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RESEARCH

Phenomenalism or the Causal Theory of Objects

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Abstract
In this short piece I critically evaluate the question of whether what I call the causal theory of objects might be a more plausible alternative to the phenomenalism Pelczar ddefends in his recent book.

Keywords Phenomenalism · Causal theory of physical objects · Sensation · Perception · Probabilities

Michael Pelczar's outstanding book *Phenomenalism: A Metaphysics of Chance and Experience* addresses the most important and fundamental metaphysical questions that arise when trying to understand our thought about the physical world and its relation to sensations. In this short piece I'll focus on the question of whether what I call the causal theory of objects has advantages over the kind of phenomenalism defended by Pelczar.

1 Shared Background Assumptions

Let me begin by indicating the respects in which I think that Pelczar and I might agree. Although the view is not nearly as philosophically fashionable as it once was, Pelczar and I agree that both our knowledge (justified belief) and our *thought* about the physical world is indirect. Our justification for believing what we do about the physical world rests on a foundation of what we know about the character of our sensations, where sensations are understood in such a way that no *actual* sequence of sensations *entails* the existence of a physical object exemplifying a physical property. We need a way to characterize sensation and I'll use the familiar language of "seem-

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ing" and "appearance." When confronted with what I take to be a red sphere (under what I take to be normal conditions of perception), I'll describe the visual experience I have as one of seeming to see something red and spherical. It would probably be better to talk about being appeared to red-ly-and-spherically, but that terminology gets old quickly.

To my way of thinking, Chisholm's (1957) discussion of appearance is still one of the very best. When using the language of "seeming" or "appearing" we are sometimes *comparing* a given sensation to others typically caused by a physical object under normal conditions (Chisholm calls this the *comparative* use of "appears"). The comparative use is of no use in analyzing the content of claims about the physical world. Alternatively, we are sometimes expressing tentative *belief* (the doxastic use of "appears"). Again, this is of no use in providing a *conceptual* analysis of the content of the tentative belief. But there is nothing to stop a philosopher from *stipulating* a use of such words to describe the *intrinsic* character of *that* appearance (the one we take to by caused in the normal case by a red spherical object), and we can call this the *noncomparative* use of "appears." This sort of view rejects a disjunctivism that rejects the idea that there is an interesting common denominator to both veridical experience (the good case) and its phenomenologically indistinguishable counterparts (the bad cases).[1]

We can have direct epistemic access to the intrinsic character of appearance. When we have the appropriate concepts, and have a paradigm instance of a certain kind of appearance, we are typically in a position to know without inference that we have the relevant experience. We can also *think* about experiences of that sort directly. What does that mean? Well, it might be easiest to contrast direct and indirect thought, by giving clear examples of indirect thought. I believe that the tallest person in the world is taller than I am. There is at least a *sense* then in which I can think about the tallest person in the world, and have beliefs made true in part by properties that person has. But there is another equally obvious sense in which I don't know who that person is. I'm not even *sure* that there *is* such a person—there may be a tie among a number of people when it comes to those who are taller than everyone else. *How* can I think about a person when I don't know who the person is (in this sense)? Well, Russell was right (something else I'm not arguing for here). I can form thoughts expressible using quantifiers. I can think about the one person who is taller than anyone else, even though I don't know which person takes the value of the variable in my quantified thought.[2]

2 The Causal Theory of Objects

Once you buy into a view like the one sketched above, it might not be that hard to convince yourself that a huge number of thoughts succeed in being about their subject matter only as indirect thoughts of the sort illustrated above. You might even be

[1] The "good/bad" terminology is used by Williamson (2000).

[2] I don't think that one can employ definite descriptions to "magically" fix the reference of expressions that then directly refer to whatever the descriptive "arrow" hit. More about this later.

able to convince yourself that *all* thought of physical objects is indirect. I can think of the objects around me now, but only through thought of the many appearances these objects can produce. I don't have any idea of what the intrinsic properties of these posited causes might be. I know them and think about them only as whatever plays a complex causal role.

I'm calling the view sketched above, the causal theory of objects.[3] It might be Kant's conception of noumena. It was Hylas's last ditch attempt to save matter from Philonous's relentless barrage of objections. Even Hume (1888, 38) toyed with the idea as a not very plausible attempt to avoid skepticism with respect to the physical world. In the philosophy of science, some philosophers endorsed structural realism as a way of trying to understand the unobservable. But in that context most philosophers of science took thought about ordinary "bread box"-sized physical objects to be unproblematic.

3 Phenomenalism

As Pelczar argues, phenomenalism is a view that is even more parsimonious than the causal theory. Berkeley (1954 [1713], 100) hints at it when responding to Hylas's worry about how to understand the existence of a physical world before conscious beings.[4]

> Why I imagine that if I had been present at the creation, I should have seen things produced into being, that is, becoming perceptible, in the order described by the divine historian.

But Mill (1889, 235) was the clearest of the empiricists to advance the thesis that we should think of physical objects as the permanent possibilities of sensation. When asked how he understands the existence of Calcutta when no one is around to experience it he responds, he says he is thinking about the sensations he would have were he on the banks of the Hoogly.

Mill is clear that the permanent possibilities of sensation about which he speaks are not the "noumena" of the causal theory. They are nothing but the truth makers for the relevant subjunctive conditionals. Pelczar thinks that Mill is on the right track but substitutes for the permanent possibilities of sensations, a world of objective conditional probabilities of certain streams of conscious experience.

The above is but the broadest sketch of what I take to be the two most appealing views on how to understand the content of claims about the physical world. The views have much in common. Indeed, it should be emphasized that Pelczar's phenomenalism doesn't even deny the existence of noumena. Pelczar is concerned only to deny that a commitment to noumena is part of the *content* of claims about the existence of physical objects.

[3] A view quite different from the far less radical causal theory of perception.

[4] Though more often he seems to rely on archetypical ideas in the mind of God.

4 Perceptual Relativity

Both the causal theory of objects and phenomenalism face a number of similar objections. The most serious problem for phenomenalism is raised by Mill's own attempt to describe a permanent possibility of sensation. As Pelczar is quick to acknowledge, Mill's phenomenalistic "translation" "cheats" by making reference to the "banks of the Hoogly." Pelczar suggests that this is a technicality—that Mill could have eliminated that reference to physical objects in a more careful analysis. But it isn't easy. Chisholm (1948) exploited the problem in arguing against C. I. Lewis's version of phenomenalism, a version of phenomenalism that is in some ways similar to Pelczar's.

Lewis (1946, 240) suggested that *part* of what it means to say that there is a doorknob in front of me and to the left is that "if I should seem to see such a doorknob in front of me and to the left and if I should seem to be initiating a certain grasping motion, then in *all probability* the feeling of contacting a doorknob would follow."[italics mine] Chisholm argues that the conditional isn't *entailed* for we can imagine the doorknob being there even though "I am unable to move my limbs and my hands but am subject to delusions such that I think that I am moving them; I often seem to myself to be initiating a certain grasping motion, but when I do I never have the feeling of contacting anything."[5]

In responding, Lewis (1948) complains that the objection overlooks the critical "probability" operator that appears in the conditional. It is true that if my hand has been anesthetized the feeling of contacting a doorknob would not follow my seeming to reach out my hand. But it would still be true that in the presence of a doorknob, the latter sensations would *probably* be followed by the former. One cannot *deduce* the truth of probability claims from claims about what actually happens or vice versa.

Like Lewis, Pelczar argues that the existence of physical objects should be identified with the existence of conditional probabilities. But what is conditional upon what? The short answer for Pelczar is that the relevant probabilities are objective conditional probabilities that one stream of consciousness will occur, given the occurrence of another. Pelczar introduces the concept of logically possible ideal worlds in which there are conscious beings everywhere, conscious beings with endless streams of consciousness. In some ways the idea reminds me a bit of Berkeley's God who is constantly aware of all of the "ideas" (experiences) that are and *would* be experiences of conscious beings if they were located appropriately. On Pelczar's view our actual experiences can be thought of us veridical when they would be parts of the experiences occurring in the ideal worlds most similar to the actual world. But the relevant notion of close possible ideal worlds is tied again to a world in which the objective conditional properties describing sensations are the same.

The above sketch of Pelczar's view hardly does justice to the view, and I'm not sure that I fully understand the objective conditional probabilities with which we are

[5] Sellars (1963) raises a closely related objection to phenomenalism. He characterizes the subjunctives phenomenalists try to use in analyzing physical objects as "essentially autobiographical." The true subjunctives about my experiences are true only because of connections among my experiences that are dependent on the external conditions in which I have those experiences (p. 81).

going to identify truth makers for claims about the physical world. I still worry that there is a problem related to

The above sketch of Pelczar's view hardly does justice to the view, and I'm not sure that I fully understand the objective conditional probabilities with which we are going to identify truth makers for claims about the physical world. I still worry that there is a problem related to the fact that what sequences of experiences we have in any given situation is relative to external conditions *and* characteristics of the relevant *perceiver*. I'll focus on the latter. As Hume and Berkeley emphasized in their attack on the existence (or even intelligibility) of matter, the character of one's experience causally depends just as much on *us* as it does on any supposed external reality. If I had the eyes of a fly my visual experience would presumably be "kaleidoscopic." Different kinds of creatures experience the world differently.

We say that an object is red and mean what? Are we asserting that the conditional probability of having a phenomenally red experiences given that we have the experience of seeming to see that object is high? I don't know how to assess that claim given that I've been told that all sorts of creatures (including some humans) see the world as you and I see a black and white movie. We could restrict the relevant conditional probabilities to those involving human experience, but then one might claim that the more perspicuous way to state the conditional probability is that of having a certain experience given that one has another when one is a "normal" human. As phenomenalists we would need an analysis of what it is to be a normal human. We would also need to be clear about the time frame to which we are making implicit reference. Are we talking about humans now, humans in the distant past, humans in the future? I imagine there might be all sorts of differences when it comes to what kinds of experiences would probably follow others that relate to where the creature is along the continuum of evolutionary development.

It seems to me that we would also need to *locate* the critical conditional objective properties in space. So imagine that we have a universe in which there are only two spheres with the same phenomenal properties (a world like the one envisioned by Black, 1952). There is a conditional probability of sensations with which we will identify the one ball and a conditional probability of sensations with which we will identify the other ball. But what makes them distinct? We could just say that we have an unanalyzed notion of space and that the two conditional probabilities of sensation occupy different regions of that space. But in correspondence Pelczar suggested to me that that the distinctness of the spheres consists in the fact that there is another conditional probability of a subject's having the sensations as of two spheres related to each other in various ways. He says the world under discussion "includes potentials for experiences as of two balls existing at some distance from one another (*as viewed from various distances and angles*)" (emphasis mine).

But on that view don't we need to posit perceivers that physically relate to conditional probabilities, where the relations in questions explain the indefinitely many changes in sensation that we associate with changing *perspectives*? Perlczar will disagree—he would argue instead that with enough ingenuity we can analyze all of the relevant spatial relations themselves in terms of more truths about objective conditional probabilities. But I'm not sure how that analysis would go.

Let's consider the bare existential claim: There exists a physical sphere somewhere in the universe. On the phenomenalism Pelczar proposes, how do we understand that claim? Does it assert that there exists a certain objective conditional probability of one sequence of sensations on another? If so, which conditional probability? Won't there be infinitely many, each corresponding to how we would imagine various creatures experiencing the world, and corresponding to the spatial distance such perceivers have to the sphere? Some of these creatures might have an experience of kind Y after having an experience of kind X, but others might have an experience of kind Z after experiences of kind X. But I am not sure I can say any of this without "cheating" on the rules of phenomenalistic reduction by making reference to spatial perspective.

5 The Causal Theory

The causal theorist is by no means in the clear when it comes to the problem of perceptual relativity. The basic idea defended by the causal theorist is the idea that our thought of physical objects and their properties is thought about the potential causes of sensations and patterns among sensations. But the questions facing phenomenalists also face the causal theorist. *Which* patterns of sensations? Is a red spherical object understood in terms of what would cause in people *now* the appearances associated with such objects? Why *people* now? Why not other creatures who would respond quite differently? And again the experiences one has at any given time is just as much a function of the environment and the perceiver as it is the physical object we are trying to denote.

The internalism/externalism controversy in the philosophy of mind and language does have implications for the way in which one tries to develop a causal theory. Because of the influence of Kripke and Putnam (and their many followers) a great many philosophers today think that one can understand the meaning of many singular terms as their referents and the meaning of kind terms as their extension. There are significant differences among variations on the view, but here I'll just talk about the idea most closely associated with Kripke that one can introduce names for individuals and kinds of things by using definite descriptions that "fix" the referents/extensions of such terms. The idea is in some ways similar to Russell's but the externalists deny that these reference-fixing definite descriptions are *synonymous* with the terms given semantic "life" by them. If such a view *were* true, then a causal theorist might argue that we can refer to both individual physical objects and kinds of objects through names and common nouns by fixing their reference in language and thought using descriptions such as "the perceiver-independent object causally responsible for the these sensations (one picks out qualitatively sensations one is having). It is, of course, trickier than this, for as we normally think of things, there are indefinitely many perceiver-independent objects involved in the causal chain that results in any given sensation. The most obvious move, however, is to "triangulate" by thinking of the relevant causes as that which plays or would play a causal role in producing a wide range of different kinds of sensations—visual, tactile, auditory, olfactory, and so on.

Still, on the reference-fixing view, we don't need to worry about different people or even different creatures relying on different sorts of sensation while still being able

to talk and think about the same physical objects. As long as we end up referring to the same individuals and kinds, we are talking and thinking about the same things. So all this would be great for the causal theorist. The only problem is the fact that externalism about meaning is false. I can't argue that here. I'll simply refer you to Fumerton (1989) for at least a sketch of why I reject content externalism.

So if the causal theorists can't help themselves to externalist views of mental content, what can they do? Firth (1950) addressed the problem of perceptual relativity for radical empiricists. As I understand his suggestion, he thinks that the radical empircists may need to resign themselves to the idea that each of us means something different when we make claims about the world around us. When I think of physical objects, I am thinking of that which has the potential to affect me with a range of sensations under normal conditions. What are these "normal" conditions? I don't know all that much about the incredibly complex range of variables that are causally relevant to producing in me the sensations I associated with a red sphere. The conditions I think of as normal are just those that obtain most of the time when I have various paradigmatic experiences. I assume that when *you* think of various sorts of physical objects, you think something similar, but the phenomenal experiences are yours and the normal conditions are those that usually attend your experiences.

Isn't it absurd, however, to defend an analysis of ordinary thought about the physical world that concedes that no two people mean exactly the same thing when they think about various physical objects? It's a bit odd, I concede, but if we ease ourselves into the idea it might not be that counterintuitive. Think about the philosophical conception of secondary qualities that so dominated British empiricism. The analysis of secondary qualities is in many respects just like the causal theory of objects and their properties. It's easier though, because, in providing the analyses one is free to make reference to primary qualities. Still, if we make the primary/secondary quality distinction, what are the chances that you and I mean *precisely* the same thing by "red" or "sour." There is a continuum of phenomenal experiences that include both paradigmatic phenomenal red appearances, but also borderline cases. It would be almost a miracle if you and I cut the continuum the same way. If that's so, then strictly speaking you and I would not mean *precisely* the same thing by "red" when we use the word to describe the redness of a physical object. But so what? Most of the time we'll be talking about same property when we ascribe to something the color red. We'll disagree about some borderline cases, but one should probably worry about a view that doesn't explain why there are such intractible disagreements about borderline cases.

All that might be well and good, a critic might argue, but the difference in content your causal theory is contemplating is much more radical. Even so, if the world is as we think it is, we will still usually be talking about very similar things. And it is only in one technical sense of meaning that the semantic concept of our respective language will be different. Consider expressions like personal pronouns and demonstratives. Most people will allow that in some sense the expression "I" used by me *means* the same as the expression "I" used by you. They also think that "this" used by me is a token of the same word type with the same meaning in all of the various sentences in which it occurs. There is *a* sense, of course, in which you and I aren't making the same assertion when we each say "I'm hungry." But there is *another* natural use of

"meaning" in which the two sentence tokens *do* have the same meaning—another sense in which we are using the relevant words in the same way. Is it really so counterintuitive that indexical reference of this sort pervades language?

6 Comparing Pelczar's Phenomenalism and The Causal Theory

So if we are radical empiricists, which view should we view as more plausible—phenomenalism or the causal theory. Pelczar can make some of the moves available to our hypothetical causal theorist. In particular, while Pelczar might insist that physical objects are objective conditional probabilitiies of one stream of experience on another, he might easily allow that different kinds of people at different times might think of those physical objects in quite different ways. Alternatively, he might insist that a physical object should be identified with the indefinitely many quite different conditional probabilities involving all sorts of quite different streams of consciousness.

So what philosophical advantages does the causal theory have over its rival, phenomenalism? I haven't said much about the metaphysics of either objective conditional probabilities or causation. Neither admits of unproblematic philosophical analysis. Frequency theories of objective conditional probability and regularity theories of causation have difficulty dealing with almost obvious objections. Possible worlds account of both saddle one with the need to give some account of possible worlds. The metaphor of a possible world is seductive, but it seems to me almost a truism that in the final analysis there is only one actual world and everything that is true (and that includes modal truths) is made true by some feature of the one and only actual world.[6]

To be sure, as Moore reminded us quite some time ago, one can't analyze everything. Every philosophical view has its conceptual "atoms" out of which more complex thoughts are built. We are not going to settle such controversies here. And I will quickly concede that Pelczar is in a far better position that I am to evaluate the connection between his objective conditional probability, and the probabilities that seem to play such an important role in the development of theoretical physics. But In the end, I find "building" physical objects with our understanding of causation more intuitive. And I think that this preference goes back to the worries about perceptual relativity. Like Pelczar, I am very sympathetic to the idea that we succeed in thinking about the physical through thinking of sensations. But if sensations (whether sense data or ways of being appeared to) are ontologically tied to perceivers, then to think of physical objects as "permanent possibilities of sensations" is to think about the way in which *perceivers* are nomologically connected to something that is not perceiver. And as we think of the physical world and its relation to perceivers we think that *both* have noumenal natures that are causally relevant to the relation. It may be true that we are not able to know or even conceive of all of the relevant properties of

[6] That actual world, of course, contains ideas, properties, perhaps propositions, facts, and relations among all of these.

both that are causally relevant, but I think that I am *indirectly* thinking of both sorts of things (objects and perceivers) when I think of the physical world.

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