



# Is Phenomenalism Superior to Russellian Panpsychism as a Theory of Consciousness and Matter?

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## Abstract

In *Phenomenalism: A Metaphysics of Chance and Experience* (2023), Michael Pelczar argues that phenomenalism offers a superior account both of the nature of matter and of the relation between matter and consciousness, compared to traditional, Kantian and structural realism (when it comes to matter) and traditional materialism, traditional dualism and Russellian panpsychism (when it comes to consciousness), mainly because phenomenalism is simpler than these other theories while retaining the same explanatory power. In response, I argue that phenomenalism is not really simpler than other theories, in the main respects that Pelczar considers, and in some further respects he does not consider, it is actually less simple. I will also defend Russellian panpsychism (which like phenomenalism offers a theory of both matter and consciousness) against the charge that unlike phenomenalism, it renders physical objects mind-dependent. Furthermore, phenomenalism lacks an account of mental causation. This puts it at a clear disadvantage relative to Russellian panpsychism especially, considered as a theory of consciousness.

**Keywords** Panpsychism · Phenomenalism · Categorical realizers · Mind-dependence

## 1 Introduction

In *Phenomenalism: A Metaphysics of Chance and Experience* (2023), Michael Pelczar lays out a detailed case for phenomenalism, the view that physical objects reduce to nothing but possibilities for experience, i.e., perceptions or sensations understood as conscious states of an observer. He argues that phenomenalism offers a superior

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account both of the nature of matter, i.e., the physical world, and of the relation between matter and consciousness.

With respect to matter, he argues that phenomenalism successfully explains the regularities within our experience in a simpler way than traditional metaphysical realism and Kantian noumenalism. There is another rival theory, ontic structural realism, which explains these regularities even more simply, but Pelczar argues that phenomenalism still holds the overall advantage because it also offers a theory of consciousness.

With respect to consciousness, Pelczar shows how there can be phenomenalist versions of dualism, materialism and panpsychism. Phenomenalist versions of dualism and materialism have no (or at best only slight) advantages over traditional versions. But a phenomenalist version of panpsychism, he argues, has advantages over non-phenomenalist, Russellian panpsychism.

This makes for a solid defense of phenomenalism, probably the most significant and thorough one since Mill.<sup>1</sup> The defense is also a timely one, given that both panpsychism and idealism – which until recently have also remained fairly obscure relative to mainstream debates<sup>2</sup> – have gotten fair hearings as potential alternatives to materialism and dualism.

I am not convinced, however, that it quite succeeds in demonstrating phenomenalism's superiority over other theories, especially in the case of Russellian panpsychism,<sup>3</sup> which like phenomenalism offers a theory of both matter and consciousness.

I will begin by outlining the main features of Russellian panpsychism and the differences between it, phenomenalism and other theories. I will then summarize Pelczar's case for phenomenalism as a theory of matter. I will offer some objections according to which, in the respects Pelczar considers, phenomenalism is not really simpler than other theories, and in some further respects he does not consider, it is actually less simple. I will also defend Russellian panpsychism against the charge that unlike phenomenalism, it renders physical objects mind-dependent.

I will then argue that, as a theory of consciousness, phenomenalism lacks an account of mental causation. This puts it at a clear disadvantage relative to Russellian panpsychism especially, even if they are considered equal with respect to matter.

## 2 Russellian Panpsychism and the Views Compared

Russellian panpsychism<sup>4</sup> (henceforth, RP) claims that:

<sup>1</sup> And in combination with Pelczar's previous book *Sensorama*, even more so.

<sup>2</sup> For a list of works central to the revival of panpsychism and idealism respectively, see Chalmers (2019: fn. 3).

<sup>3</sup> As well as other forms of Russellian monism, such as panprotopsychism, but for simplicity I focus on panpsychism only.

<sup>4</sup> Named after Bertrand Russell, who defended some of its central tenets. For a more detailed explanation of the view, see Chalmers (2013) or Mørch (2023: ch. 4).

- (1) Physical properties (understood as those described by physics) are all structural or relational,<sup>5</sup> i.e., there are no categorical physical properties.<sup>6</sup>
- (2) Physical objects must have categorical properties (as the realizers of physical structure).
- (3) Phenomenal properties (that characterize *what it is like* to be in conscious states) are categorical.

From this, it infers:<sup>7</sup>

- (4) Phenomenal properties are the categorical properties of all physical objects (i.e., realizers of physical structure).

In addition, it asserts:

- (5) Phenomenal properties are fundamental.

With this set of claims, RP can be clearly distinguished from phenomenalism and what Pelczar considers its main rivals as a theory of matter: metaphysical realism, Kantianism and ontic structural realism (henceforth, OSR).

Metaphysical realism (as construed by Pelczar) is the view that physical objects have *physical* categorical properties, i.e., it denies **1** and **4** (it can also be taken to assert **2** and remain neutral on **3** and **5**).

Kantianism (as construed by Pelczar) is the view that physical objects have *unknown* and *unknowable* categorical properties, or perhaps no categorical properties at all, as we cannot know either way, i.e., it asserts **1**, but denies **4** and leaves open **2** (as well as perhaps **3** and **5**).

OSR is the view that there are *no* categorical properties, either physical, phenomenal or unknown, i.e., all properties are purely structural. It thereby asserts **1** but denies **2** and **3**, and by extension **4**. It also takes the entire structure of the world to be revealed by physics, from which it follows that phenomenal properties are physical, i.e., it also denies **5**.

Phenomenalism, in contrast, agrees with both OSR and Russellian panpsychism that *physical* properties are structural or relational, because they reduce to pure possibilities or propensities, which can in turn be understood as pure causal or modal structures, i.e., it asserts **1**. But unlike Russellian panpsychism, and like OSR, it denies that this structure requires categorical realizers, i.e., it denies **2**, and therefore

<sup>5</sup> Proponents of RP sometimes also describe physical properties as dispositional. Dispositional properties can be considered a species of structural or relational properties, insofar as they are reducible to pure modal or counterfactual relations. But dispositions can also be understood as involving non-Humean, intrinsic (i.e. not purely relational) powers. However, such properties are arguably not directly revealed by physics, and insofar as we still have metaphysical reasons to posit them, RP claims they still require a categorical, and hence phenomenal (as per claim **3**), aspect.

<sup>6</sup> By categorical, I mean not purely structural or relational as well as not purely modal (i.e., not purely powerful, a pure propensity, or similar). Pelczar also defines categorical properties as non-modal, and I assume he agrees they are not purely structural in other respects.

<sup>7</sup> Informally – different premises can be used to bridge the formal gap.

also **4**. But it (or at least the non-materialistic version Pelczar ends up favoring) differs from OSR by still regarding phenomenal properties<sup>8</sup> as categorical and fundamental, i.e., it asserts **3** and **5**.

### 3 Phenomenalism as a Theory of the Matter

Pelczar defends phenomenalism primarily as a theory of the physical world. Firstly, he argues that phenomenalism explains the regularities in our experience (which he considers the main purpose of any kind of realism) as successfully as metaphysical realism and Kantianism, because they all explain it in essentially the same way: by positing a regular set of physical objects as causes of our experiences. But since phenomenalism denies that physical objects have categorical properties, either physical or unknown (i.e., asserts **1** and denies **2**), its explanation is simpler or more parsimonious.

The classic objection to phenomenalism is that the notion of a pure power or possibility, or of pure causal or modal structure in general, is incoherent. Or, in other words, that claim **2** (asserted by metaphysical realism and RP) cannot be denied. Pelczar addresses various arguments to this effect, including the “always packing, never travelling”-argument, according to which a world of pure powers will exist only possibly rather than actually. Against this, he offers the standard response that powers or possibilities themselves may exist really and actually even if what they are powers or possibilities *for* exist only possibly, i.e., even when their effects are unmanifested.

But if the notion of pure causal or modal structure is coherent, then so is OSR, which also regards the physical world as purely structural, with the structure typically assumed to have a causal or modal aspect. Since OSR also denies that phenomenal properties are either categorical or fundamental (i.e., **3** and **5**), it is also simpler than phenomenalism. But Pelczar argues that phenomenalism is still preferable, because (in part precisely in virtue of accepting **5**) unlike OSR it offers a theory of consciousness. And even though he takes the notion of pure causal structure to be coherent, he still regards it as counterintuitive – but, on reflection, only the sort posited by OSR. If we think of pure causal structure as consisting of powers or possibilities for producing experience, as per phenomenalism, rather than just further possibilities or powers, as per OSR, he claims the intuition against it loses its force.

But what about RP? Like phenomenalism, RP takes the world to consist in phenomenal categorical and physical structural properties only, so its ontology is equally parsimonious, and it also offers a theory of consciousness. It also takes all causal structure to be connected to experience, even more closely than phenomenalism, by positing it as a categorical realizer rather than just an effect of physical objects.

But Pelczar objects to RP (as a theory of matter; objections to RP as a theory of consciousness will be discussed later) that, unlike phenomenalism, it renders physi-

<sup>8</sup> Pelczar does not use the term “phenomenal” but does claim that consciousness is fundamental (given non-materialist phenomenalism), and I assume he means phenomenal consciousness.

cal objects *mind-dependent*.<sup>9</sup> According to phenomenalism, physical objects are possibilities for conscious experience, but these possibilities can exist unrealized or unmanifested, hence the physical world could still exist even if there were no actual conscious beings. According to RP, the physical world cannot exist without phenomenal properties being actually instantiated and categorically realizing it.

#### 4 Objections to Phenomenalism as a Theory of Matter

This makes for a compelling case for phenomenalism, but a number of objections can still be raised.

Firstly, it seems that, just as (non-materialist) phenomenalism is not simpler than RP (or OSR) with respect to how many kinds of fundamental properties they posit, it is not necessarily simpler than metaphysical realism and Kantianism either. Phenomenalism and RP both posit two fundamental kinds of properties, physical structural properties and phenomenal categorical properties.<sup>10</sup> But metaphysical realism and Kantianism also commit to no more than two fundamental kinds of properties, physical structural properties and either physical or unknown categorical properties. It is possible for both theories to posit fundamental phenomenal properties in addition, thus ending up with three fundamental kinds, because they are both compatible with dualism about consciousness. But they need not, since they are also both compatible with reductionism (reductive physicalism in the case of metaphysical realism, and reduction of phenomenal properties to unknown properties in the case of Kantianism). Reductionism also seems easier to defend given metaphysical realism or Kantianism than given phenomenalism<sup>11</sup> (and other views that deny non-phenomenal categorical properties, such as OSR), since it seems easier to reduce phenomenal properties to non-phenomenal categorical properties than to purely structural properties, given that phenomenal properties are widely acknowledged to at least *appear* categorical.

In another respect, phenomenalism is also less simple than other theories, namely, in terms of the number of fundamental properties or entities themselves (rather than *kinds* of properties or entities) it must posit and the complexity of the laws that describe their behavior. According to other theories, the physical world has (or at least can be, and typically is, taken to have) the same simple structure as posited by physics: it consists in a small set of fundamental physical entities or properties

<sup>9</sup> The same objection is made to idealism, which for simplicity, I will not consider here, except implicitly to the extent that there are idealist versions of RP (see next footnote).

<sup>10</sup> More precisely, RP comes in two different versions, pure and impure. Pure RP claims physical structural properties are reducible to their phenomenal realizers, but impure RP takes at least some physical relations to be fundamental (such as causal, spatiotemporal or entanglement relations), and can thus be regarded as a form of property dualism (which nevertheless importantly different from traditional dualism since the relation between these properties is categorical realization rather than causation (Mørch, 2023, Sect. 4.0). It is unclear whether the reduction implied by pure RP is possible and here I assume, as a concession to phenomenalism for the sake of the argument, that it is not.

<sup>11</sup> In other words, reductionist versions of metaphysical realism and Kantianism seem more defensible than the materialist (i.e., reductionist) version of phenomenalism.

(such as the particles in the standard model, or properties such as charge, mass and spin) and a small set of fundamental laws. According to phenomenalism, the physical world consists in possibilities for a vast, perhaps even infinite, number of experiences: the experiences of each object from every possible angle, via every possible sensory modality, and for all possible observers (which include not only humans and animals, but also possible alien creatures and beings that can observe properties unobservable to us, such as microphysical properties). It seems like a large number of fundamental phenomenal properties must be posited to characterize all these experiences, and a highly complex set of laws are required to describe their instantiations or the possibilities they are involved in. The overall structure of reality thereby becomes vastly more complex given phenomenalism than other views.

In response, phenomenalists could suggest that its huge variety of possible phenomenal properties may be reducible to a small set of fundamental ones related by simple laws or principles. RP typically posits something similar in response to the combination problem (in particular, an aspect of it known as the palette problem) (Chalmers, 2013, 2016). If such intra-phenomenal reduction is implausible, it is therefore as much of a problem for at least RP as for phenomenalism.

Phenomenalism might have to posit more types of experiences than RP (such as perceptual experiences of every physical object—RP is compatible with many physical objects not being directly perceivable), so the reduction of all phenomenal properties to a small set of fundamental ones may be *somewhat* more difficult given phenomenalism, but not clearly *a lot* more.

Still, it seems the laws or principles that govern these properties would have to be much more complicated given phenomenalism than given RP. According to RP (or at least the standard, constitutive version), each fundamental microphysical entity (or entity in a state) is associated with one fundamental microphenomenal property. When microphysical entities (such as particles) come together to compose an appropriately organized macrophysical object (such as a brain), their microphenomenal experiences will also compose a macrophenomenal experience. Phenomenal properties can therefore come to be instantiated in a way that mirrors the simple laws and composition relations we find in physics.

For phenomenalism, in contrast, the relation between experiences at different levels is causal, as well as fairly complex and indirect: a human perceptual experience is caused by one physical object, such as a rock being observed by the human, whereas the “micro-perceptual” experiences associated with what we typically consider the parts of the rock, such as particles, would be distinct effects of those particles. Furthermore, the particles (i.e., the causes of the micro-perceptual experience) would not really seem to compose the rock (i.e., causes of the human experience) in a mereological sense, because phenomenalism reduces spatiotemporal composition relations to a complex set of causal (rather than mereological) “hypertext” relations (Pelczar, 2023: ch. 7) within an “ideal spacetime” (ch. 4) based on intersecting streams of consciousness (i.e., composition relations between physical objects are ultimately reduced to causal relations between experiences). Given phenomenalism, then, it seems phenomenal properties would have to be instantiated mainly in accordance with causal laws alone, rather than compositional relations, and it seems these laws must have a different and much more complicated structure than the laws of physics.

A further objection is that non-phenomenalist theories posit a much simpler or systematic *relationship* between structural and categorical properties. According to RP, all physical relations require categorical relata.<sup>12</sup> The same holds, or can be taken to hold, for metaphysical realism, which takes the categorical relata to be physical instead of phenomenal. OSR holds that *no* physical relations require relata, nor do any in fact have them. Kantianism (as Pelczar construes it) claims that we do not know whether relata are needed, but it can be taken to suppose they are either required (and hence omnipresent), or if not, altogether absent.

Phenomenalism implies that some relations have categorical relata but others do not: the relations between physical objects and observers have categorical relata on the side of the observer, but not on the side of the physical objects, and relations between physical objects (Pelczar's phenomenalism takes all physical objects to be possibilities for experience, but they can also be possibilities for further possibilities for experience, i.e., directly affect other physical objects as well) have no categorical relata. Categorical relata are therefore neither necessary nor impossible, but contingent and optional. This seems less systematic than the stances of other theories. It also leaves phenomenalism open to many of the same objections as OSR, of which Pelczar addresses some, but not others.<sup>13</sup> As will be discussed in the next section, it also raises the question of what, if any, causal or explanatory role the categorical properties could have – if they are not required, what job are they doing when they are present?

My final objection is to Pelczar's criticism of RP as rendering physical objects mind-dependent. This could be considered a reason to favor phenomenalism over RP granted they are equally simple, and perhaps also granted that RP is simpler in some respects, as I have argued; that is, one might consider avoiding mind-dependence worth the cost of losing some simplicity.

However, it is important to distinguish mind-dependence from observer-dependence. Observer-dependence is a form of mind-dependence: when the existence of an object depends on being observed from without, or on the mind or consciousness of an external observer. But mind-dependence does not imply observer-dependence, because an object could also depend for its existence simply on its own mind or consciousness. Given RP, physical objects are dependent only on their own consciousness or phenomenal properties as their categorical realizers, and hence mind-dependent but not at all observer-dependent. And while observer-dependence is problematic in

<sup>12</sup> Some proponents of RP hold that categorical relata are not metaphysically necessary (but rather only nomologically necessary, in the actual world). But it is still possible, and arguably more plausible (Mørch, 2023: Sect. 4.4.2) to regard them as metaphysically necessary (i.e., required), and here I assume that they are (or a version of RP that takes them to be).

<sup>13</sup> For example, even though (as Pelczar discusses) Newman's problem and related objections according to which the world cannot reduce to purely logico-mathematical structure can be avoided by regarding physical structure as causal, this seems to require that causal structure is understood as non-Humean, and we arguably have no clear conception of non-Humean causation—except, at best, as categorical and perhaps even mental (Mørch, 2018).

a number of ways,<sup>14</sup> mere mind-dependence is not – at least not when the dependence is systematically explained, as it is for RP.

In conclusion, when simplicity or parsimony is considered more broadly, in terms of (1) the number of fundamental *kinds* of properties, including non-phenomenal categorical kinds, (2) the number of fundamental properties themselves (rather than overall kinds) and complexity of the fundamental laws, and (3) the relationship between categorical and structural or non-categorical properties, it is not clear that phenomenalism is simpler than, or even as simple as, any rival theories of the physical world. Furthermore, the main additional advantage claimed over RP in particular, of avoiding mind-dependence, is not clearly important, since mind-dependence seems problematic mainly to the extent that it implies observer-dependence, but for RP it does not.

## 5 Phenomenalism as a Theory of Consciousness

According to Pelczar, phenomenalism offers no single theory of consciousness, but a variety of different ones, including a dualist, a materialist (i.e., physicalist), and a panpsychist version. But only panpsychist phenomenalism is claimed to have significant advantages relative to its non-phenomenalist version or counterpart.<sup>15</sup>

Panpsychist phenomenalism claims that all physical objects are associated with consciousness not just by having the propensity to cause conscious perceptions of themselves, they also have their own experiences, in the same way humans do. Unlike RP, these experiences are not regarded as the categorical realizers of their associated physical objects, but rather as causally (or otherwise non-accidentally) dependent on them. Pelczar claims panpsychist phenomenalism has the same main advantages as RP,<sup>16</sup> while avoiding its problems.

According to Pelczar, the main advantage of RP is that it dissolves the mystery of why consciousness is present in some physical objects but not others. If consciousness is fundamental, it seems odd that it is not ubiquitous or at least widespread, since all other fundamental properties seem to be, and there is also nothing special that distinguishes physical objects that according to non-panpsychists are conscious, such as humans, from those that are not, such as rocks or particles. In other words,

<sup>14</sup> For example, observer-independence may seem incompatible with the very concept of “being real”. If there are no observer-dependent physical objects, there is also no explanation of why they regularly show up whenever they are observed. Neither of these problems transfer to the mind-dependence implied by RP.

<sup>15</sup> As well the “panoptic” version, which is panpsychist in a broad sense but distinct from what Pelczar explicitly labels as the panpsychist version. Panoptic phenomenalism takes all physical objects to be actually rather than merely possibly perceived, most of them by unembodied observers. For lack of space, I will not discuss this version, but my objection to the (narrowly) panpsychist version that it fails to secure mental causation would also apply to this version.

<sup>16</sup> More precisely, panpsychist phenomenalism is compared to what Pelczar calls “strong panpsychism”, which seems equivalent to what is typically known as pure or idealist panpsychism, ignoring the impure or non-idealist version (which is not equivalent to what he calls “weak panpsychism”, because it also posits consciousness as the categorical basis of physical properties) (see footnote 10). However, his objections to strong (or pure/idealist) panpsychism apply equally to impure panpsychism, so I will treat them as directed toward to RP in general.

the main advantage consists in avoiding a kind of arbitrariness with respect to the distribution of consciousness. The main problem of RP, in addition to the issue of mind-dependence, is that “we have no good reason to accept that physical things have categorical natures” (Pelczar, 2023: 161).

Like RP, panpsychist phenomenalism avoids arbitrary distribution of consciousness, thereby preserving RP’s main advantage, but without positing it as the categorical nature of the physical, and by the same token incurring mind-dependence, thereby avoiding its main problems.

## 6 Objections to Phenomenalism as a Theory of Consciousness

My main objection to this case for phenomenalism is that the main advantage of RP is in fact *not* that it avoids an arbitrary distribution of consciousness,<sup>17</sup> but rather that it offers a solution to the problem of mental causation, i.e., the main problem of dualism, compatible with phenomenal properties being fundamental or otherwise non-physical, thus also avoiding the main objections to physicalism (based on the epistemic gap from the physical to the phenomenal) (Alter and Nagasawa 2012; Chalmers, 2013; Mørch, 2023). This solution is made possible precisely by positing phenomenal properties as the categorical realizers of physical structure, so unlike the feature of avoiding arbitrariness, it cannot be replicated by panpsychist or other versions of phenomenalism that reject this posit. Phenomenalism also provides no alternative solution to the problem of mental causation.

According to the problem of mental causation, the physical world is causally closed: every physical effect (i.e., event that has a cause) has a sufficient physical cause. It follows that phenomenal properties, if non-physical, must be epiphenomenal or overdeterminers, which seems highly implausible. Hence, we should regard them as physical after all.

Phenomenalism (except in its materialist form, which Pelczar – rightfully, in my view – all but rejects, in part because it would face the same main objections as ordinary materialism), has no solution to this problem, except those also available to traditional dualism, i.e., denying physical causal closure, accepting epiphenomenalism or accepting overdeterminism.<sup>18</sup> This is because, just like dualism, it takes the relationship between consciousness and physical objects to be causal (or otherwise

<sup>17</sup> To my knowledge, Russellian panpsychists rarely point to this as an important advantage at all. Spinoza, who can be interpreted as a panpsychist though not clearly a Russellian one, does invoke it, but in an argument that seems to have had little influence on current debates. It may also be somewhat related to the argument from continuity (from Clifford and James), but this is generally not counted among the strongest arguments for RP.

<sup>18</sup> One might think Pelczar’s phenomenalism has an advantage with respect to physical causal closure since it posits chance (or probabilistic propensities) as fundamental rather than deterministic powers or laws. But the problem of mental causation is generally regarded as unaffected by the indeterminism we find in quantum mechanics, roughly because even if quantum mechanics implies that many physical events have no sufficient physical cause, the chance of every physical event would still be physically accounted for. If phenomenalism posits a level of determinism beyond quantum mechanics, it would amount to a rejection of physical causal closure, or the analogous indeterministic principle, and it is not clear how to justify this.

counterfactual and holding between distinct properties, which would be close enough for the principle of physical causal closure to still apply).

RP, in contrast, takes the relation between physical and phenomenal properties to be one of realization rather than causation. That is, phenomenal properties are not distinct causes or effects of physical objects, but rather the categorical realizers of physical causes themselves. This is entirely compatible with physical causal closure (see Mørch, 2023: Sect. 4.2.2), but still offers phenomenal properties an essential, i.e., both non-epiphenomenal and non-overdetermining, explanatory role: if physical structure requires categorical realizers, i.e., cannot exist without them, and it is phenomenal properties that play this realizer role, then phenomenal properties are indispensable to the physical world.

This also offers a response to Pelczar's objection that we have no good reason to suppose that physical structure requires categorical grounds. Not only can this claim be countered by offering further objections to OSR (as noted previously); the fact that categorical realizers being required enables a solution to the problem of mental causation can be cited as a major reason to suppose they are.

It also strengthens the claim that there is nothing unacceptable about the kind of mind-dependence implied by RP. Not only does it come with no further implication of observer-dependence; if the physical world is rendered entirely *independent* from the mind, the mind becomes epiphenomenal more or less by hypothesis.

In conclusion, when taking all the advantages of RP into consideration, especially its solution to the problem of mental causation, it comes out superior to both panpsychist and dualist versions of phenomenalism as a theory of consciousness, and in virtue of regarding phenomenal properties as fundamental, arguably the materialist version as well. With its additional advantages as a theory of matter, and its alleged disadvantage of mind-dependence neutralized, it also seems preferable overall.

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## Declarations

**Ethical Approval and Consent to Participate** N/A.

**Conflict of Interest** None.

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