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How Not to See Pierre

Making Sense of Absences

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Abstract

An absence is a puzzling object. In some sense, something which is absent is phenomenologically present to us. This paper discusses the metaphysical and epistemological problems of absences. After a short primer of mereology, it then presents a mereological account of absences. The absence of an object is its mereological complement. The paper then explains how this account resolves the metaphysical and epistemological problems. It ends by addressing some objections to the account.

Keywords

absences; mereology; Nyāya; relative/absolute complements; Sartre

1 Introduction

Absences are strange objects (whatever one takes objects to be). One can refer to them, think about them, and, strikingly, even perceive some of them. Yet absences are, well, things that fail to be present. One might—to steal the phrase from Berkeley on infinitesimals—call them the ghosts of departed quantities. How to make sense of this?

The point of this paper is to answer the question. To do so I will make use of some unlikely apparatus: mereology (the theory of parts and wholes). We will proceed as follows. First, I will spell out the problems posed by absences more carefully. I shall not assume that the reader is familiar with formal mereology. So I will then provide an introduction to the tools required to address the problem. This will, in fact, constitute a major part of the paper. Having explained the machinery, I will then show how it can provide a solution to our problems. I will conclude the essay with a discussion (and rebuttal) of a few of the more obvious objections to the account.[1]

2 The problems of absences

In Chapter 1 of *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre tells a story.[2] He is due to meet Pierre in a café. He enters, and Pierre is not there. He experiences the absence of Pierre. He does not have to reason: "The things in the café are a table, a chair, a waiter; Pierre is not a table; Pierre is not a chair; Pierre is not the waiter. Ergo, Pierre is not in the café". There is simply an immediate experience of the absence of Pierre. That absence is phenomenologically present to him. He has a direct experience of this absence. So Pierre's absence is something—indeed something of a kind one can experience. I am sure that most of us have had the kind of experience Sartre describes.[3]

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[1] This is a written up version of talks given to the workshop Logic and its Philosophy, University of Düsseldorf (January 2022), the Logic Group, University of Connecticut (April 2022), and 9th National Meeting in Analytic Philosophy, NOVA University, Lisbon (July 2024). I am grateful to the audiences on those occasions for their thoughtful comments and criticisms. Thanks also go to Elia Zardini and two referees of this journal for their written comments on an earlier draft of the paper.

[2] Sartre [1958: 9 *ff*.].

[3] Further on seeing what is not the case, see Priest [2006: §3.5]. In what follows, I talk of visual experience. But one should note that one can experience absences in other sensory modalities. For example, one can experience a missing note or chord—as in the powerful end of Puccini's *Mme Butterfly*.

Sartre is not the only philosopher to recognise absences. Nyāya is one of the orthodox schools of Indian philosophy. The Naiyāyikas were realists about perception, and one of their categories of things in the world comprised absences (things with *abhāva*).[4] They had a sophisticated theory of kinds of absence (*e.g.*, past absences, future absences, differences). And one thing they did was to use the theory of absences to give an account of the truth conditions of negative sentences. So *there are no pots on the table* is analysed as: the table is characterised by the absence of pots. They would have agreed with Sartre that one can see the absence of Pierre. But since one can see that there are no pots on the table, they also held that one can see the absence of a whole category of things: pots. One does not have to agree with the Nyāya theory of negation to take the point that visible absences can be absences, not just of singular things, but of a whole class of things. Sartre could no doubt have seen the absence of elephants in the café, just as much as the absence of Pierre.[5]

Absences, whether of one thing or of a plurality of things, pose two well known problems, however.[6] First, an absence is something that is not present: something that is not there; presumably not elsewhere either. It does not exist. That is a metaphysical problem. The second is an epistemological problem. Even if one could solve the metaphysical problem, how could one have a visual experience of an absence? Seeing is a causal process, and involves a causal chain between the thing seen and the seer. Since, in the case of an absence, there is nothing there, there can be no causal interaction between it and the seer. So it cannot be seen.

Perhaps the metaphysical problem could be solved by saying that the absence of Pierre, and the like, *are* things, just non-existent things. After all, one can have a phenomenological experience of a non-existent object. But this only ratchets up the epistemological problem. If the absence is a non-existent object, there can certainly be no causal chain between it and the seer—the possession of causal powers implying existence.[7]

The issue about absences can spill over into issues about negative states of affairs, such as *the Empire State Building not being in Chicago*.[8] One possibility is to take such things as entities just as positive as positive states of affairs. They are negative only in the sense of

[4] See Ganeri [2019], esp. §1 and §11.

[5] For a thoughtful discussion of the phenomenology of the perception of absences, see Varzi [2022].

[6] See, *e.g.*, Farennikova [2013] and Sorensen [2015].

[7] In the world in which they are exercised.

[8] See, *e.g.*, Molnar [2000], Mumford [2007] and Barker and Jago [2012].

being truth-makers for negated sentences. But another possibility is to take them to be absences, such as the absence of the state of affairs *the Empire State Building being in Chicago*. If one goes down this path, one faces the problem of absences.

The problem can also spill over into issues about negative events—including acts of omission—such as *Mary failing to water the plants* (at a certain time).[9] Again, one can take these to be identical with corresponding positive events, such as *Mary falling asleep* (at that time). But one can also take them to be absences, *e.g.*, the absence of *Mary watering the plants* (at that time). Again, if one goes down this path, one faces the problems of absences.

I shall not go into these matters here. To do so would require a discussion of the nature and identity condition of states of affairs and events; and the matters are complex—in the case of omissions, becoming tangled up with moral questions of responsibility. So let me just say that what follows about absences in general can also be applied fairly naturally to absences of states of affairs and events, if one chooses to go down those paths.

3 Mereology

So to mereology. In contemporary philosophy, the study of mereology was introduced by Edmund Husserl and, as a formal theory, by the Polish logician Stanisław Leśniewski. It is now a well-studied part of formal logic.[10] In this section, we will look at the elements of this which are relevant to our problem.

What follows talks of objects. Note that I do not assume that all objects exist. Purely fictional objects, like Sherlock Holmes, and abstract objects, like the number 3, are non-existent objects.[11] However, this will have little bearing on most matters to follow.

3.1 Basic ideas

Many things have parts. Books have chapters; symphonies have movements; people have arms and legs (etc.); countries have states or counties. We would not normally think of the whole as a part of itself, but it does no harm to do so, as a sort of limit case—an improper part. Parts that are not the whole may be called *proper parts*. So let us write $x < y$ for 'x is a proper part of y'. The standard assumption is that $<$ is transitive and asymmetric. That is:

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[9] See, *e.g.*, Beebee [2004] and Bernstein [2015].

[10] For a survey of the subject, see Varzi [2016] and Cotnoir and Varzi [2021].

[11] See Priest [2005].

- $(x < y \land y < z) \to x < z$
- $x < y \to \neg y < x$

A proper part of a proper part is a proper part, and if x is a proper part of y, then y is not a proper part of x. So $<$ is a (strict) partial order.

We may define 'x is a part of y', $x \leq y$, in the obvious way:

- $x \leq y := x < y \lor x = y$

It is then easy to show that $\leq$ is itself transitive, and that if $x \leq y$ and $y \leq x$ then $x = y$ (since one cannot have $x < y$ and $y < x$).

Next, we need the notion of overlap. When does one object overlap another? When they have a part (maybe the whole itself) in common. Thus, the time of the Western Roman Empire and the first millennium have a part in common (the time from 1 CE, till the collapse of the Empire). Turkey and Europe overlap, since they have a part in common (the part of Turkey in the Balkans). And Great Britain and England overlap, since they have a part in common, *viz.*, England. So if we write 'x overlaps y' as $x \bigcirc y$, this may be defined as follows:[12]

- $x \bigcirc y := \exists z(z \leq x \land z \leq y)$

The opposite of overlapping is being disjoint. Two objects are disjoint if they have no part in common. If we write 'x is disjoint from y' as $x \bullet y$ then it may be defined in the obvious way:

- $x \bullet y := \neg x \bigcirc y$

Perhaps the most crucial mereological notion is that of a *sum*, or *fusion*. The mereological sum of a bunch of objects is the whole which you get when you put those things together. Thus, the sum of my parts (my arms, my legs, etc) is me. Australia has six states.[13] The sum of their geographical masses is the geographical mass of Australia. Beethoven's 9th Symphony has four movements; and their sum is the Symphony itself.

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[12] I will write the universal quantifier as $\forall$, and the particular quantifier as $\exists$. Note, however, that I take these not to carry "existential commitment". That is, they do not mean *all existent* and *some existent*— just *all* and *some*.

[13] Plus a couple of territories; but let us ignore these here.

So take a set of objects, Σ, defined by some condition, $A(x)$. That is, $\Sigma = \{x : A(x)\}$. Let z be the fusion of objects in Σ. When does something overlap this? Well, if something overlaps one of the states of Australia, it overlaps Australia; and if it overlaps Australia, it must overlap one of its states. So, quite generally, something will overlap the fusion, z, iff it overlaps one of the things that satisfy $A(x)$. That is:

Fuse. $\forall y(y \bigcirc z \leftrightarrow \exists x(y \bigcirc x \wedge A(x)))$

Two obvious questions then arise: (i) Is there more than one such z? (ii) Is there at least one such z?

Concerning (i). Mereological identity conditions can be given in various ways. A simple way in the present context is as follows. If two objects are distinct, it is natural to assume that some object overlaps one of them, but not the other. (For example, Great Britain and England are distinct, since Scotland overlaps the first but not the second.) Contraposing, two objects are the same if everything that overlaps one, overlaps the other. That is:

- $\forall y(y \bigcirc z_1 \leftrightarrow y \bigcirc z_2) \rightarrow z_1 = z_2$

Now, suppose that:

- $\forall y(y \bigcirc z_1 \leftrightarrow \exists x(y \bigcirc x \wedge A(x)))$
- $\forall y(y \bigcirc z_2 \leftrightarrow \exists x(y \bigcirc x \wedge A(x)))$

Then:

- $\forall y(y \bigcirc z_1 \leftrightarrow y \bigcirc z_2)$

So $z_1 = z_2$. Hence, there is at most one z satisfying **Fuse**.

Question (ii) is trickier. Is there any z at all that satisfies **Fuse**? It is a widely held assumption that there is no such z when $A(x)$ defines the empty set of objects. That is, if nothing satisfies $A(x)$ then the things that satisfy it have no fusion. Though I do not accept this,[14] it does no harm to assume it here.

Some philosophers hold that in all other cases, there is a fusion. That is:

- $\exists x A(x) \rightarrow \exists z \forall y(y \bigcirc z \leftrightarrow \exists x(x \bigcirc y \wedge A(x)))$

[14] See Priest [2026].

One may call this *general composition*.[15] General composition is certainly a simple view, but it has some strange consequences. Consider the set which contains just my appendix, left thumb, and right eye ball. Does some object have exactly those parts? It would be a strange object, certainly not one with a standard anatomical name. Or consider the set whose members are: the Buddha's left earlobe, the rings of Jupiter, and the *Ode to Joy*. These seem far too disparate a collection to constitute the parts of an object.

Some philosophers have swung to the other extreme. No bunch of objects has a fusion. This view is sometimes called *mereological nihilism*.[16] The world is just a bunch of mereological atoms, with no real compound objects at all. This seems even more implausible. I really am composed of my parts; Beethoven's 9th Symphony really is composed of its four movements; and so on.

In the middle ground are those philosophers who hold that for some conditions, $A(x)$, the members of $\{x : A(x)\}$ have a fusion; and for some $A(x)$ they do not.[17] To have a fusion, the objects specified by $A(x)$ must have a certain unity. The natural idea is that for there to be a fusion the objects satisfying $A(x)$ must not be a disparate collection, but must cohere together, in some sense. The view is called *special composition*; and it must be agreed that the view seems to fit much better with common sense. The rub is that it seems very hard to find a plausible sense of what this unity amounts to.[18] A coherent bunch of objects can be disconnected in space (Australia), time (the British monarchy), category (the molecules in an alloy); and so on.

The simplest theory of mereology endorses general composition. Though, again, I do not accept this,[19] we can assume it for present purposes.

3.2 Axiomatic mereology

So much for the central concepts. Different theories about how, exactly, they behave may be captured in an appropriate axiomatic system. What the correct theory is, is contentious. However, there is a "standard" theory—not standard in the sense that it is the received view,

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[15] Lewis [1991] endorses general composition.

[16] The view of Unger [1979] is essentially of this kind.

[17] The view of van Inwagen [1981] is essentially of this kind.

[18] Some interesting possibilities and their problems are discussed in Hudson [2006].

[19] See Priest [2026].

but standard in the sense that it is a simple starting-point for further investigations. This is as follows.[20]

The theory is formulated in a first-order language and based on classical logic with identity. There are two binary predicates, $<$ and $=$. The mereological axioms can be formulated in different but equivalent ways.[21] The following is one.[22] First we have three definitions:

- $x \leq y$ is $x < y \vee x = y$
- $x \bigcirc y$ is $\exists z(z \leq x \wedge z \leq y)$
- $x \newmoon y$ is $\neg x \bigcirc y$

The axioms are then as follows:

A1 $(x < y \wedge y < z) \rightarrow x < z$

A2 $x < y \rightarrow \neg y < x$

A3 $\neg y \leq x \rightarrow \exists z(z \leq y \wedge z \newmoon x)$

A4 $\exists x A(x) \rightarrow \exists z \forall y(y \bigcirc z \leftrightarrow \exists x(y \bigcirc x \wedge A(x)))$

A1 and **A2** need no further comment. **A3** tells us that as long as *y* is not a part of *x*, there will be a part of *y* which is disjoint from *x*. The following Venn-style digram makes this clear. *z* is shaded in grey. Note that the circles are not sets, but objects, and a sub-area of a circle is a part of it.

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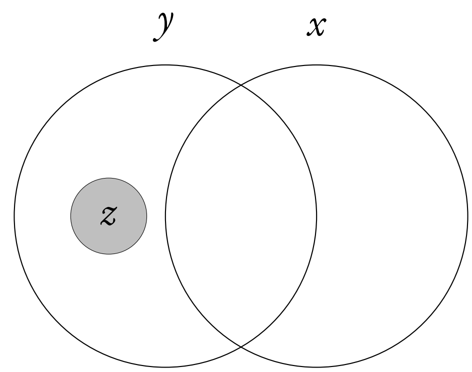
[20] The theory also has a very natural model. Take a complete Boolean algebra (that is, one in which every set of elements of the algebra has a least upper bound and greatest lower bound) and remove its bottom element. If we interpret the mereological $<$ as the (strict) ordering in the algebra, all the axioms of the mereological theory are true. In other words, bottomless boolean algebras are a model of the mereology. Indeed, the theory is complete with respect to the class of all such bottomless boolean algebras. For a full details and a proof, see Cotnoir and Varzi [2021: §2.2].

[21] For an extensive discussion, see Cotnoir and Varzi [2021].

[22] I take this from Cotnoir and Bacon [2012].



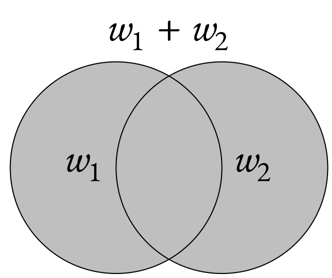
A4 is general composition. One particular instance of it will be useful in what follows. Take $A(x)$ to be $x = w_1 \vee x = w_2$. Then **A4** gives us:

- $\exists x(x = w_1 \vee x = w_2) \rightarrow \exists z \forall y(y \bigcirc z \leftrightarrow \exists x(y \bigcirc x \wedge (x = w_1 \vee x = w_2))$

The antecedent of the conditional is a logical truth, so we may detach. Writing the z is question as $w_1 + w_2$, and using the properties of identity, we have:

- $\forall y(y \bigcirc (w_1 + w_2) \leftrightarrow (y \bigcirc w_1 \vee y \bigcirc w_2))$

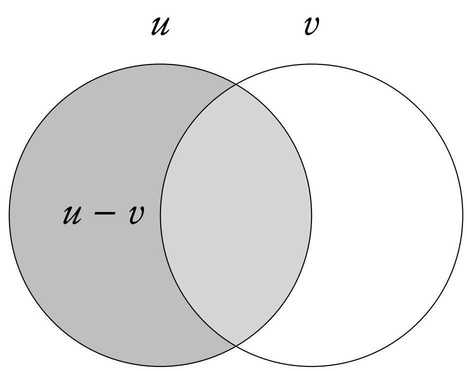
In the following diagram, w_1 is the left hand circle, w_2 is the right hand circle, and the whole shaded area is $w_1 + w_2$:



3.3 Mereological complements

Let us now turn to the piece of mereological machinery which will be central to what I want to say about absences: complementation. First, relative complements; then absolute complements.

The complement of v relative to u is the part of u that would remain if the part in v were removed—assuming this to be non-empty; that is, it is the shaded area in the following diagram, marked $u - v$:



A3 tells us that:

- $\neg u \leq v \rightarrow \exists x(x \leq u \wedge x \bullet v)$.

Take the fusion of all such xs, and call this $u - v$. Then **A4** with $A(x)$ as $x \leq u \wedge x \bullet v$ tells us that:

- $\exists x(x \leq u \wedge x \bullet v) \rightarrow \forall y(y \bigcirc (u - v) \leftrightarrow \exists x(y \bigcirc x \wedge (x \leq u \wedge x \bullet v)))$

Putting these two things together gives us:

- $\neg u \leq v \rightarrow \forall y(y \bigcirc (u - v) \leftrightarrow \exists x(y \bigcirc x \wedge (x \leq u \wedge x \bullet v))$

It is not hard to show that, given $\neg u \leq v$, $u - v$ and v form a disjoint partition of $u + v$. That is:

[1] $(u - v) \bullet v$

[2] $(u - v) + v = u + v$

(I leave a formal proof of this and the few simple facts that follow as exercises for the reader!)

$u - v$ is the complement of v relative to u; but we can also form an absolute complement. For $A(x)$, take $x = x$. Everything satisfies $x = x$, so the fusion of all x such that $x = x$ is the fusion of all things. Call this *everything*, and write it as $\mathbf{e}$. **A4** gives us:

- $\exists x\, x = x \rightarrow \forall y(y \bigcirc \mathbf{e} \leftrightarrow \exists x(y \bigcirc x \wedge x = x))$

So by the properties of identity, we have:

- $\forall y(y \bigcirc \mathbf{e} \leftrightarrow \exists x\, y \bigcirc x)$

Since, for any x, $x \bigcirc x$, it follows that everything overlaps $\mathbf{e}$. Indeed, it is not hard to show that everything is part of $\mathbf{e}$.

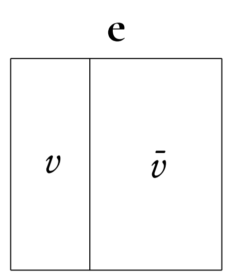
The absolute complement of v is the complement of v with respect to $\mathbf{e}$, $\mathbf{e} - v$. Let us write $\mathbf{e} - v$ as $\overline{v}$. Then [1] and [2] tell us that provided $\neg\mathbf{e} \leq v$:

- $\overline{v} \bullet v$
- $\overline{v} + v = \mathbf{e} + v$

But it is not difficult to show that $\mathbf{e} + v = \mathbf{e}$. Hence, the second of these becomes:

- $\overline{v} + v = \mathbf{e}$

These things hold under the condition that $\neg\mathbf{e} \leq v$. But it is also easy to establish that this is equivalent to $\mathbf{e} \neq v$. Hence, what we have seen is that provided $\mathbf{e} \neq v$, we have the situation represented in the following diagram:



That is, $\overline{v}$ is the "boolean complement" of v. $\mathbf{e}$ itself has no such complement, since there is no empty fusion.

4 Problems of absences resolved

Given this background, let us now return to absences and their problems. This is not the place to discuss all the suggestions that have been made as to how to solve them.[23] I shall simply discuss how they may be handled given the mereological apparatus I have just described.

In fact, the solutions to the problems I wish to suggest are now probably fairly obvious. Given some object, x, we can take its absence to be its complement, $\bar{x}$; that is, the fusion of all the things that do not overlap x. In the case of Pierre, that is the sum of all those things

[23] For some examples, see the references given in §2.

that do not overlap Pierre. The absence of Pierre is, so to speak, everywhere where no part of Pierre is. In the case of the pots, their absence is the sum of all those things that do not overlap any pot.

This tells us what absences are, and so solves the metaphysical problem. Absences are mereological fusions, just like all other objects.[24] What makes them absences is simply that something is missing.

What of the epistemological problem? Absences may have physical parts. The absence of Pierre and the absence of pots both have as parts the Empire State Building, Einstein, and Venus. These can obviously have causal interactions with a cognitive agent. If one thinks that some objects do not exist, an absence can have non-existent parts too. Those cannot enter into such interactions. But this is no matter. To see an object, one does not have to see the whole of it. Indeed, normally one does not. If I see any translucent solid object, I see only the surface, not the parts inside. And seeing the surface counts as seeing the object. In the same way, if an absence has existent parts, I can see the absence by seeing those parts. It matters not that others are invisible. Hence, taking the absence of x to be $\bar{x}$ also solves the epistemological problem of perception.

5 Objections

Of course, philosophical theses of any interest always have some objections to face. Let me consider five. I will put these in terms of Pierre; but they could be made in terms of pots or anything else.

> *Objection 1. The collection of things that do not overlap Pierre is too heterogeneous to have a fusion. So there is no absence of Pierre.*

> Of course, if one holds to general composition, this is simply false. But suppose that one holds to some version of special composition. If one is moved by this objection, a simple reply is to take the absence of Pierre to be his complement relative to some (contextually determined) object—say the café itself. And the move is quite natural in many cases. For example, it is plausible to take holes to be absences of a certain kind. If one does this, it is natural to take these to be relative absences. Thus, the

[24] Recall that even a mereological atom, x, is the fusion of the objects in $\{x\}$.

hole in the middle of a hollow ball is the fusion of all the things (or parts of space?) *interior* to the shell.

However, I am not moved by the objection. It is hard to give a definitive reply to it without a full answer to the question of what kind of unity a bunch of objects must possess for them to have a fusion. In any case, unities are of many kinds: natural, social, and their various subvarieties. Still, at least as a first cut, we may suppose that we have a unity when the members of the totality are picked out by an appropriate non-gerrymandered condition.[25] And the things which fuse together to form the absence of Pierre are united by the fact that they all share the non-gerrymandered property of not overlapping Pierre. Maybe this does not pick out a natural kind (whatever that is); but it is as much a social kind as that of the nationals of a country who have never resided there.

Objection 2. The absence of Pierre is too big to be seen.

Again, a simple reply is to take the absence of Pierre to be a relative complement—say relative to the room. However, again, I am not moved by this objection. As I noted, one normally does not see the whole of an object—just a part of it. Indeed, it might be a very small part of it. When my ship pulls out of Sydney Harbour, I see the Pacific Ocean. And when I gaze into the night sky, I see the cosmos. So I can see an absence by seeing just a part of it.

Objection 3. If de Beauvoir is not in the café, Sartre also sees the absence of de Beauvoir—which, we may suppose, he does not.[26]

A simple reply is that what you see depends on your expectations. Notoriously, people often do not see things when they do not expect to see them. (Proof-reading is an obvious case in point.) Sartre expected to see Pierre; he did not expect to see de Beauvoir. So he saw the absence of Pierre, but not that of de Beauvoir.

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[25] Though I doubt that what counts as non-gerrymandered is an *a priori* matter. It may be determined by theoretical inquiry (see Priest [1976]).

[26] If the absences are complements relative to the café, then the absence of Pierre and the absence of de Beauvoir are identical; but even if these are absolute complements, what Pierre sees is part of both, and so he sees both.

That's not quite right, however. Suppose that Sartre goes into the café on Monday, and that he knows that Pierre goes in every day except Monday. Sartre does not expect to see Pierre, but if Pierre occurs to him when he enters the café, he can still see the absence of Pierre.

However, it remains the case that what one sees depends on one's mental state. When I look at an X-ray picture, all I may see is a senseless arrangement of black and white shapes. But the radiographer may see a kidney with a tumour. Their training has put them in a quite different mental state to view the picture. On entering the café, then, Sartre sees the absence of Pierre but not the absence of de Beauvoir, because a quite different mental state would be required to do so—such as having Beauvoir on his mind.

One might also say that Sartre *did* see the absence of de Beauvoir. He just didn't realise that that is what he was seeing. What he saw, he saw *as* the the absence of Pierre, not *as* the absence of de Beauvoir. *Seeing as*, or *aspect seeing*, is discussed at length by Wittgenstein in the second half of the *Philosophical Investigations*. To see the duck-rabbit duckwise is to see it *as* a duck. One may look at the same thing, and not see it as that. Similarly, one may see something which is the absence of de Beauvoir, but not experience it *as* the absence of de Beauvoir.[27]

Objection 4a. Suppose that Pierre is in the café. Then the absence of Pierre has as a part the rest of the contents of the café. So Pierre and his absence are both in the café! Surely, that cannot be.

Now, for a start, the absence of Pierre is not in the café; it overlaps the café. And is it odd to say the absence of Pierre overlaps the café in this case? Not at all. An absence is an absence from somewhere. Pierre was absent from the café; he was not absent from Paris. Even if Pierre were in the café, he would be absent from some parts of it—perhaps from a seat at the bar. This is part of his absence.

Objection 4b. But then, one can see Pierre and his absence at the same time! Surely that cannot be the case.

[27] See Mumford [2021: ch. 7] for good general discussion of the perception of absences. His own account [§7.5] provides a possible explanation of the cognitive mechanisms at work when we have the phenomenological experience of an absence.

It can. Suppose that Pierre is seated at a table and not on the empty bar stool. One can see both. In seeing the bar stool one is seeing (part of) the absence of Pierre. However, as noted, that does not imply that one experiences it *as* the absence of Pierre. (Indeed, the same may be true of seeing Pierre: one can see a part of Pierre (maybe his foot)—or even the whole of Pierre—without experiencing it *as* Pierre.) Seeing it thus, depends on having the right mental state; but even this may be present. Suppose you expect to see Pierre on the bar stool, and you look there. He is not there, and you may experience his absence. At the very same moment, he pops up from behind the bar. So you see him as well.[28]

Objection 5. Suppose, this time, that Pierre is not in the café; and that the café is dirty. Then it follows that (part of) the absence of Pierre is dirty. That seems counterintuitive.

It certainly sounds odd; but oddity is not the same as falsity. A good metaphysical theory can certainly have apparently odd consequences. Many hold that a statue and the clay out of which it is made are different objects.[29] It follows that two things can be in exactly the same place at the same time. And the mind/brain identity theory implies that a thought can have a physical location. These are pre-theoretically odd views. But there is no reason why metaphysical theories should not have consequences which are just as surprising as those of physical or logical theories.[30]

In any case, the objection appeals to what one is "inclined to say". But I am not engaged here in ordinary language philosophy. It is standard to define the von Neumann ordinal 3 as $\{0, 1, 2\}$. If one does so, it follows that $1 \in 3$. This sounds very odd too; but it is perfectly acceptable if, for example, the definition is interpreted as what Carnap called an 'explication'.[31]

[28] Arguably, the optical illusion of the Kanisza triangle is also a case where one can see something and its absence as well. (See Mumford [2021: 104].)

[29] See Varzi [2016: §3.2].

[30] It comes as a *great* surprise to most students beginning their study of logic that all unicorns have five legs (because there aren't any).

[31] See Leitgeb and Carus [2020: 10D].

What we see, then, is that these objections to the theory of absences I have given have cogent replies, and so the mereological machinery provides a natural solution to the problems concerning absences.

6 Conclusion

Absences are certainly strange things, but we employ them in our thinking all the time. For all that, our thinking in this case could just be confused—as no doubt it often is. However, what I hope I have provided is an understanding of the notion which does justice to the role that absences play in our thinking. One might think it necessary to jettison them from our conceptual economy, thereby making them absent therefrom. Such would be unjustified. Still, we now know exactly what it would mean to say this.

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