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BOOK SYMPOSIUM

Summary of phenomenalism: a metaphysics of chance and experience

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Experience has a certain regularity to it, in that it often occurs in seemingly non-random ways, including ways that suggest the presence of an external world of public objects and events. The regularity pertains to individual minds as well as groups of minds. Individually, experience occurs in each of us very differently from how you would expect, if our experiences occurred completely at random; collectively, it often happens that different streams of consciousness unfold in seemingly non-random and coordinated ways.

Another way to describe the regularity of experience is by saying that there seem to be non-random relative frequencies among experiences. If we're playing tennis, then in each of us the frequency of phenomenally yellow experiences relative to phenomenally ball-shaped experiences is seemingly greater than chance, as is the frequency with which both of us have an experience as of a net-ball given that one of us has such an experience.

It's conceivable that all the seeming non-randomness of experience is illusory: that it's just a huge coincidence that experience unfolds in these suggestive and seemingly non-random ways. Analogously, it's conceivable that five seconds ago, random fluctuations in a quantum vacuum congealed into the fully-formed universe we now inhabit. But, just as nobody thinks our world is mere seconds old, nobody thinks that the regularity of experience is a mere accident: we all believe that there is some explanation for

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the regularity. This belief is so ingrained that we have a name for the assumed explanation: we call it "the physical world."[1]

That something explains the regularity of experience, and that this something, whatever it may be, is the physical world, is the first premise of abductive arguments for various theories about the nature of physical reality (various "analyses of matter," as they used to say). These have the form:

1. The physical world is whatever explains the regularity of experience.
2. What best explains the regularity is *X*.
3. Therefore, the physical world is *X*.

The first premise is widely granted, including by everyone who responds to external world skepticism with an inference to the best explanation, and I do little to defend it in the book, beyond observing that our everyday ways of thinking, talking, and acting indicate that we all tacitly accept it. Something explains the regularity of experience, and this something—whatever it may be—is the physical world. The question is: what kind of thing is this "something"?

Different answers propose different values for *X* in the second premise. According to metaphysical realists, $X =$ non-mental things with categorical features in virtue of which they collectively tend to cause regular experience. According to classical idealists, $X =$ minds with mental features in virtue of which the minds tend to have regular experience. According to Kantians, $X =$ things (further nature unknown) that tend to cause regular experience. According to phenomenalists, $X =$ a tendency for experience to occur in regular ways.

Traditionally, phenomenalists equate the existence of the relevant tendency with the truth of so-called *sensation conditionals:* counterfactual conditionals of the form, "If such-and-such experiential state of affairs existed, then so would such-and-such other experiential state of affairs." I equate it with the truth of *phenomenal probabilities:* objective probability statements of the form, "The likelihood of such-and-such experiential state of affairs, given such-and-such other experiential state of affairs, is *x*." The reason for this innovation is as follows.

Counterfactual dependence has a widely accepted analysis, according to which "If it were the case that *p*, it would be the case that *q*" means that it is the case that *q* in the possible worlds that most closely resemble our own world, among those worlds in which it is the case that *p*. But what is the measure of similarity between worlds, when it comes to sensation conditionals (counterfactuals whose "*p*" and "*q*" represent purely experiential states of affairs)? Phenomenalists can't answer: "similarity in physical features"; after all, physical features are precisely what

[1] The claim here isn't that we use "the physical world" and "that which accounts for the regularity of experience" as synonyms: it's that by "the physical world," we intend to refer to whatever in fact explains the regularity of experience. This needn't prevent us from using "the physical world" to refer to something that could exist even if there were no experience.

phenomenalists hope to analyze in counterfactual terms. Appealing to similarity in occurrent phenomenal respects might seem to avoid this problem, but it's doubtful that there's enough occurrent experience in our world to distinguish it from other possible worlds in enough detail to support the desired sensation-conditionals.[2]

My solution is to measure similarity between worlds in terms of the phenomenal probabilities that exist in those worlds. In my view, such probabilities are the truth-makers of traditional phenomenalists' sensation conditionals.

The main advantage of phenomenalism over alternative analyses of matter is its simplicity: the phenomenalist's ontological commitments are a proper subset of the Kantian's, which are a proper subset of the metaphysical realist's. Both Kantians and realists posit entities with suitable experience-causing powers, but only the latter posit entities whose powers are grounded in non-mental categorical features; both phenomenalists and Kantians posit a tendency for experience to occur regularly, but only the latter posit experience-causing noumena that underlie the tendency. Given that the simplest explanation is best, other things being equal, it follows that, other things being equal, we should accept the phenomenalist explanation of the regularity of experience.

Are other things equal?

There are several reasons one might doubt it.

The first is that phenomenalism makes a category mistake by equating physical things with "mere possibilities." The suggestion is that possibilities of sensation, whether understood in terms of counterfactual conditionals or conditional probabilities, are too insubstantial to count as physical things.

By calling physical things "substantial," proponents of this criticism mean that they're the sort of things you can touch, see, etc., and that can causally interact with other physical things. But phenomenalists agree that physical things are substantial in this sense. According to phenomenalists, for a rock to be touchable is for tactile experiences to be among those for which the rock is a possibility; and there's nothing in the nature of causation to prevent one possibility of sensation (in my view: one probabilistic state of affairs) from causing another.

A related concern is that possibilities of sensation, whether understood counterfactually or probabilistically, require some categorical basis. But phenomenalists have no need to deny this. Maybe something underlies the possibilities of sensation that hold in our world; if so, physical reality is not this underlying something, but the possibilities it underlies. In the phenomenalist view, if something underlies the possibilities, its relationship to the physical world is like God's in traditional theistic cosmology: the reason why there is a physical world, not the physical world itself.

In support of this view, consider what would happen if we discovered that the possibilities of sensation that exist in our world did have a categorical basis, but that the basis was constantly changing, so that at one moment what underlies the possibilities is a Berkeleyan God, at the next moment a population of Leibnizian

[2] Old-school phenomenalists, like J.S. Mill, C.I. Lewis, and A.J. Ayer, used unanalyzed sensation conditionals, but this choice came back to haunt them when later philosophers used the ambiguity of raw counterfactuals to raise influential objections to phenomenalism (see *Phenomenalism: A Metaphysics of Chance and Experience,* pp. 48-49).

monads, at the moment after that a collection of Kantian noumena, etc. Suppose this constant flux at the level of what underlies the possibilities has no effect on the possibilities themselves: the likelihood of having experiences as of mountains, given that you have experiences as of travelling to Bhutan, remains the same throughout the shifts in categorical basis; the universe has the same propensity to reward travelling-to-Bhutan experiences with mountain experiences, regardless of whether what underlies the propensity is God, monads, noumena, or something else.

How would this discovery influence our thinking about mountains? Would it make us conclude that there are no mountains, or that no mountain exists for more than a moment? No; we would still believe that the Himalayas have existed for many years, that the mountain Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay climbed up was the same as the mountain they climbed down, etc. This suggests that as far as the existence of mountains is concerned, it's the relevant possibilities of sensation that matter, not what, if anything, underlies them.

A different alleged shortcoming of phenomenalism is that it's inconsistent with the public or objective nature of physical things.

Traditional phenomenalists tried to account for the objectivity of physical things in terms of dependencies among the experiences for which the things are possibilities. In this view, for two people to perceive the same tennis match is for it to be the case that if either were to have (e.g.) an experience as of the ball going out of bounds, the other would also have an experience as of the ball going out of bounds.

But suppose that two people are watching the match on T.V., in their respective homes. If either were to have an experience of a screen-image of a ball going out of bounds, the other would also have such an experience. But it doesn't follow that the two perceive the same screen-image.

Objectivity therefore requires more than counterfactual (or probabilistic) interdependence. My proposal is that two people perceive the same physical thing when their experiences stand in a suitable relation of probabilistic dependence *and* occupy the same region of ideal spacetime. The experiences of the T.V. images satisfy the dependence condition, but not the ideal co-location condition.

"Ideal spacetime" sounds like a major innovation, but really it's not. Its reality supervenes on prosaic relations among perceptual experiences, in a way that parallels the supervenience of physical spacetime on prosaic relations among physical events. Physicists define physical spacetime in terms of relations between various causal sequences of physical events, known as "worldlines." By treating various worldlines as clocks and probes, they construct spatiotemporal coordinate systems; the details of each system depend on which worldlines we treat as clocks and probes. An event's location in physical spacetime corresponds to its coordinates in the system that best facilitates a description of the physical world in terms of simple natural laws.

Ideal spacetime is much the same. It's just that now, instead of using sequences of *physical* events (worldlines of clocks and probes) to construct coordinate systems, and evaluating those systems according to how well they facilitate simple laws of physics, we use sequences of *phenomenal* events (streams of consciousness, such as

those we have when observing the clocks and probes physicists use to define physical spacetime) to construct coordinate systems, and evaluate the systems according to how well they facilitate simple laws of experience, understood as requiring experience to unfold in such a way as to suggest a world of things obeying the laws of physics.

A final objection to phenomenalism is that it's incompatible with imperceptible physical phenomena, like individual atoms. The objection isn't that phenomenalism can't accommodate physical things that are essentially imperceptible: we have no reason to think that such things exist (and, I argue, ample reason to think they are impossible). The objection is that phenomenalism can't accommodate physical things that, though perceivable in principle, are imperceptible to any nomologically possible being. Thus, the objection goes, phenomenalists are committed to a strong form of scientific antirealism.

Phenomenalists might respond to this by accepting scientific antirealism. However, there are two alternative responses.

One is to acknowledge the existence of atoms, etc. and identify them with possibilities for the sort of experiences that prompt scientists to posit such entities (this is what I call "anthropic phenomenalism"). The other, which I favor, is to say that an atom is a possibility for nomologically impossible experiences.

Does appealing to possibilities for experiences of atoms put phenomenalism at a disadvantage to alternative analyses of matter? Only if metaphysical realists and Kantians have no need for such possibilities. But they do, if they want to avoid scientific antirealism. What distinguishes actual physical things from numbers, sets, and fictional physical things is that there's a more-than-merely-metaphysical possibility of perceiving them. If we have no reason to think that atoms are the sort of thing one could perceive, if only by violating the laws of physics, we have no reason to think that there are atoms, as opposed to "atom talk" that facilitates scientific prediction without committing those who engage in it to the existence of atoms, like climatologists' talk of fictitious "Coriolis forces."

Phenomenalism is first and foremost an analysis of matter, and its main virtue is that it offers the simplest explanation of the regularity of experience. But phenomenalism also has virtues beyond this.

For one, it clarifies the relationship between the world as described by physics and the world as presented to us in everyday experience: it's like that by which the deeper levels of a hypertext link to the levels above them. When a being with greater perceptual acuity (or a microscope) views the same object as another being with lesser perceptual acuity (or no microscope), any change in the latter's experience will correspond to some change in the former's, but not vice versa: there is an asymmetric dependence between the two observers' experiences. In the phenomenalist view I defend, the physical world is like a layered hypertext in which higher layers (comprising, e.g., ordinary human experiences) have this kind of asymmetric dependence on lower layers (comprising, e.g., the experiences of beings with superhuman powers of perceptual discrimination).

A further dividend of phenomenalism is a theory of perception that strikes a balance between representationalist and naive realist theories. When we have a veridical perception of a yellow ball, we don't have an experience that literally shares the

yellow ball's yellowness; nor do we merely have a phenomenally yellow experience caused by the ball. Rather, according to phenomenalists, having a veridical yellow experience of a ball means having a phenomenally yellow experience that is one of those for which the ball is a possibility.

Last but not least, phenomenalism takes two things notoriously resistant to reductive analysis—objective chance and conscious experience—and reduces all else to them. The result is a global metaphysical theory that turns David Lewis's Humean supervenience on its head, in a way that achieves metaphysical monism without relying on a reductionist view of consciousness or a mind-dependent view of physical reality. In this, phenomenalism is unique.

Declarations

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Competing interests I declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

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