

***Knowledge and NOW: What Is the Epistemic Standing of the Present Moment?***  
**Jesse Butler, University of Central Arkansas**

The present moment, NOW, is a pretty big deal to us humans. Everything seems to be happening NOW, on the razor edge between history and the future, and without a NOW through which we experience the world, the world itself seems inaccessible, if not altogether incomprehensible. But what is this NOW? Is NOW an objective feature of external reality, a uniquely privileged public moment through which we are in contact with the actual world as it unfolds, or is NOW merely a subjective illusion that we each project onto the world through the egocentric temporal window of our own experience?

Philosophers and scientists from Parmenides to Einstein have contemplated many possibilities concerning the nature of time, arguably with some degree of progressive success, but this question of the reality of NOW within time remains. Enthusiasts of the topic might even call NOW the “hard problem” of time, in that nothing seems more directly real or certain in our experience than NOW, the present moment, yet the status of this moment within our philosophical and scientific understanding of temporality and the world continues to be a matter of debate and uncertainty.<sup>1</sup> There are many who are reasonably assured by conceptual analysis (e.g. McTaggart-style tenseless B-theorists) and/or scientific theory and experimental verification (e.g. Einstein’s special theory of relativity) that our experience of the present moment is merely subjective, with no objective non-relational and/or non-relative reality with which it can be identified and/or said to be simultaneous.

Others, including Dwight Holbrook (2013), stand resolutely on the side of common sense and experience, defending the external reality of the common NOW. NOW realists like Holbrook maintain that we are directly acquainted with the reality of NOW as our collective concrete presence in the world unfolds. In fact, if Holbrook is right, the thoughts and observations behind counterintuitive attempts to explain NOW away as a subjective illusion necessarily presuppose an epistemically foundational NOW through which they are apprehended. Simply put, Holbrook’s claim is that the denial of a common NOW is an inconceivable contradiction, due to the necessity that any knowledge we may have at all requires a NOW in which it is known.

In this essay, I will analyze and respond to Holbrook’s defense of the reality of the common NOW, focusing in particular on the tight relationship he proposes between NOW, knowledge, and the physical universe. As will become clear, I choose this focus for four reasons: 1) It is a foundational point on which his overall account depends, 2) It is the aspect of his account in which he draws upon my own work (Butler 2011) to explain and support his views, 3) It brings up interesting and important considerations concerning the nature of knowledge, as relevant to the themes of this journal, and 4)

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<sup>1</sup> Incidentally, as perhaps an indication of this uncertainty, the nature of time received the highest “other” response among the possible answers to 30 standing philosophical questions given in a recent (2009) survey: 58.2% of philosophers chose “other”, in contrast to “B-theory” (26.3%) and “A-theory” (15.5%). See <http://philpapers.org/surveys/results.pl>, and see McTaggart (1908) for more on B-theory vs A-theory terms that have framed debate on time in philosophy.

Although it has some virtues, it also faces some significant problems that should be noted, and which could be improved upon to strengthen the overall case for the reality of NOW. I will have less to say about the nature of time itself and where NOW fits within theories of time, although these are interesting and important aspects of Holbrook's account as well.

### **On Holbrook's Argument**

To begin, here is an outline of Holbrook's overall argument as I understand it:

We experience the present moment, NOW.

We face two competing viewpoints concerning the nature and epistemic status of this experience:

A) The Everyday Understanding View: NOW is objectively real and the basis of knowing the material public world.

—or—

B) The Counter-Intuitive View: Experience of the present moment is merely phenomenal, in which case NOW is a subjective illusion to be eliminated / explained away through objective knowledge of the material world.

Denying A) through the acceptance of B) results in self-contradiction, as can be illustrated through the consideration of five fundamental claims connected to A), the ordinary common reality of NOW, the denial of which results in self-contradiction:

Fundamental 1: Knowing Takes Place Only in Present Time

Fundamental 2: The NOW is not a Measurement or Objectified Configuration

Fundamental 3: The NOW is not a Mere Phenomenal Property of Consciousness

Fundamental 4: The NOW has no Past

Fundamental 5: The NOW is that which gives the Material Universe its Autonomy and Non-Solipsistic Character<sup>2</sup>

Given that these fundamentals are incontrovertible, the everyday understanding of NOW must be accepted, as the foundation of the material public world and our capacity to know it.

There is much to discuss here, particularly across the five fundamentals that form the core of Holbrook's perspective. Beginning with Fundamental 1, Holbrook maintains that knowing anything at all is dependent upon a NOW through which the knowledge is obtained, capturing this at one point with the pithy statement that "there is no view from no when" (4). Necessarily, he observes, all knowledge originates in a temporally pivotal

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<sup>2</sup> These five fundamentals are directly quoted from across Holbrook's essay, on pages 4, 7, 9, 11, and 13.

NOW through which a conscious being is acquainted with the thereby known world. To give further support for this claim, Holbrook gives the following argument:

Try knowing anything before or outside the moment when you come to know or acquire knowledge of it. Whatever it is you have come to know, however much thought or reflection you may have put into knowing it correctly, there is no possibility—no conceivable way—of it being something you know unless this act of apprehension occurs in the first place (4).

Holbrook takes himself to be standing on bedrock common sense here, but upon closer scrutiny I think there are challengeable assumptions at play. Of course, the conscious act of knowing is necessarily connected to the present moment in which it occurs, and perhaps also all knowledge originates in such acts of knowing, but it does not necessarily follow that all knowledge relies upon the NOW as a fundamental epistemic component of its content. Although acts of knowing are causally dependent upon some NOW or other for their occurrence, the actual representational content of propositional knowledge, the truths or facts of which it is comprised, are not fundamentally constrained or constituted by the NOW through which they are known. Consider, for example, knowledge of a simple mathematical truth, such as  $2 + 2 = 4$ . To be cognizant of this fact, one must of course undergo a moment, or perhaps series of moments, in which the fact comes to be known, but nothing about its factual content or epistemic character is essentially connected to that moment. Indeed, we rarely, if ever, recall or otherwise consider the particular NOW in which we came to know that  $2 + 2 = 4$ , without any notable consequence for the content or character of our knowledge of that particular fact across the countless times we utilize or think about it.

These considerations equally apply to empirically-acquired knowledge, as well as its social character as it is purveyed to others. Consider, for example, Galileo's telescopic observations of the moons of Jupiter and the pivotal role they played in the social shift towards knowledge of a heliocentric cosmology. There was of course a NOW (or series of NOWs) in which Galileo made his observations, and also countless NOWs in the development and social purveyance of the knowledge thereby acquired. We must acknowledge that the context of the particular times in which these events occurred is historically and socially significant, but there are no identifiable epistemic consequences for the knowledge itself specifically in terms of the particular momentary NOWs in which it was acquired and passed along. Indeed, if Galileo, or someone else altogether, had acquired this knowledge in different NOWs, nothing of epistemic consequence would follow with regard to the specific propositional knowledge that Jupiter has moons in orbit, nor the further heliocentric consequences that can be ascertained from this fact, regardless of how significant such causal differences might be historically speaking.

So, while Holbrook may be right that all knowing takes place in a NOW, there do not seem to be strong epistemic implications from that observation that necessarily carry over to the knowledge thereby acquired. Holbrook makes a point of emphasizing knowing over knowledge (see footnote 3, 22), using that emphasis to draw attention to the fact that knowing necessarily occurs in a NOW, but this focus on knowing over knowledge stacks

the deck in his favor in a manner that overemphasizes its epistemic consequences. It simply does not follow that all knowledge is constrained or epistemically dependent upon the particular NOW or NOWs in which it is acquired.

Nevertheless, Holbrook could be right that NOW is not a subjective phenomenon contained only in our private experience but rather is an event that places us in direct acquaintance with the external material and public world, as indicated by the conjunction of Fundamentals 3 and 5 in his core argument. In fact, I am sympathetic with Holbrook's viewpoint here, despite the fact that I am skeptical about his attempt to support it by arguing that all knowledge is epistemically dependent upon the NOW. I agree that we are directly acquainted with the world, as conscious knowing beings necessarily embodied in material reality, and it is plausible to connect this fact with the NOW, as the temporal point of engagement we have with the world, but these observations need not define the fundamental characteristics or parameters of all knowledge. As we will see shortly, this may be best clarified by distinguishing notably different kinds of knowledge.

### **Knowing NOW**

It makes sense to think about NOW in terms of knowledge, as both arguably are kinds of mind-to-world relations. Knowledge is standardly thought of as a particular kind of mind-to-world relation, e.g. a justified true belief in one's mind about the way things are in reality, and NOW, too can be plausibly thought of in terms of a mind's ongoing direct contact with the world. But we must be careful in weaving knowledge and the NOW together. More particularly, I think there are at least four distinguishable kinds of knowledge to consider here, if we are to address the epistemology of NOW accurately.

First, there is phenomenal knowledge of one's own conscious experiences, which I have characterized elsewhere as a distinct category of knowledge, specific to the first-person experience of one's own mental states (Butler 2011 and 2013).

Second, there is acquaintance knowledge, which consists of knowledge of the objects with which one is directly acquainted. In Bertrand Russell's classic formulation of this kind of knowledge (1910), it is limited to sense data, universals, and (perhaps) one's own self, but contra Russell we may have direct acquaintance knowledge of the ordinary objects we encounter in the world.

Third, there is ability knowledge, or know-how, consisting of the things we know how to do (e.g. recognizing faces, riding bicycles, etc.).

Fourth, there is descriptive propositional knowledge, consisting of the propositions we know to be true of the world (e.g.  $2 + 2 = 4$  and the fact that Jupiter has orbiting moons, etc.).

In everyday life, all four kinds of knowledge meld together into our general experience and understanding of the world, but confusion and error can result when we fail to distinguish them and their differing epistemic traits. The fourth kind of knowledge, propositional knowledge, has received the lion's share of attention in epistemology, with

many philosophers simply equating knowledge in general with this kind of knowledge (e.g. consider the many definitions of knowledge in terms of true belief: justified true belief, reliably-formed true belief, etc., with belief standardly understood as a propositional attitude). It is undoubtedly an important kind of knowledge, the nature of which must be acknowledged in any accurate treatment of knowledge, as we have already seen with regard to Holbrook's attempt to reduce all knowledge to instances of knowing in the NOW.

To his credit, however, Holbrook rightly draws attention to other aspects of knowing that may stand apart from the classic treatment of knowledge in terms of propositional content. Indeed, I think he is right to say that we know the material public world through our direct acquaintance with it in the present moment, NOW, and I applaud the anti-Cartesian move he develops on this point, rejecting the epistemological and metaphysical mind / body divide that has kept philosophy in general, and epistemology in particular, from embracing our fundamental embodiment in the world for far too long (8). However, the kind of knowledge most centrally at work in his account is acquaintance knowledge, and it should not be conflated with other kinds of knowledge in addressing the particular epistemic considerations regarding our experience of NOW.

As we have already seen above, it should not be conflated with propositional knowledge, in virtue of the fact that the content of the propositions we may come to know are not constrained by the particular NOWs in which they are learned or entertained, nor are they constrained by that with which we are acquainted (an important point for the possibility of social knowledge purveyed through testimony, incidentally). Moreover, acquaintance knowledge of the NOW should not be conflated with the phenomenal knowledge we have of our own experiences. Here, Holbrook is on a bit more solid ground, as he himself also wants to distinguish our knowledge of NOW from the subjectivity of our mental states, as observed in Fundamental 3 above, but he nevertheless makes a conflation here that is somewhat detrimental to the aims of his account.

In his characterization of knowing by acquaintance, Holbrook states that he rejects the distinction between a knowing subject and a known object (14 and 22, footnote 3). He quotes my work on phenomenal knowledge here to make his point, where I say that my model of phenomenal knowledge "explicitly refrains from characterizing the kind of knowledge in question in terms of the knowing subject obtaining an epistemic relation with a distinguishable known object. In the case of phenomenal knowledge, the knower and the known are one and the same..." (Butler 2011, 137; quoted by Holbrook 2013 in footnote 3, 22). The problem here is that my rejection of the subject / object distinction is intended to distinguish phenomenal knowledge from acquaintance knowledge, which is standardly understood in terms of a subject being acquainted with an object (e.g. Russell 1910). Holbrook erroneously conflates phenomenal knowledge with acquaintance knowledge, characterizing the latter with the unique epistemic character of the former. Not only does this run counter to the intent of my point that he quotes, but it also runs counter to his own aims, at least as I understand them.

## **NOW as Acquaintance with the World**

One of Holbrook's core aims is to establish that our experience of the NOW puts us in direct contact with the material public world, autonomous from our subjective minds, as indicated in his Fundamental 5 listed earlier. It seems to me, then, that he would want to embrace acquaintance knowledge in terms of a subject / object relation, such that our acquaintance with the world through our experience in the NOW is a direct epistemic relation between us as knowing subjects and the material public world as a known object. In other words, if our experience of NOW is characterized as constituting direct acquaintance knowledge with the material public world, specifically in the sense of a direct subject / object relationship, we are in a better position to confront the worry that NOW is merely a subjective illusion within our own minds and argue that it is instead an objective feature of our concrete embodied existence in the material world.

Understanding NOW specifically in terms of objective acquaintance knowledge between oneself and the world works well with all five of Holbrook's fundamentals. Given that our acquaintance knowledge of the NOW is constituted by our direct embodiment in the world at a particular location and time, it is understandable that such knowledge would only take place in present time (Fundamental 1). Given that acquaintance knowledge is fundamentally non-propositional in nature, standing in contrast to the conceptually-mediated propositional claims constituted by scientific theorization and measurement, it also makes sense that our acquaintance with NOW is not in itself constituted by measured configurations (Fundamental 2).

As we have already seen, acquaintance knowledge is not to be conflated with subjective phenomenal knowledge of one's own experiences, thereby accounting for the fact that it is not merely a phenomenal property of our own minds (Fundamental 3). Acquaintance knowledge exists only as an immediate and direct relation between the knower and the known at a particular time, thereby accounting for the fact that our acquaintance with NOW itself has no past (Fundamental 4), in contrast to the less temporally-constrained domain of propositional knowledge (which can nevertheless be used to describe acquaintance knowledge, just as we are doing in this analysis). And finally, again, acquaintance knowledge (in the classic subject / object relational sense) accommodates the fact that the NOW puts us directly in contact with an autonomous material universe (Fundamental 5).

So, with some close attention to its particular epistemic qualities, our knowledge of NOW can be clarified in terms of objective acquaintance we have with the material world in which we exist, distinguishable from merely subjective experience and the conceptually-mediated propositions we construct to describe the world. Understood in terms of acquaintance, NOW puts us in a unique epistemic relationship with the world that is neither subjective nor illusory, but rather in fact objectively real, in terms of our concrete existence in the world at a particular time. It is our objective embodiment in the world at the unique particular juncture between our experience and the world.

**Contact details: [JButler@uca.edu](mailto:JButler@uca.edu)**

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