



Can ‘permanent possibilities’ be a part of objective reality?

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Abstract

Michael Pelczar, in his fascinating recent book, attempts to answer the main problem that phenomenalism faces, namely that it gives us a world with too many gaps and no rationale for its ordering. He does this by developing a strong doctrine of objective probability. I argue that, if this is to be strong enough to solve the problem, it is no longer immaterialist: the fine line Pelczar needs to walk cannot be held.

Keywords Ontology · Phenomenalism · J. S. Mill · Potentialities

1 The phenomenalist’s problem

Michael Pelczar’s second book defending phenomenalism (Pelzar, 2023) is a very welcome contribution to two of philosophy’s ongoing debates, namely that about the relation between experience and the ontology of the physical world, and that about the priority of the mental or the physical.

Phenomenalism remains a very unfashionable theory, even amongst those who are mental monists, because phenomenalism, unlike Berkeleian idealism or panpsychism, seems to hold that our experience of the world just occurs without any underlying cause. The apparent implausibility of this is well expressed by John Mackie.

Phenomenalism, without Berkeley’s God, is committed to the intermittent existence of things, and hence to interpreting successive observations of the same thing as the repeated springing into existence of complex groups of phenomena just like groups that passed out of existence some time before; and this sort of coincidence would occur not just a few times, but on innumerable occasions. Also, whatever observed phenomena we now explain in terms of unobserved causes would be left unexplained. In short, it would be an utterly

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improbable coincidence that our perceptions should lend themselves as well as they do to being interpreted as intermittent observations of a world of persisting things, unless there was some set of persisting entities related in some systematic way to what we perceive. The realist hypothesis, in a broad form which would include even Berkeley's mind of God, is overwhelmingly supported by these considerations against its phenomenalist rival. (Mackie, 1969: 114)

So the main task for the phenomenalist is to show how his theory can provide a complete and coherent account of the world. The first five sections in this paper will discuss how Pelczar attempts to solve this problem.

One possible route for a phenomenalist to take in response to Mackie is to adopt a Humean account of probability. According to Hume, the only things that are improbable are things that experience shows do not happen or only happen very rarely. As experience does indeed occur, as the phenomenalist says—if you look in the next room, you will see the table that was there five minutes ago, although no one has been looking at it since you last did. The fundamental thought behind this theory is that there are no such things as a priori probabilities; that is, what is probable or likely can only be determined from experience, not from abstract ratios of possibilities. This is the theory lucidly defended in Ayer (1972).

Pelczar does not explicitly draw on this line of argument in responding to Mackie-style criticism, but in his (Pelzar, 2015), he took the similar line that explanation must stop somewhere and the phenomenal level is as legitimate as any.

A phenomenalist does not believe that it is an improbable fluke that or statistical miracle that our experiences admit of interpretation as perceptions of an orderly physical universe. But nor need he believe that something *explains* why our experiences occur the way they do. For it is open to him to hold that it is a fundamental law of nature - or of experience that they occur that way.

The point is missed often enough. "Caused versus random" is a false dichotomy. Nothing (as far as we know) *causes* bodies to conform to the inverse square law of gravitation...Likewise, nothing *causes* physical phenomena to behave only in ways that conserve energy. That physical things behave in energy-conserving ways is not a consequence of some further fact about those things: it is a fundamental regularity in the things' behaviour. (2015, 135)

In his new book, Pelczar presents arguments to make his choice of the phenomenal level to stop explanation less arbitrary. He believes Mill's notion of physical objects as 'permanent possibilities of sensation', if interpreted as objective probabilities, can fill the gaps that Mackie thought unacceptable.

2 Pelczar's extension of the range of 'permanent possibilities of sensation'

Phenomenalists have traditionally, perhaps by oversight, restricted this idea to human or possibly sophisticated animal experience. It is assumed that the atomic and subatomic are not perceived by anything and exist instrumentally. For a Berkeleyan

idealist, everything is perceived, in some broad sense of that term, by God. Pelczar claims that everything, including electrons and quarks, is perceivable in as direct a way as we perceive the objects around us, by some possible mind, so the criterion of ‘permanent possibility of sensation’ extends to everything in the physical world. A panpsychist claims that everything exists by being phenomenally conscious; Pelczar’s phenomenalist holds that everything exists by being a possible object of some possible phenomenal conscious state.

I have two worries, which fall short of downright denials of this as a possible theory. First, the assumption that abstruse physical entities and forces are perceivable in the relevant sense seems to me dubious. Phenomenalists are direct, indeed, in a sense, naïve realists, so the qualities we experience are intrinsic features of the object, not just their effects. But even in the case of gravity, I doubt whether we can say that we perceive it in that sense. We do, in a sense, experience gravity, but only its effect on us. Prior to modern science, it would be natural to think that it was a property of objects—their weight—that kept them on the ground, not gravity. What kind of perceptible intrinsic qualities could a quark or muon have, or what could the quality of spin, in the subatomic sense, be? Lewis posits quiddities as a placeholder for these things, but they do not constitute the essence of their nature as forms of energy. So I think that the assumption that everything is, in principle, perceptible in its intrinsic nature needs more of a defence.

My second inconclusive worry concerns the way that postulating unknown and unknowable to us kinds of minds runs against the natural anthropocentric tendencies of phenomenalism. The point of phenomenalism is to anchor *our* conception of the world to what *we* can most clearly conceive; its roots are connected with *our* epistemological predicament, not with the primacy of perceptual experience, *per se*.

One way round these problems might be to broaden Mill’s maxim and say that physical objects are permanent objects of *cognition*. If there could be a completed physics, then weird minds would not be required. Empiricists like Berkeley, Hume and Mill tended to think that concepts either were just images, or their content was restricted to what could be constructed from phenomenal content, but if one abandons those ideas and allows that intellectual cognition is not restricted in this way, so science can give us a full grasp on what arcane physical entities are, then that they be perceptible would not be required.

It would still be the case that objects would only be possibilities when not being thought about, and it is the status of such possibilities, whatever the nature of cognition in question—though I shall refer to it in the Millian way Pelczar uses—that the rest of this essay concerns.

3 Pelczar on the redundancy of realism

Pelczar’s first move in his ‘objective probabilities’ strategy is to claim that realist theories have no advantage over phenomenalism because the role of the realist background is merely to give rise to the ‘permanent possibilities of sensation’, which, according to the phenomenalist, are what the physical objects are: by Ockham’s

razor, therefore, the realist component is redundant, and it is better to stick with the ‘permanent possibilities’ as constituting the physical world (51ff).

Pelczar reinforces this claim by arguing that it would not matter if the reality behind the phenomenal world kept changing, so long as the phenomenal world sustained by that reality remained apparently the same (69–71). This latter argument is one that is used in Robinson (2022, 198–205), to show that any reality behind the phenomenal world is not itself the physical world, but this conclusion is not equivalent to the claim that the phenomenal world does not need a reality sustaining it, be it the standard physical reality or Berkeley’s God.

To illustrate how the possibility of a changing background reality does not show that no such reality is necessary, consider the case when Fred is my plumber one month, and Mike is my plumber the next. This does not show that all that I need is ‘the possibility of a plumber’ in the absence of any particular thing which realizes this possibility: although what plays the role may vary, there must always be something in the role. To reach the conclusion Pelczar wants, one has to show that the world of permanent possibilities is self-sufficient and not needing a realizer, in the way that ‘the possibility of a plumber’ is not self-sufficient and needs a realizer.

This is where Pelczar’s second move in response to the Mackie argument comes in, for he claims that objective probabilities about possible experiences can plug the gaps in the phenomenalist’s world, but bare possibilities are not themselves realizers. We shall see more about this in Section 5.

4 How Pelczar tries to differentiate himself from Mill

Pelczar identifies with Mill’s theory that physical objects are ‘permanent possibilities of sensation’, but it turns out that he understands this in a rather different way than Mill understands it.

For both Hume and Mill, the explanation of the structuring of experience into a coherent world is provided by the tendency of the mind to pass from one experience to an anticipation of that which is normally associated with it, and to project this from experienced cases to the possible experiences which no one actually has. We are conditioned by experience, aided by the ‘natural tendencies of the mind’, to treat our impressions as facets of enduring, mind-independent objects. So the theory that physical objects are ‘permanent possibilities of sensation’ is not an account of external reality, but a philosophical analysis of our understanding, imagination or construction of a purportedly objective physical reality. It is the only conception we can have, after philosophical reflection, of physical objects. On most interpretations, this leaves Hume as a total sceptic about both the existence of an external world and the intelligibility of the notion of such a world. Mill, who is Pelczar’s model, is more ambiguous. He certainly accepts the psychological explanation of how we come about the idea of external objects that exist unperceived, and he affirms that the only idea we can have of such objects is that they are the permanent possibilities of sensation. It was not clear to his readers whether this account was really meant as a defence of the existence of an external world. In a footnote at the end of the

chapter on the nature of the material world, he says of ‘My able American critic, Dr. H. B. Smith’:

Dr. Smith’s criticisms continually go wide of the mark because he has somehow imagined that I am defending, instead of attacking, the belief in Matter as an entity per se. As when he says (pp. 157-8) that my reasoning assumes, contrary to my own opinion, “an a priori necessity and validity of the law of cause and effect, or invariable antecedence and consequence.” This might fairly have been said if I were defending the belief in the supposed hidden cause of our sensations: but I am only accounting for it; and to do so I assume only the tendency, but not the legitimacy of the tendency, to extend all the laws of our own experience to a sphere beyond our experience. (Mill, 1867, 232-3)

The fact that he assumes ‘only the tendency, not the legitimacy’ of extending experience beyond its actual occurrence strongly suggests that the ‘permanent possibilities of experience’ are the product of a logical construction, sustained by the association of ideas, not of an inference to an external cause.

Whatever might be the case for Mill, Pelczar makes a realist interpretation or development of Mill’s ideas. Pelczar entirely rejects the subjectivist account of the nature of the potentiality that lies behind sensation. In his view, these potentialities are objective probabilities. The question then arises of in what the reality of these probabilities or potentialities consists. It is not in a psychological tendency of the perceiving subjects, nor in some realist physical force or power.

5 Probabilities, causes and real powers

It is important to Pelczar that these probabilities can be real causes, for he cites as the sixth of his six theses defining phenomenalism.

(6) Some possibilities for experience cause other possibilities for experience and some cause experiences. (110)

Indeed, his whole strategy depends on his reification of these ‘permanent possibilities’ as real agents: it is on this that his project depends. He appeals to the role of probabilities in quantum theory to bolster his claim that the kind of probability he needs as the foundation of the existence of unperceived objects is scientifically legitimate, for he sees these quantum events as having no categorical base, but as arising out of objective probabilities akin to his ‘possibilities of sensation’ (65–6).

Unfortunately, it seems to me that the disanalogy between the quantum cases and what Pelczar needs is much greater than their analogy. The circumstances constraining, for example, the random decay of some subatomic particle, are very specific and actual: all that is uncertain is whether it occurs at one time or a slightly different one; the necessary background conditions are firmly actual. It is rather like the informal uncertainty of whether I will sneeze now, or in ten seconds, or possibly not at all for now, but it is not just ‘out of the blue’, without any actual explanation on any level of why there should be a sneeze at all—for example, a real person, with a real

nose, and usually other circumstances, like having a cold or being in a draught. Or the practical uncertainty at which point a balloon being overblown will explode; the background circumstances which are very actual and make the event non-mysterious are directly proximate to the event. Perhaps in a post-Newtonian world, we tend to assume that something deterministic is going on at a deeper level in the cases of sneezes and bursting balloons, but that is not what makes these cases unmysterious. Aristotle follows common experience when he says, in *Prior Analytics* (32b5), that in nature things ‘happen for the most part and fall short of necessity’, and this is, indeed, all our normal experience can tell us about causal relations. Quantum indeterminacy merely brings science back into line with ordinary experience. The background conditions in both quantum and day-to-day cases are firm and actual. But what Pelczar needs is probabilistic causes in situations where there is nothing actual in the context perhaps for millions of years in time and in light years away: for example, events on far away stars, deep in the sea or in the early years of the universe. Nothing actually perceived, according to the phenomenalist, constitutes the context; only further unactualized possibilities.

There seems to me to be a further problem in Pelczar’s way of treating probabilities. How probable something is, is a fact, not an object: I do not think that facts can cause each other. To think of them as influencing each other in this manner seems to be to treat them as powers or potentialities located in space. Such things are not merely the probability of a certain thing occurring, but more like a field or force which will have a certain effect if the right kind of thing—in this case an appropriate perceiver—comes within its range of influence. Such things can, indeed, affect each other, but they seem to be physical or quasi-physical entities that are rather like Boscovichian powers should be no part of a phenomenalist’s ontology.

On the other hand, what the ontology of these possibilities is seems to me to be unclear. In fact, Pelczar seems to run powers, probabilities and possibilities together in his discussion of the ‘powers regress’, where he agrees that such a regress can only be terminated in experience (162). And he responds to the argument that such powers would be physical, not mental (because not based in a mind) by saying that probabilistic causes of physical events are deemed to be physical, so a probabilistic cause of mental events can be deemed mental (156). So perhaps he would tolerate real Boscovichian powers as being the kinds of thing that constitute the possibilities of perception. The issue of their being mental is not so simply decided, however. A mental state is private to the subject that has it; a physical state is available equally to any subject. Any experience the power to be perceivable gives to any subject will be private, but the object, which is the permanent possibility of such experiences, is the same object for whoever—human, mouse or Martian—perceives it, so the objectively real permanent possibility counts as public and so physical.

Furthermore, I cannot see how the possibility for perceptions of all that variety, depending, as they do, on the nature of the perceiving subject, can be the product of a single real power, disposition or objective probability. We saw above, too, that Pelczar says that phenomenism is committed to.

- (6) Some possibilities for experience cause other possibilities for experience and some cause experiences. (110)

The first role of the possibilities referred to here must be what counts as the physical interaction between objects as captured in the natural sciences. In what sense can these be a function of the possibility of perception? How is this plurality coalesced into the one possibility of probability or power?

The Hume-Mill subjectivist line seems to fit the situation more naturally, namely that, according to a phenomenalist, the only conception of objects we are in a position to construct is of them as being the availability of experience for us, in a way that is utterly non-committal—or even positively nihilistic in a Humean way—about the objective presence of anything unperceived.

A traditional phenomenalist treats scientific theory in an instrumentalist way, so that no question of ontology, beyond an ‘as if’ sense should arise. For a Berkeleian, a correct science would map the plan for experience, including the rationale of its micro support structure, in God’s mind. Pelczar, I think, has a picture that is realist in the following sense. The possibilities for experience are located in an ideal space, within which they interact with each other and do not merely pose the opportunity for experience. It seems very odd to me to claim that a possibility of experience has, in its own right, powers to influence other such possibilities unless reified in a way that makes them publicly available, and hence physical forces.

I started this essay by showing the task, very neatly expressed by Mackie, that the phenomenalist faces in trying to give his world a coherent and complete form, and in the following sections, I have argued that Pelczar’s attempt at a semi- or quasi-realist notion of permanent possibilities of sensation will not do the job.

In the final section, I shall look at a very different problem that faces the phenomenalist.

6 How does there come to be a world suitable for perceiving subjects?

There is an issue that I think is not sufficiently discussed in relation to idealism and phenomenalism. Berkeley talks as if physical objects are just collections of ideas, Hume similarly with impressions, and the physical objects that we experience are regarded as collections or patterns of such ideas or impressions. But there could be many recurrent patterns of phenomena which would fail to constitute a livable physical world. Talk of causation and constant conjunction seems to be applied by phenomenologists as if it applied at the phenomenal level, but in fact, making sense causally and nomically of the phenomenal world entirely depends on the fact that it can be construed in physical object terms. There are no laws of nature relating impressions or sense-data to other impressions or sense-data; these laws operate entirely at object—macro and micro—levels. So the intelligibility of the world does not just depend on there being regularity in the patterns of impressions, but on the regularity of the patterns of behaviour at the physical object level, which cannot, as far as I can see, be nomically reduced to phenomenal regularities, as one might hope to explain the behaviour of macroscopic objects in terms of laws governing microscopic ones. So whereas it is no coincidence that the behaviour of atoms gives rise to the behaviour of macroscopic objects—indeed, it is nomically necessary—it

is as if the organization of phenomenal data is governed by the, as it were, *obligation*, if an observer should appear, to form themselves into the appearance of physical objects. If I understand Kant correctly, he believes that this order is imposed by the categories in our mind, the noumenal world being itself, from our perspective, wholly characterless, which is why Kant's successors, such as Hegel, simply did without it, as it contributed nothing substantive, but phenomenologists in the empiricist tradition allow that the phenomena themselves are given with a specific character, yet they are so organized as to give us a law-governed physical world. So it is not just order that is a brute fact for the phenomenologist, but order with a certain purpose, namely to constitute a world of a standard physical kind. This gives strong grounds for a teleology behind the phenomenal array, namely to provide an environment suitable to the minds that experience it.

In his first book on the subject, Pelczar claimed.

Well, according to a phenomenologist, it is a fundamental law of the *phenomenal* world that its constituent experiences are interpretable as perceptions of a physical world in which energy is always conserved. The main difference between the laws, according to the phenomenologist, is that the latter law is more fundamental. The relative coherence of conscious experience – coherence relative to what one would expect of randomly occurring experiences – is a reflection of the fact that experience is subject to certain fundamental laws, or exhibit certain fundamental regularities, rather than experiences being caused in certain ways. (2015, 135-6)

This is not just order or regularity of the kind found in physical laws, but seems to be so organized as to present the form of a livable physical world. There is no 'bottom up' explanation of this, as there can be claimed to be by the physical realist, because the less fundamental physical science is constructed to explain a phenomenal order that is already given, so the phenomenal laws in question seem to be determining what is required of the phenomena, and this top-down determination seems distinctly teleological. In the book these articles are discussing, he seems to be trying to give a 'bottom up' explanation in terms of objective probabilities. If my objections are correct, he has not succeeded in doing this, and we still have a fundamental teleology. This seems to me to be a powerful basis for an argument from design for the existence of a controlling Intellect, and Berkeley's God fills this role.

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