

ψυχη PSYCHE

Doubts About Receptivity

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Abstract: Receptivity is a foundational concept in the analysis of causation given in Gregg Rosenberg's *A Place for Consciousness* and it enters, directly or indirectly, into the definitions of a host of other terms in the book. This commentary raises a problem (which I call "the triviality problem") about how we are to understand receptivity. Search for a solution proceeds by examination of several contexts in which the concept of receptivity is used. Although a satisfactory solution remains elusive, it is hoped that making the problem clear will lead to its eventual resolution.

0. Introduction

In *A Place for Consciousness* (hereafter, APC), Gregg Rosenberg introduces the central notion of *receptivity* in the following way.

This seems to be a conceptual truth: A property of an individual may be effective only if some individual is receptive to the property's presence. The two notions, effectiveness and receptivity, are logical complements of one another, so the world cannot realize one without the other (p. 154).

The problem I want to raise is that this conceptual truth appears to be trivial. If this truth really is trivial, then receptivity will not be able to bear the weight that it is required to bear in the subsequent discussion. I will refer to this problem as “the triviality problem”.

To understand what I mean by the triviality problem, imagine that someone announces the discovery of a logical relation between Northness and Southness, and supports the claim to this discovery by saying that the world cannot contain a case of something’s being North of something else unless it also contains a case of something’s being South of something else. I hope and believe that most readers will regard such a claim as an invitation to deflation. “B is South of A” does not introduce a new fact, it is just an alternative way of saying that A is North of B. We have a word for the converse of the North relation, and so we can indicate the relation either by using “North” or by using the converse word while reversing the order of terms. There is no more of metaphysical interest here than there is in the fact that many languages afford us a stylistic choice between active and passive voice.

If receptivity is no more than the converse of effectiveness, then the conceptual truth that they must both occur if one does cannot support any interesting new view of causation. Remarks about receptivity could all be replaced by parallel remarks about effectiveness, with order of terms reversed.

In searching for resolutions of the triviality problem, I shall divide the discussion into direct and indirect cases. Direct cases are examples of receptivity or statements that apply predicates to receptivity. Indirect cases are applications of the concept of receptivity that hold out some hope of inferring what receptivity must be from statements about how it is supposed to contribute to the developing theory in APC.

Not to tantalize, I will say in advance that I do not think either kind of case provides what is needed to resolve the triviality problem. But we must acknowledge the logical point that a negative conclusion of this kind cannot be established without examining every paragraph in the book, which, of course, we cannot do here. My strategy will be to look at what I take to be the leading direct cases and the most promising of the indirect cases. My discussion of these cases will at least clarify what I am taking the problem to be, and why I think it is an important problem for the project of APC. It will, I hope, set the stage for a reply that will provide a substantive increase in our understanding of the key concept of receptivity.

1. Direct Cases

1.1. We are told (see pp. 154-155) that on the medieval/Aristotelian conception, God is missing a receptive aspect. But we may also say that nothing can have an effect on God. It is not apparent how reference to a receptive aspect adds anything, so it is not apparent how reflection on the traditional conception of God shows how receptivity talk is anything more than a stylistic variant of (in this case, negative) efficacy talk.

1.2 On p. 155, we are told that “Einstein added *receptivity* to space” (emphasis in original). Bodies do not affect Newtonian space, but “Einstein introduced responsiveness to the distribution of mass within it”.

These remarks are understandable and justifiable by reference to the relevant physics, but they do not help to explain receptivity, because we can recast the same idea, without apparent

loss, as a difference in effective properties: In Newton's theory, mass has no effective property of affecting (the curvature of) space but in Einstein's theory, mass does have such an effective property.

1.3. On p. 155, again, we are told that singularities have effects on other things, e.g., by creating black holes, but that they may lack receptivity.

But we may say the same thing this way: It may be that nothing has the effective property of being able to affect a singularity.

“Collectively, these examples show the conceptual and empirical distinctness of effectiveness and receptivity” (p. 155). But as far as I can see, they do not show either kind of distinctness. They are compatible with regarding receptivity talk as an alternative way of stating (positive or negative) claims about efficacy. Moreover, it is not apparent how the two formulations could be *empirically* distinct if, as claimed in the original introduction of receptivity on p. 154, they are “logical complements” of one another.

1.4. On pp. 168-169, we find the interesting analogy of the front and back of a wall. These two parts of a wall are evidently distinct, but at the same time there seems to be a logical connection that requires a wall to have a back if it has a front (and conversely). So, here we seem to have a model for what was puzzling, namely, distinctness combined with logical connection.

To evaluate the cogency of this analogy, we should ask where the logical connection comes from. The story behind the analogy would seem to be this. A wall is a three dimensional object. Necessarily, a three dimensional object has a two dimensional surface that requires three dimensions to be embedded. (Alternative formulation of this point: A three dimensional object has a two dimensional surface that encloses a non-zero volume.) Necessarily, a two dimensional surface has distinct, two dimensional subsurfaces. “Front” and “back” are ways of specifying two such subsurfaces—the specification is implicitly relational, i.e., the front of an object is a subsurface that faces an implicit observer, the back is a subsurface that is hidden by the object covered by the front surface.

I think this story implies that the requirement of a back for a front (and conversely) gets its necessity from the necessity of the geometrical relations just mentioned plus the semantics of the terms “surface”, “subsurface”, “front” and “back”. The necessity for a back does not come from mere two dimensionality: rainbows and mirror images are two dimensional but do not have back surfaces. It is essential that “front” be “front of a three dimensional object”—this is what lets the geometrical relations get a grip on the case.

If this analysis is right, then I believe the wall analogy is not as helpful as it first appears. True, it delivers an F and a B that are distinct in themselves, yet logically related, which is what we wanted for effectiveness and receptivity. But it delivers these goods only in virtue of being embedded in the fairly rich background just indicated. This leads to a question: What is the background that articulates or explains the necessity of the relation between effectiveness and receptivity? I have suggested that this relation is a merely verbal necessity, like the necessity of B's being South of A if and only if A is North of B. I have not proved that there is not a richer background story in the case of effectiveness and receptivity, but I do not know what it is supposed to be. The wall analogy, upon reflection, does not provide the story we need; indeed, it outlines a logical space where a story is needed that we do not (yet?) have.

1.5. We are given two definitions on p. 159 that, taken together, may be regarded as defining “receptivity”. They are:

Definition 9.2: A *causal nexus* . . . – A receptive connection binding two or more effective individuals.

Definition 9.4: *Receptive properties* – Connective properties enabling individuals to become members of causal nexii and to be sensitive to constraints on the state of nexii where they are members.

Effective properties “contribute constraints on the state of nexii where they are members” (p. 159, Def. 9.3). It is not clear why we need receptivity in addition to effective properties. It would seem that efficacy is already a connection that binds an effective property to whatever it constrains. It logically follows that whatever is constrained by an effective property *can* be so constrained, just as it follows from A’s being North of B that B *can* be South of something. But this observation gives no explanation of why we should be thought to be adding new properties to our metaphysics, as opposed to adding new ways of referring to properties we already have.

2. Indirect Cases

2.1. “The individuals a receptive property binds, together with the receptivity, create a new individual” (p. 165). Perhaps we can come to a more robust appreciation of receptivity by thinking of it as the relation that binds effective properties into higher level individuals.

But if we do not already have some other way of solving the triviality problem, the quoted sentence tells us no more than what can be said in this way: an effective property, together with whatever that property constrains, forms a new individual.

This conception of individuals presents a second triviality problem. Namely, it seems that we *can* learn to formulate claims in accordance with the following reformulation principle: Whenever E1 constrains E2, En, reformulate by saying that there is a (higher level) individual that has an internal connection among its properties, E1 En. But it is not clear why we should adopt such a linguistic policy. As far as I have been able to see, there is no argument for doing so that does not already presuppose that receptivity talk is substantively different from what can be said in terms of efficacy alone; and we have not yet seen how such a view can be made out.

This doubt about the use of “individual” ramifies to doubts about other important claims. For example, it is said on pp. 198 that

the existence of the higher level individual has made the world more determinate. By recognizing their autonomous role in resolving the determination problem, we can see how the existence of layers of higher level individuals opens up a more general way to view what effective properties *are*. (Emphasis in original.)

But this claim of autonomous role is suspect. If individuals become available for reference merely by applying the reformulation principle just stated, their names will pick out collections constituted by effective properties and what they constrain. If we begin with this understanding, it will be clear that we need an argument that the constituted individuals have any properties that

are not results of the efficacy of the effective properties; and this argument does not seem to me to have been given.

It may be suggested that the desired argument is implicitly present in the treatment of (strong) emergence, where strongly emergent properties “are properties whose instances, if they exist, are not wholly constituted by the organizations and interactions of lower level entities . . .” (p. 273). The argument I have in mind is not stated by Rosenberg, but perhaps someone might reason that higher level individuals are necessary in order to explain the possibility of strong emergence, and then explain the nature of receptivity by pointing to its role in constituting higher level individuals.

It is, however, not clear that we would need to think of emergence in terms of higher level individuals. Just to illustrate the possibility of emergence without higher level individuals, imagine a world in which addition of two forces can be done by using the parallelogram rule, but addition of three forces cannot be done simply by applying that rule to one pair and then applying it again to the resultant and the third force. Of course, this is a world with weird physics; the point is only that it could be consistent and describable without recourse to receptivity. So, it is unclear whether describing a world in terms of higher level individuals bound by internal receptivity connections is more than merely a verbal alternative to a description in terms of how effective properties are to be compounded when there are many at work. Absent a clear difference, reflection on strong emergence does not provide us an additional grip on receptivity, and thus does not resolve the triviality problem.

The claim is made that the framework introduced in Chapter 10 “explains [the correlations among distant particles in EPR experiments] by appealing to the existence of a spatially distributed higher level individual created by a shared receptivity for the particles” (p. 221). But it seems doubtful that any explanation is provided; it appears, instead, that we are given only an alternative way of describing a situation that is just as puzzling under this alternative description as it is under all the other ways of describing it.

2.2. “Plausibly, the ontological relation between phenomenal qualities and their participation in the experiencings of subjects matches this crucial logical structure of the relationship between effective properties and their shared receptivity” (p. 243). This remark suggests that we can use our understanding of the distinction between experiences and their objects to throw light on the distinction between receptive connections and the effective properties they are said to bind.

The difficulty here is that we would seem to be explaining the obscure by the even more obscure. We are told that phenomenal qualities and experiencing subjects cannot exist apart, but that “despite this mutual participation in one another’s natures, they are distinct essences” (p. 243). This view is stated in several ways, but no argument is offered for it. Absent such an argument, we really have no articulated understanding of the experience/object “relation”, and thus no aid in understanding receptivity.

The experience/object distinction—or, in more traditional terms, the act/object distinction—is so familiar that it may not be realized how deeply problematic it is. G. E. Moore famously argued that a sensation of blue and a sensation of green had to have two “elements” (blue, and green) to account for their difference, and an additional element—consciousness, or awareness – to account for their both being sensations. One might just as well argue that a patch of blue and a patch of green require two elements (blue, and green) to account for their

difference, and an additional element—a (presumably colorless?) patch to account for their both being patches. In the face of such peculiarity, one might well wonder whether it might be better to suppose that “an experience”, conceived as an element of some kind, is a mistake. Perhaps “phenomenal qualities” are experiential qualities, without there being a quality and an (in itself qualityless?) experience in some sort of “relation”. (And if it is held out that the experiences are not qualityless, then it seems that the further step of “relating” them to a quality is otiose.)

Evidently, the preceding two paragraphs are not a proof of any positive view; they are intended only to show that we cannot take the experience/object relation as giving us a clear model for receptivity, or anything else, on the ground that it is itself too fraught with difficulties to serve such a purpose.

A later discussion offers a little more about receptivity and experience. We are told that in knowing what it is like (to hear a scream, to know what’s on the tip of your tongue, etc.) we have

knowledge of the basic causal structure of the particular that we are. It is acquaintance with the carriers of our own nomic content and is available to us because of the immediate nature of the shared receptive connection that consciousness carries (p. 260).

There is, however, little explanation of just how the nature of receptivity makes acquaintance with nomic content available to us. The remark that “acquaintance collapses the metaphysical distance between thing experienced and thing experiencing” (p. 262) seems merely to return us to the mystery of the act/object distinction. (If the metaphysical distance is zero, is there really a distinction? If it is non-zero, we need an account of the bridging, however small the distance.) Substitution into the quotation from p. 260 of the analysis of nomic content—“the *effective properties* that are responsible for an individual’s capacity to constrain the states of other individuals and the *receptive properties* that form a network of connectivity, allowing individuals to place the constraints potential in their effective states” (p. 152; emphases in original) does not seem to help. The upshot is that I think the remark quoted from p. 260 probably contains an important clue for the understanding of receptivity, but I am unable to discern just what this clue is.

3. Conclusion

Since receptivity is such a fundamental notion, there are many roles it plays in later sections of APC that may afford bases for its further explanation, with the possibility of overcoming the triviality problem. Indeed, Rosenberg explicitly suggests (p. 249; 253) that seeing how receptivity works in the development of his views will help clarify and support his model. So it may fairly be asked why I am going to stop with the points I have raised. The answer is that these later developments and explanations are replete with references to the theory of individuals and the view that receptivity is carried by experiences. When I seek enlightenment about receptivity in these later discussions, I find myself repeatedly running up against the problems I have indicated above. Instead of converging enlightenment, I find ramifying puzzlement. I suspect that there are lines of clarification available in these later discussions, but I am unable to reconstruct the explanatory bridges that would seem to be required. I have clarified the sources of my puzzlement as best I can and it is time to ask for Rosenberg’s assistance.

In addition, I suspect that the root of my difficulties is that I have missed something very simple very early in the introduction of receptivity. If that is right, lengthening my list of

difficulties would not be to the point. I have proceeded as far as I have in hope of making clear both the nature of my unease about the triviality problem, and the importance it has as an obstacle to understanding the theory of *A Place for Consciousness*. It is my hope that this effort will give a clear outline of a space that further explanations by its author will be able to fill.