogy between echoes and reflections in a mirror, and apply that to recorded sound, then we might say the following. We can encounter, in visual perception, an object that is reflected in a mirror by seeing its reflection, even though the reflection is a visible entity that is distinct from the object it is a reflection of. The reflection isn’t where the reflected object is, and it may give us no sense of where the reflected object is. But none of this gives us reason to think of the reflected object as an abstract particular. The reflected object is what it is – material object, hologram, flash of light, whatever. Similarly, in auditory perception we can now re-encounter a past event that was the bearer of acoustic properties by listening to a recording of it, even though the bearer of the acoustic properties that we now hear when we listen to the recording is distinct from the ‘original’ bearer of acoustic properties. The bearer of acoustic properties that we now hear when we listen to the recording doesn’t occur when the ‘original’ bearer of acoustic properties occurs; and listening to the recording may give us no sense of when the original bearer of acoustic properties occurred. But none of this gives us reason to think of the original bearer of acoustic properties as an abstract particular. That original recorded occurrence is what it is – collision, echo of a collision, the barking of a dog, whatever.
It is worth noting though, that in adopting the catholic view of the bearers of acoustic properties that I have been recommending, there need be no reason to deny that there can be bearers of acoustic properties that are appropriately thought of as ‘abstract particulars’. As Martin notes, there may be reason think that the visual realm can contain abstract particulars. Visual images might be examples. For visual images that relate to one occasion of capture, such as photographs, can be multiply located, as when one makes copies of copies of photos, and yet the image thereby reproduced has a particularity about it which is “inherited from the object of which one is aware through the image” (Martin 2012: 347). Similarly, one could say that recordings of a sound can be multiply located, as when one makes copies of copies of recordings, and yet such a reproduction has a particularity about it which is inherited from the event that was originally recorded. So auditory reproductions of this kind might be regarded as abstract particulars. For similar reasons, one might be led to a view on which we are to regard several echoes of one sound as abstract particulars. However, to accept this much won’t force the conclusion that all bearers of acoustic properties must be abstract particulars. At least not if one resists the assumption that the bearers of acoustic properties must be one kind of thing.

Suppose we were to accept that recordings of sounds are occurrences that are pure audibilia, just as reflections in mirrors are pure visibilia. What bearing would this have on the question of whether our auditory experiences of such sounds are illusory? Austin makes the following remarks when mentioning our perception of mirror images. “No doubt you can produce illusions with mirrors, suitably disguised. But is just any case of seeing something in a mirror an illusion? Quite obviously not. For seeing things in mirrors is a perfectly normal occurrence, completely familiar. And there is usually no question of anyone being taken in” (1962: 26). Similar remarks can be made about our experience of recorded sounds. Such experience is now ubiquitous. Stereos, radios, televisions, computers, mobile phones, &c., all emit recorded sounds that we encounter on a daily basis. We are rarely ‘taken in’ by any of them. So why should we assume that such experiences involve illusions?

One may be led to think that such experiences must be illusory if one addresses that question with a prior assumption about what the bearers of acoustic properties can be. For if one assumes that the bearers of acoustic properties must be one kind of thing, then this may lead one to think that when we hear recorded sounds, our auditory experience misrepresents something about the bearers of the acoustic properties that we hear. For example, consider the view that has it that when we hear two objects colliding, the bearer of the acoustic properties that we hear cannot be the collision we hear, but must rather be an individual – a sound – produced, or caused, by the collision. It is natural to think that when one hears such a sound one’s auditory experience is informing one about the environmental event that is the cause, or ‘source’ of that sound – i.e. the collision. Indeed, there is a good deal of empirical evidence to suggest that the auditory system groups the frequency components that it detects in the way

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10 This isn’t to assume that recordings of sounds are just like visual images, such as photographs. They may be more like mirror images. For reasons for thinking that recorded sounds differ in significant respects from photographs (and in a way relevant to how we should think of depiction), see the discussion of this issue in Martin 2012.
that it does in order to inform us about such ‘sources’.\(^{11}\) That is to say, the hypothesis that the auditory system functions to inform us about such ‘source events’ best explains the workings of the auditory system. As Nudds puts it, “The auditory system groups together all and only frequency components that are likely to have been produced by the same source *because* they are likely to have been produced by the same source” (2009: 74).

So now if we assume that the collision cannot be the bearer of the acoustic properties that we hear, and we also hold that the auditory system is functioning to inform us about the collision, then we may well be led to hold that when we hear a collision our auditory system is representing the presence of *both* a sound that bears the acoustic properties of timbre, pitch, and loudness, *and* the source event that produces or causes that sound. This in turn may lead to the view that when we hear a recording of a collision, our auditory experience misrepresents the source event, even if it veridically represents the acoustic properties of the ‘sound’ caused by that source event. For the ‘source event’ may be a loudspeaker, or even two or more loudspeakers, rather than one collision.\(^{12}\)

In section 2, I suggested that once we reject the assumption that the bearers of acoustic properties must be one kind of thing, it is not clear that we have any good reason to deny that environmental events that we can see (such as collisions) can be the bearers of acoustic properties. And this in turn, I suggested, should lead us to question whether we have sufficient grounds for thinking that our auditory experience of such an occurrence represents *both* the bearer of acoustic properties *and* some ‘source event’ that causes or produces it. And if we no longer assume that our auditory experience represents *both* the bearers of acoustic properties *and* the source events that produce them, then it is no longer clear that we have grounds for thinking that our experience of recorded sounds represents *both* the bearer of the acoustic properties that we hear *and* a source event that produced it. In which case, it is no longer clear that we have grounds for thinking that our experience of recorded sound ‘misrepresents’ such source events.

If we reject the assumption that the bearers of acoustic properties are one kind of thing, then we can allow that environmental events that we can see, such as collisions, can be the bearers of acoustic properties, and we can also allow that pure audibilia can be the bearers of acoustic properties. And we can then allow that when we hear recorded sounds, the bearers of acoustic properties that we hear are pure audibilia – pure audibilia that we can hear without hearing (or misrepresenting) their ‘source events’. However, it might nonetheless be suggested that our experience of such recorded sounds should still be classified as illusory, because our experience of such events is misleading. It misrepresents these pure audibilia as concrete events involving material objects. So the content of such experience is non-veridical. But is that really the case? How are we to settle exactly what it is that our senses are ‘telling us’ when we perceive pure audibilia, or indeed any other of the perceptual ephemera that don’t

\(^{11}\) For discussion of this point, see Nudds 2009, 2010a, 2010b, and 2013.

\(^{12}\) For the suggestion that our experience of recorded sounds over two loudspeakers standardly involves a perceptual illusion, see Nudds 2013, Casati and Dokic 2009, and O’Callaghan 2011.
fall under the category of “moderate-sized specimens of dry goods” – e.g. reflections, rainbows, images on a cinema screen?

5

In section 1, I noted that when Austin makes critical remarks about the way in which the philosopher’s notion of illusion departs from that of the ‘plain man’, he suggests not only that the philosopher has an oversimplified conception of what the objects of perception must be, but also that the philosopher needs reminding that the phrase ‘deceived by our senses’ is a metaphor, and that the same metaphor is taken up by the expression ‘veridical’. For literally speaking, there is no ‘testimony of the senses’. “Our senses do not tell us anything, true or false” (1962: 11). Is Austin right about this?13

Sticking for now with the objects of auditory perception, it at least seems reasonable to think that our senses are not committal on such matters as the science of sound – or the science of the bearers of acoustic properties. And while it seems right to hold that our perceptual systems make us sensitive to objects and events in our environment, and features and relations instantiated by such objects and events, it is not obvious that they do so, or must do so, by making us sensitive to physical features that are instantiated in our environment, if by ‘physical’ features one means those features that are, or will be, invoked by the science of physics. In which case it is not obvious that we should assume that the environmental features that our perceptual systems make us sensitive to will be features that we will be able to map onto ‘physical’ features in any straightforward way. This, I think, is not unconnected with the suggestion that in some instances only perception can reveal to us what those features are – and that it does so by acquainting us with them.14 And it may be thought that (at least some of) the sensory dimensions of the sounds we hear fit that description. But is the auditory system committal on the question of the kinds of metaphysical entities that can bear such features? What does the auditory system tell us about their status? The somewhat facetious response is to say that the auditory system does not address itself to philosophical questions, any more than it addresses itself to scientific ones. But what about empirically supported hypotheses about the function and functioning of the auditory system? Can they not uncover for us what our senses are ‘telling us’ about the entities we hear?

Hypotheses about the function of auditory perception can certainly play important (and perhaps essential) roles in explaining the workings of the auditory system. And, moreover, empirical research on the workings of the auditory system can help uncover what these functions might be. Understanding the functioning of the auditory system can in turn help to explain how we perceive what we perceive when we hear ‘perceptual ephemera’ such as echoes, artificially produced sounds, and recordings. But I don’t see that this in itself determines what we perceive when we perceive such perceptual ephemera. By that I mean, I

13 For a forthright defence of the claim that he is, see Travis 2004, and papers collected in Travis 2013.
14 For discussion and defence of this claim, see Campbell’s contribution to Campbell and Cassam 2014.
don’t see that this in itself determines what view we should take on the metaphysical status of such perceptual ephemera. And neither does it determine what our senses are “telling us” about what we perceive when we perceive such perceptual ephemera; unless we assume that whatever our senses are ‘telling us’ is a matter solely determined by whatever functions our perceptual systems have been evolved to perform. However, it is not clear why we should assume that auditory perception can only acquaint us with entities that it is the evolved function of auditory perception to represent. And if auditory perception can acquaint us with entities that fall outside the purview of such evolved functions, then it is not clear why hypotheses about the functioning of the auditory system should be thought to determine what audition is “telling us” about them. That is not to suggest that an appeal to mental representation, and functional role, is anything other than essential when explaining the workings of the auditory system. However, it isn’t obvious that any such appeal can uncover for us the veridicality conditions of our auditory experience, where such veridicality conditions are thought of as what the auditory system is testifying to about what we perceive, and where this in turn might be thought to determine whether our auditory experience of such perceptual ephemera is illusory.

None of this, of course, is to suggest that there are not clear cases of auditory perceptual illusion. But then, it might be asked, if we don’t appeal to something like the ‘testimony of the senses’ in explaining such illusions, then how are we to account for them? That important and complicated issue is beyond the scope this paper. However, when we do set ourselves the task of providing an account of illusion, we might do well to heed that Austinian suspicion of neat and simple dichotomies. For as Austin also remarked in Sense and Sensibilia, “there is no neat and simple dichotomy between things going right and things going wrong; things may go wrong, as we all know quite well, in lots of different ways – which don’t have to be, and must not be assumed to be, classifiable in any general fashion” (1962: 13).

References:


15 For discussion of the issue, see Brewer 2008 and 2011.


