



Two problems for Millian phenomenalism

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Michael Pelczar's new book *Phenomenalism* (OUP 2023) further develops and defends the broadly Millian form of idealism he has championed in his earlier book *Sensorama* (OUP 2015) and numerous articles. Idealism in general includes a wide range of views in philosophy that all somehow give special metaphysical significance to minds in one of many different ways. Phenomenalism is broadly a subclass of idealism that focuses on the significance of sensation or experience, as opposed to, say conceptual thought or some other aspect of the mind. Pelczar's Millian form of phenomenalism holds that physical objects are possibilities of experience, which contrasts with more Berkeleyan versions, which hold that physical objects are somehow constructed from actual experiences, or so in rough outline, leaving aside all subtleties and details. All this is to be applauded, as it explores a radical philosophical position that goes against the mainstream and Pelczar does so with admirable ambition without shying away from the obstacles that the position faces. Still, I believe Pelczar's Millian phenomenalism can't be right, and in this brief essay I will outline what I think its main problems are. I should make clear that I am in general friendly towards idealism, having defended a very different version, one that focuses on the metaphysical significance of conceptual thought instead, but I do not believe any form of phenomenalism can be right. In the following I will elaborate on why I believe this, thereby drawing on the critical discussion of phenomenalism in my own *Idealism and the Harmony of Thought and Reality* (OUP 2023), which came out just when Pelczar's *Phenomenalism* did. I will repeat and elaborate on some of the arguments given in that book, in particular in Sect. 2.1, which is devoted to criticizing phenomenalism more generally, but here applied more specifically to Pelczar's most recent articulation of his position.

Pelczar defended a Millian form of phenomenalism also in his earlier book *Sensorama*, although that book surprisingly gets little mention in *Phenomenalism*. I sometimes wished for a more explicit discussion in *Phenomenalism* of what has changed from the old view and why. But I won't in my discussion below rely on many of the subtleties that do come up in both books, since I believe the criticism

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to be presented shortly applies to the Millian view more generally, be it formulated with potentials, or possibilities, or probabilities.

I take the main idea of the Millian position to invert the more standard order of priority between there being a physical object and there being a potential or a possibility for experience. The standard view holds that there is a possibility for a certain experience because there is a certain object ready to be experienced. In contrast, the Millian holds that there is an object because there is a possibility for experience. Both sides can agree on the following biconditional:

(1) All things being equal, there is a certain object iff there is the possibility of / potential for certain experiences. But the two parties disagree on which side of the biconditional has priority in some sense: the object or the possibility of experience. As Pelczar makes clear in Section 4.5 of *Phenomenalism*, he takes physical objects to be reduced to possibilities for experience. Reduction is a tricky notion, but possibly another way to think of it is identification: physical objects just are such possibilities. The latter would be a view about the nature of objects, but the reductive view can be seen as providing just the same. Crucially, on any of these Millian accounts possibilities for experience are fundamental: they are among the basic building blocks of reality. And that these possibilities are fundamental is what is the source of the problem with phenomenalism.

Illustrated with an example, the issue is simply this: maple syrup tastes sweet and is associated with the possibility of sweet experiences. Other things do not taste sweet and are associated with other possibilities of experience. But why does the maple syrup taste sweet? Why is it associated with this particular possibility of experience? This is asking for an explanation of a particular connection. Explanations come in different kinds, including prominently causal and constitutive explanations. So, when I ask why the wall is white that can be explained causally (because Sue painted it white) or constitutively (because it reflects visible light of every wavelength). Keeping this distinction in mind, we can give a standard answer to the above question for an explanation, in rough outline at least: Maple syrup contains a lot of sugar which when interacting with the taste buds and other parts of our sensory system produces sweet experiences. To be clear, how sugar interacting with taste buds leads to experiences is an issue that will be discussed a little more just below, and clearly that is a big step, but even though it is not clear how that part works more precisely, the rest is surely correct if incomplete. Thus, there is an explanation of why maple syrup is associated with the possibility of sweet taste experiences. This explanation in outline is not a triviality and based on various discoveries about what in the physical world affects our experiences how. And this explanation of the connection of the potential for particular experiences to maple syrup goes via a causal explanation: sugar causes certain sensations, and thus the potential for sweet experiences is associated with things like maple syrup that contain a lot of sugar. The phenomenalist will need to be able to accept this explanation unless they want to go completely revisionary, rejecting the widely held discoveries of the sciences and other parts of inquiry in defending their phenomenalism. No one should do this, and Pelczar certainly does not want to do this, as I understand him. However, the phenomenalist cannot

accept this explanation, for a very simple but important reason. There can be no causal explanation of the connection between maple syrup and the possibility of sweet experience, since the maple syrup just is the possibility of experience. And what's more, there can be no constitutive explanation of why the possibility of experience is tied to the maple syrup. Possibilities for experience are supposed to be fundamental and thus have no constitutive explanations. They are rock bottom, not to be explained by various other things. In a nutshell, phenomenalism can't accept the explanations we have and need to accept about why certain possibilities of experience obtain. But we know of many such explanations, and thus Millian phenomenalism is not compatible with what we know. It must take a radical and unacceptable revisionary line that denies well-established results of the sciences. It is not an innocent metaphysical line that is compatible with the empirical sciences and merely reverses purely philosophical orders of priority. Instead it is committed to substantial claims about explanation which are incompatible with well-known empirical results.

Admittedly, this is a simple argument, but I still think it is correct nonetheless and shows what is in the end wrong with inverting the order of priority between objects and possibilities of experiences. If we think about a particular example and particular experiences associated with particular objects, we can see that there often are explanations for why some possibilities obtain. But if the object just is the possibility, then this should be impossible. And if the possibilities are rock bottom and fundamental, then this should be impossible as well. But we do know in many cases why there is a possibility of sweet experiences, but not roller-coaster experiences, associated with maple syrup. That explanation looks at the substances that make up the syrup and how it interacts with the sensory system, and thus there is an explanation for why there is this possibility of experience here with the maple syrup, something that is ruled out, I maintain, on the Millian phenomenalist picture.

The standard view has no problem here. It can explain why there is the possibility in the way just outlined, leaving again open for discussion just below why there are experiences in the first place associated with physical effects on the sensory system. But can the phenomenalist accept an explanation like the one given above? Can't they just restate everything in terms of possibilities where I talked about objects? So, what explains the possibility of sweet experience is the fact that the possibility of sugar experience is part of the possibility of maple syrup experience, and the possibility of sugar experience causes the possibility of sensory system experience to produce the possibility of experience experience, or if the latter is not to be understood as a thing to be reduced to possibilities, then at least produce experiences. I am not sure anyone would want to go this far, but if one simply replaces all talk of objects one-one with talk of possibilities, and thereby accepts that possibilities have parts, and spatial parts at that, which are other possibilities, that possibilities cause possibilities, and so on, then it might seem that the whole debate itself has been undermined. In particular, if "objects cause experiences" itself is translated over to possibilities talk, then the two views seem to be merely in verbal disagreement: one is calling objects "possibilities", the other calls them "objects," but otherwise they agree about everything, or so it

can seem. The two positions are more clearly separated on what I take to be the official line: possibilities of experience are basic building blocks of reality, and these possibilities get actualized in certain ways, leading to experience directly.

And this leads me to my second main point. One of the key differences between the phenomenalist and their more traditional materialist opponent is explaining how experiences arise in the first place. The materialist faces a so far unsurmountable problem in explaining how it happens that some combinations of matter give rise to conscious experiences. The phenomenalist instead can hope to overcome this problem by not facing it at all. Experiences are the basic parts of the world, and so no explanation is required how they arise from something else, or so the basic idea. So, the phenomenalist has a leg up over the materialist, or so they might argue. But whether this is indeed so is not at all clear, and in fact, seems to me to be false. The key issue is that the Millian phenomenologist like Pelczar works with possibilities of experience, or something related like potentials or probabilities, but not with experiences directly. But there being a possibility of experience does not explain why there is experience. And possibilities of experience being fundamental do not solve the problem of saying how experiences come into the world. What is missing is how the possibilities are actualized and how the potentials are realized. And to illustrate that with an example, consider the apple, i.e. the possibility of apple experiences, sitting right there on the table. When I am in the room as well, it leads to apple experiences, and thus the possibility gets actualized. If I leave the otherwise empty room, intuitively there is no such apple experience any longer and the possibility does not get actualized. But what explains the difference? Why is the possibility sometimes actualized, and sometimes not? One account is that that apple reflects light hitting my eyes, stimulating my optical nerve which somehow leads to experience. But spelling that out is exactly the problem that the phenomenalist had hoped to sidestep by making experiences, or at least their possibility, fundamental. If that story still has to be told, then the phenomenalist loses their apparent advantage over the materialist. But how can the Millian avoid having to account for this difference?

Pelczar addresses this, or at least a closely related, issue in chapter 8 of *Phenomenalism*. There he investigates several options a phenomenalist has to deal with, including a version of panpsychism. Pelczar holds that all of them are compatible with phenomenism, although he does not officially pick his favorite one. But let me illustrate the issue I have by considering the panpsychist version as a candidate for solving the problem, a candidate that Pelczar at least conditionally endorses as being on the table. Panpsychism essentially holds that conscious experience is abundant and not rare. The particular version of this view, which Pelczar calls panoptic phenomenism, holds that all possibilities of experience are in fact actualized, and if I understood the position correctly, this means that there is experience of the apple even if no one is in the room (see pages 165-6). Panpsychism of this kind is a radical option, although one that should be on the table like all other ones. But taking this option undermines Pelczar's overall position in several ways.

First, it questions why we are considering a metaphysics of the material world that consists of possibilities of experiences when all those experiences are in fact

actualized. Why not work with actualized experiences instead? The key novelty of the Millian position, over a more traditional Berkeleyan, was exactly to move to the realm of the possible and deal with some of the apparent problems of a Berkeleyan position that way. But the Millian view then has its own problems, including how to make sense of actualized possibilities and what explains when some possibilities are actualized. I hoped to motivate such a problem just above. Avoiding these problems by actualizing all possibilities faces the danger of giving the game away for the Millian.

Second, one of the key potential advantages of a phenomenalist position was to be able to side-step one of the main problems of the mainstream materialist alternative: explaining how experiences arise from the arrangement of matter. But going panpsychist gives that potential advantage away, since now all the work is done by the panpsychist part of the view and not the phenomenalist part. A materialist can also adopt a panpsychist view and hold all matter is conscious besides having all kinds of other material properties, and both sides can hold that such properties are among the basic properties, in need of no further explanation. Of course, for both sides many challenges remain, for example, to explain why the contents of experiences are related in various ways to the other material properties in the nearby environment, but now this applies to both sides equally, with no clear advantage for phenomenism as such in sight.

But maybe all this points in a certain direction: there are real problems with the connection between matter and experience, but these problems are not to be solved with Millian phenomenism. Instead they need to be solved with a different approach: either materialism or a more radical panpsychist position, or a kind of phenomenism that works with actual, not possible, experiences. For what it is worth, my own view is that there is no way around solving the problem that the standard materialist position faces, as its alternatives face essentially a similar problem and don't make progress on the core of the problem. If that problem motivates us, we might just as well face it head on and be materialists. Or so it seems to me, and I say this even though I believe a version of idealism is correct, although one tied to conceptual thought, not to experience or to consciousness.

Pelczar's version of phenomenism developed in both *Sensorama* and *Phenomenalism* is likely the most sophisticated versions of phenomenism ever developed, with many subtle discussions that I couldn't begin to touch on here. I hoped to focus on two problems here which strike me as especially central to the approach and which persuade me not to be a phenomenist. Others will surely disagree and Pelczar is surely among them. But besides any philosophical disagreements, we should all applaud that Pelczar has developed the Millian position to the extent and with the sophistication that he has in *Phenomenalism* and elsewhere. Doubling down on the radical, neglected option is a key contributor to philosophical progress, and this is a good example of just such progress.¹

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