



The issue that slips under the radar

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Abstract

Michael Pelczar is right that we need an explanation of the regularities in our experiences, and that this means we should reject traditional idealism. His version of phenomenalism might seem to offer the needed explanation, but what seems to be the case is not in fact the case.

Keywords Idealism · Phenomenalism · Armstrong

As Michael Pelczar (2023) observes, phenomenalism was once a major position in metaphysics and the philosophy of perception. Someone as opposed to it as the uber-physical realist David Armstrong judged phenomenalism worthy of detailed discussion in Armstrong (1961). Nowadays, few think that it is worth serious consideration. Pelczar makes an impressive case for its reinstatement. He hopes for more, of course. He hopes that some readers of his book will become phenomenalists.

My discussion will focus on an issue that slips under his radar, or so it seems to me. But, first, some background.

It is common ground that we have perceptual experiences and that these experiences manifest patterns and regularities. One way to think of an external, independent of us world, often dubbed ‘the physical world’, is as the best explanation of these patterns and regularities. On this way of thinking, our experiences are kinds of data points, and the hypothesis of an independently existing physical world is the result of a wide-ranging exercise in hypothetico-deduction. Pelczar’s central thought is that we can and should be more metaphysically modest. He agrees—indeed insists—that we should demand an explanation of the patterns and regularities in experiences. This means we should reject the metaphysics of traditional idealism. This is because an explanation of the patterns and regularities in experiences requires something in addition to the experiences themselves. We do not, however, have to follow physical realists in postulating an independently existing world to do the needed job. For example, Pelczar argues, we might draw on the version of phenomenalism to

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be found in J. S. Mill. Suppose that we add to experiences possibilities of experiences (permanent possibilities of sensation as Mill puts it)—roughly, more on this shortly, possibilities of experiences in the sense of experiences that would be had were certain other experiences had—we would have, Pelczar argues, the metaphysics we need for the explanatory task. Phenomenalists could then talk of ‘the physical world’, and Pelczar does, and say that the physical world explains the regularities and patterns in our experiences, but their conception of its nature would be very different from, e.g., Armstrong’s. And their view would be metaphysically modest, because the extras that serve to explain the patterns and regularities in experiences are analysed in terms of possible experiences.

Pelczar’s book is a detailed, forcefully argued development of this general line of thought. He gives his own view on how we should think of the extras to be added to experiences to do the needed explanatory job, consistently with respecting phenomenalists’ metaphysical modesty. Here, Pelczar goes beyond anything to be found in Mill. Indeed, Mill figures in this book as an instructive illustration of one way that phenomenalists might meet the demand for an explanation of the patterns and regularities in experiences while respecting metaphysical modesty. Mill’s version of phenomenalism serves as a kind of introduction to the version of phenomenalism that Pelczar himself favours.

I now turn to the heralded issue that slips under the radar. Pelczar suggests, as we noted, that if we add possibilities of experiences to the idealist’s actual experiences in the account of what there is, we can distinguish phenomenalism from idealism, and get a theory that explains the regularities and patterns in experiences. But, of course, the possibilities are not *mere* possibilities. Phenomenalists, or anyway phenomenalists who take on board Pelczar’s insistence that we need to add to experiences in order to explain the patterns and regularities in them, are not advancing the view that it is *possible* that idealism is false. They hold that idealism is in fact false. The possibilities in question are more than mere possibilities. What makes a possibility more than a mere possibility? One way for phenomenalists to go, one with a more than respectable history, as Pelczar notes (in ch. 5, Sect. 1, most especially), is to understand them in terms of counterfactual dependencies between experiences: the possibilities consist in the fact that were certain experiences had, certain other experiences would be had. This can then be spelt out in terms of one or another version of the possible worlds account of how counterfactuals get to be true, an account Pelczar endorses and rightly calls ‘now-standard’ (p. 99). We can think of this as an updated construal of Mill’s permanent possibility proposal mentioned earlier, updated courtesy of possible world semantics. As these counterfactuals are true, the possibilities in question are more than mere possibilities. It follows that we are being offered an addition to the ontology of idealism. Or so it might seem.

The trouble is that what might seem to be the case is not in fact the case. The basic idea—all we need for our purposes—behind the possible worlds treatment of counterfactuals is that had P been the case, Q would have been the case is true at the actual world just if the P-world (possible world at which P is true) closest to the actual world is a Q-world (possible world at which Q is true). This means that idealists can give an account of the truth of counterfactuals of the form ‘had so and so experiences been had, such and such experiences would have been had’ *without*

expanding their ontology for the actual world. They do not need to add anything to their restricted picture of what is to be found in the actual world. Idealists simply need to urge that what is to be found in the actual world is similar in various ways to what's to be found in nearby possible worlds, where the similarities in question are between certain experiences to be found in the actual world and those to be found in other possible worlds.

Here is the point spelt out in terms of a simple example—oversimplified, but not in ways that matter here, I trust. There are tables in unoccupied rooms. What makes it true that there are? Not the mere possibility of having table experiences after having entering room experiences. At best, that would be an account of its being possible that there are tables in unoccupied rooms. The suggestion under discussion is, and has to be, that what makes it true is that were certain entering the room experiences had, then certain table experiences would be had. The possible worlds account of counterfactuals then tells us that this is true if certain non-actual worlds with entering the room experiences followed by table experiences are more similar to the actual world than are certain non-actual worlds with entering the room experiences *not* followed by table experiences. The crucial point is that there is nothing in this account that threatens idealists' very austere metaphysics. For what makes the similarities in question obtain lies in similarities between various possible worlds that themselves contain *only experiences*.

It is tempting to think that adding a truth to the actual world is necessarily adding to its metaphysics. Of course, for some truths, this is the case. An idealist cannot allow that it is true at the actual world that there are *independently existing* physical objects (in the sense Armstrong, e.g., gives to the italicised terms). To allow that would be to allow that there is more to be found in the actual world than experiences. But an idealist can allow that it is true at the actual world that had certain experiences been had, certain other experiences would have been had. The truth of a counterfactual of that kind does not require that the actual world contains more than experiences. At places Pelczar talks in terms of truth makers. In these terms, the worry is that idealists can and should hold that the truth makers at the actual world of counterfactuals of the form 'had so and so experiences been had, such and such experiences would have been had' lie entirely in how various experiences are at the actual world.

Although Pelczar discusses in some detail how one might give a Mill-inspired, counterfactual-possibilities account of the extras that need to be added to the idealist's account of what there is, he does not in the end endorse it, as we noted earlier. He worries, plausibly, that how things are at the actual world in terms of experiences isn't rich enough to make the needed counterfactuals true. (see, e.g., the discussion at the end of Sect. 1 of chapter 5.). Too many counterfactual dependencies will come out false or indeterminate. But this isn't, I am suggesting, the real worry for going down the counterfactual-possibilities route. The real worry is that going down that route isn't a departure from idealism. It only sounds like one.

We now have an obvious question. Does the same fate befall Pelczar's preferred account of what should be added to idealists' metaphysics? His preferred account, his replacement for the counterfactual-possibilities account, is in terms of the likelihood of such and such experiential states of affairs, conditional so

and so experiential states of affairs, taking one or another value. Counterfactual possibilities of experiences of so and so a kind get replaced by conditional probabilities of experiences of so and so a kind. So Pelczar's preferred version of phenomenalism is one where the idealist's world of experiences is supplemented with the obtaining of various conditional probabilities or, as he sometimes puts it, propensities, concerning experiences taking one or another value. As you would expect, he has quite a bit to say about how to understand these conditional probabilities (e.g. in Sect. 2 of chapter 5). For example, they are objective probabilities, not subject to further analysis, of various experiences occurring conditional on certain other experiences occurring, and they are defined when the probabilities they are conditional on are zero. The conditional probabilities are in this sense basic. All the same, there is a story about what makes it the case that they obtain (as there should be, of course). The story is one about the probabilities of various possible worlds related thus and so to the actual world, where the various possible worlds are those where certain experiences occur, namely, the experiences the conditional probabilities in question are conditional on (see, e.g., the discussion on pp. 107*f*). But now we have an answer to the 'same fate' question. What makes it true that such and such conditional probabilities obtain at the actual world is settled by the probabilities of so and so non-actual worlds, the non-actual worlds being those having the experiences which the probabilities at the actual world are conditional upon. But this requires no more of the actual world than that it contain the experiences that it does contain. The truths Pelczar is offering as additions to the idealist's metaphysics are ones that idealists can embrace. For the truths simply concern the distribution of probabilities among certain of the non-actual worlds where there are experiences of one kind or another that are missing from the actual world. To put the point in terms of our earlier simplified example: idealists can insist that truths of the form 'the probabilities of certain table experiences conditional on certain entering the room experiences take such and such a value' are made true by similarity relations between worlds that contain no more than experiences.

This, I urge, is the issue that slips under the radar. Pelczar's key thought—his interesting replacement for Mill's permanent possibilities proposal—is to add truths about the actual world concerning various conditional probabilities of having certain kinds of experiences to the idealist's account of how things are at the actual world. The problem is that these truths do not require additions to the idealist's metaphysics for the actual world.

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