An Inquiry Into Phenomenalism

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The purpose of this paper is to expound the doctrine of phenomenalism. In the first section of this paper, I will introduce the two main competing theories to phenomenalism, *viz*. naVve realism and representational realism. In the next section of this paper, I will provide a detailed account of the doctrine of phenomenalism. Finally, in the last section of this paper, I will provide some objections to the theory of phenomenalism.

Phenomenalism was developed in response to the inherent difficulties found in the other theories of perception that were alive at the time of its formulation. In what follows, I will sketch what phenomenalism is and show that although it perhaps eradicates some of the difficulties found in the other major competing perceptual theories, the difficulties it faces may make it as untenable as the theories it purports to correct. Before investigating the doctrine of phenomenalism, the reader must be acquainted with the two competing theories of which its aim was to improve upon, beginning with representational realism.

Representational realism is a theory of perception based on the existence of external physical objects, which are the cause of our corresponding sensations of them. The term "sensation" is synonymous with experiences, percepts, sense-data, qualia, sensums and representations[80]. These terms, in essence, equate to the various subjective mental experiences in the minds of perceivers (i.e. sounds, tastes, visual experiences, etc.), which constitutes the immediate objects of awareness in sensory experience.

Those theories that support sense-data as being the immediate objects of awareness in sensory experience, like representational realism, justify the existence of these conscious entities by what is commonly referred to as the argument from illusion and hallucination. The argument form hallucination is supposed to show the way we can have the same kind of experience of, say, a coin, without there actually being a coin present, causing our experience of it. When we hallucinate a coin for instance, we experience some mental image (i.e., sense-datum) in our minds, which resembles a real coin (similar shape, color, etc.), which we might take for the real coin.

Since subjective experiences like the latter can be indistinguishable from what we commonly refer to as normal perceptions of things (i.e. coins), one can infer, as the representational realist argues, that in cases of normal perception, in respect to experiencing a coin, for instance, one is immediately aware of a coin-like image in the mind. In the case of hallucinations compared to normal perceptual experiences, what differs is not the immediate object of our perception (sense-

data), but the cause of this perception. In the former case, drugs may be the cause of the sensation of the coin, in the latter case, the actual coin is the cause of the perception. Thus, the immediate object of awareness is not necessarily the direct object (if there even is in fact an object causing the perception), but some mind-dependent entity (sense-data).

The argument from illusion aims to show that our experience of an object changes even when the object that we perceive (or think we perceive) remains unchanged (Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy, 656). Though the coin, for instance, remains the same color, size and shape, what we experience, according to the argument, differs in color, size and shape as the conditions of the room change (i.e. lighting), the angle at which it is perceived changes and the distance at which it is perceived changes. Therefore, the conclusion is that what we experience is not the physical object itself. "Since it varies with changes in both object and viewing conditions, what we experience must be a causal result, an effect, of both the object we commonly say we see (the coin) and the conditions in which we view it. This internal effect, it is concluded, is a sense-datum " (Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy, 656).

As a result of sense-data being the immediate objects of sensation, physical objects are indirectly perceived; with the "burden" of sense-data as intermediary mind dependent entities, in part, obstructing our view of them. Accordingly, representational realists hold that the causes of our perceptions are inaccessible to experience. However, to account for the order or law-like pattern of "involuntary" experience — waking experience — the representational realist holds that we are justified [81]in believing in external causes or "dry goods"[82]that are responsible for such experiences.

Representational realists differ as to how accurately, if at all, our private, sensory experiences resemble the objects that cause them. For example, John Locke (1632-1704), in his work titled *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, thought that sensory experiences or ideas — as he referred to them — of number, motion, extension, bulk and figure accurately resemble the objects being perceived. Locke classified these ideas as ideas of *primary qualities*, which are qualities actually in the objects causing the corresponding sensations of them.

Alternatively, ideas such as color, taste, sounds, etc., which are classified as ideas belonging to the class *secondary qualities*, do not accurately resemble the objects causing those ideas, that is, these sensations are not of things that are actually in the objects that are causing the ideas of them.

Thus, representational realism entertains that there are "minds" with mental properties or substances (sense-data, sensums, etc.) as well as material objects or "dry goods" which cause these properties to come to be in the minds of those perceiving them.

However, representational realism is open to various skeptical hypotheses in respect to what exactly are the causes of our experiences. This then allows for the far-fetched skeptical hypothesis that we are a brain in a vat, being fed experiences from a computer — the cause of our immediate sensory

awareness — or that we are engaged in, at all times, something equivalent to a dream, whatever it is that *we* are.

Another competing theory to both phenomenalism and representational realism is called naVve or direct realism. Direct realism shares with representational realism the belief in the existence of physical material objects — external to perceivers — that exist independently of being perceived. While direct realists agree with representational realists that we have private, subjective experiences of physical objects, they deny that our awareness of, say, a naked woman, is of a mental intermediary (sense-data).

Defenders of this view hold that when a physical object is being perceived, there are no "obstructions" like sense-data dividing the object being perceived: the cause, from the awareness of it: the effect. Thus, the direct realist "side steps" the problem faced by representational realists having to justify their inference from sense-data experiences — immediate objects of awareness — to the existence of physical material objects which cause these experiences.

However, with further investigation, direct realism seems to collapse into representational realism. In cases of perceptual error, like hallucinations or illusions, the immediate awareness of, say, a coin, is not a direct experience of a coin, because while hallucinating, there is no coin present. It would then seem that the experience of hallucinating a coin is a sensory representation of the coin. However, if the immediate sensory awareness of the coin in a hallucination is indistinguishable from the perception of an actual coin, why not say that in both cases, the immediate object of awareness is a sensory representation? (The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy, 238).

Moreover, the skeptic suggests to the direct realist that their statements about the external world grounded on experience, as the hallucinatory case shows, is prone to error. Thus, the direct realist does not seem to be justified in saying that our immediate experiences necessarily entail the existence of a world exactly like it is presented to us.

As a result, the direct realist would seem to be forced to posit something like sense-data to explain the varying experiences of, for example, a coin. But, this view would collapse into representational realism and be exposed to the same hypothetical challenges, such as the brain-in-a-vat dilemma. Thus, the skeptic seems to have put both views into check-mate.

In summary, the direct realist wants to say that a perceiver experiences the world through a clear window. But, it might be more accurate that, like the representational realist, perceivers experience the world, in part, perched behind a "veil of ignorance."

Phenomenalism purports to answer the difficulties of the these two theories, advertising an empirical, non-skeptical theory of perception — that we are justified in believing in the existence of

trees and houses and so forth. It grew in response to the skeptical arguments against representational and naVve realism as well as the philosophical movement known as *logical positivism*. The essence of logical positivism houses the principle known as *verificationism*, which is a criteria of meaning used by logical positivists.

Based on this principle, a statement or proposition has meaning if there is a way to adequately justify it. If a statement cannot be justified, then it is meaningless, according to strong verificationism. Weak verificationism holds that a statement or proposition has meaning if it is possible to find evidence or justification that bears on the likelihood of the proposition's being true (Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy, 515). Most phenomenalists, particularly of antiquity[83], entertain the former form of verificationism.

The origins of the doctrine, and the exercise of the principle of verificationism, can be found as early as the mid 1600's, in George Berkeley's[84]work titled *Principles of Human Knowledge*. In it, Berkeley entertained the thesis that one is limited to his own subjective private experiences (sense-data) of the world and that there is nothing more that one can know besides his immediate experiences. To postulate something beyond ones own immediate experiences, like the representational realists do (e.g. Locke) — unperceivable causes of experience — is to assert the existence of something that cannot possibly be known by experience.

As a result, there is no way to confirm (verify) or disconfirm the postulate that something exists beyond ones immediate sensory experiences. Therefore, the notion of "I know not what" — something over and above immediate experience — as Locke refers to the causes of our experience, is an unintelligible notion, according to Berkeley, and, among others, phenomenalists.

In keeping with Berkeley's philosophy, phenonemalism has two main premises. First, that there is no knowledge other than that of phenomena (sense-data). Second, the phenomenalist denies the thing-in-itself or the existence of substance in the metaphysical sense[85]. (Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 333).

The phenomenalists' main task is to "save" common sense from the skeptical implications of representative realism. In order to avoid the sceptic's attempt to divide sensations from their so called material causes, the phenomenalist seeks to establish a *conceptual* link between the existence of physical objects and the presence of sensations. The notion of a conceptual link between physical objects and the presence of sensations will be developed in what follows.

As discussed earlier, the phenomenalist does not posit the existence of anything beyond his perceptual experiences. However, the phenomenalist must do so without making the existence of material objects depend on the *actual* existence of sensations (Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 333). If the concept of a physical object is the concept of something that can exist unperceived, then the phenomenalist must not associate physical objects with actual sensations. If the phenomenalist were to entertain such a thesis, similar to George Berkeley[86], he would have to confront the issue of objects *not* existing while not being perceived.

Berkeley "saved" the persistence of physical objects existing unperceived by introducing the concept of an infinite spiritual substance — God — whom Berkeley asserted was always perceiving physical objects (physical objects are, according to Berkeley, collections of *ideas* or immediate objects of sensations). Thus, physical objects always existed in this sense because God was always perceiving them — that is, they were always in the mind of God as ideas or sensations. Of course, positing an entity like God is not something the phenomenalist is entitled to do based on his strict adherence to the principle of verificationism, which eliminates all metaphysical objects as something to "fall back on."

Factual phenomenalism attempts to fill the gaps between instances of actual sensations. Supporters of this view defined material objects as groups of actual and possible sensa (The Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 131). An early proponent of this concept, British Philosopher J. S. Mill (1806-73), stated that matter consists of "groups of permanent possibilities of sensation." (The Encyclopedia of

Philosophy,131).

What Mill means by asserting that matter are groups of permanent possibilities of sensations is that the actual sensations that we normally associate, with, say, an apple, are assumed or expected to exist while the apple is not being perceived. So, the actual sensations associated with the apple, for example, while the apple is not being perceived, turn into possible sensations, dubbed conditional certainties. These conditional certainties or possible sensations are verified when one actually proceeds to sense an apple, and finds that indeed he is actually having the sensations that were, as of before being experienced, merely possible sensations associated with an apple.

Permanent possibilities of sensation, or unperceived sense-data, are what later philosophers such as the British Philosopher Bertrand Russell (1872-1970) would refer to as "un-sensed sensibilia." (BonJour, Epistemological Problems of Perception). However, it still is not clear, as opposed to actual sensations, what the possible sensations of matter are. What evidence can be formed regarding the existence and nature of such possible sensations? One cannot perceive that in fact such entities fill gaps in between actual sensations, making it somewhat impossible to acquire evidence in order to verify their existence and nature.

Thus, on a strict interpretation, it seems that nothing actually fills the spaces in between instances of sensations. Accordingly, the *factual phenomenalist* has the same problem as the representational realist (unobserved causes), that is to say, the problem of holding the obscure claim that there are un-sensed sensibilia or matter that are permanent possibilities of sensation. So, by associating sensations with matter, as the factual phenomenalists do, perceptual sensations are just series of sensations that exist in a law-like fashion, with no apparent way of explaining why they exist like this.

Linguisticphenomenalism attempts to eradicate the problems faced by factual phenomenalism. Supporters of this doctrine, are, most notably, the 20thcentury English philosopher A. J. Ayer (1910-

89) and American Philosopher C. I. Lewis (1883-1964). "Each theorized that the content of a physical-object statement involves appeal to nothing more than sense-contents or sense-data" (BonJour, Epistemological Problems of Perception). Ayer describes what in fact we are entitled to say with respect to our knowledge of the physical world:

What Berkeley discovered was that material things must be definable in terms of sense-contents … We know that it must be possible to define material things in terms of sense-contents, because it is only by the occurrence of certain sense-contents that the existence of any material thing can ever be in the least degree verified. (Language, Truth and Logic, p. 71).

As a linguistic phenomenalist, Ayer held the thesis that material objects are logical constructions out of sense-data. What this means is that when we make reference to material physical objects, we are only making reference to actual and possible sensations (sense-data) that we can have of them. Any reference to material objects can be spoken of in terms of sense-data; that is to say, the language of material objects is reducible to — has a one-to-one correspondence with — the language of sense-data without a loss of meaning. Thus, everything that can be said in terms of material object language can be said in terms of sense-datum language. As Ayer says:

Every empirical statement about a physical object, whether it seems to refer to a scientific entity or to an object of the more familiar kind that we normally claim to perceive, is reducible to a statement, or set of statements, which refer exclusively to sense-data (Problems of Knowledge, 118).

So, Ayer, and company, completely translate material object language into sense-datum language which purportedly preserves meaning in our statements directed toward the existence of things in the physical world. For example, the belief in the existence of a material physical object, from the phenomenalists perspective[87], can be defined as the following: "that sense-data of various sorts have been experienced, are being experienced, will be experienced, and/or would be experienced under certain specifiable conditions" (BonJour, Epistemological Problems of Perception).

For example, the belief that there is a painting of Elvis Presley in the next room is to believe that sense-data associated with seeing an Elvis Presley painting, under normal conditions, which reflect the presence of such an entity, either have been, are presently, or will be, in the future, experienced in the context of other sensations associated with the location and surroundings of the painting.

By reducing or translating material object language to sense-data language, the sets of sensum statements used by linguistic phenomenalists take on two main forms. Insofar as an object is actually being perceived, the statements are categorical (material object concepts), but when referring to unperceived objects, the statements are hypothetical (Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 132). For example, "I see a coin" equates to "I have sensations of ABC, etc.," where ABC could stand for "of a round, silver, solid-like shape." Alternatively, to say "there is a coin in the next room" would equate to something like "If you were to go into the next room, you would have sensations of ABC, etc."

The hypothetical statements used to assert the existence of something while it is not being perceived are in strict accord with the principle of verificationism. These statements supposedly set up necessary and sufficient links between sets of sensations, establishing a sound conceptual or

corresponding link between a set of sensations and other sets of sensations (material object concepts). Thus, the assertion that trees and chairs and houses exists are perfectly meaningful statements, verified on the condition that by having certain sensations (e.g. the sensations of green; of leaves; of wood, etc.), certain other sensations will accompany them (e.g. the sensation of experiencing a tree).

Thus, linguistic phenomenalism gains ground over factual phenomenalism insofar as the hypothetical statements used to refer to possible sensations do not suggest that possible sensations are actually components of actual objects (The Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 132).

As stated earlier, all one can have is actual and possible sensations of the world, and linguistic phenomenalism has, taking this as its main tenet, redefined what we mean when we refer to material objects. There is no need to refer to anything beyond these actual and possible sense-data, like Platonic Forms or unknown causes, as representational realists do.

Thus, instead of the troublesome dichotomy that realists, both direct and representational, create for themselves, the phenomenalist avoids this relationship between mind and physical material objects by holding that a certain set of sensations are conceptually linked to what is referred to as physical object concepts; sequences of patterns of particular sense-data. So, the meaning of our statements asserting the existence of physical objects is verifiable — has meaning — by the presence of a set of sensations which are normally associated with other sensations.

Objections to Phenomenalism

First, phenomenalism presupposes that our direct awareness of the world is entirely of private sensa. Modern Science, Philosophy and the like are still not clear on what exactly mental conscious properties are, if there even are such things. Moreover, the phenomenalist does not seem to adequately define these entities themselves. The argument from illusion or hallucination seems dubious. In the case of the bent stick in water (illusion), it does not immediately follow that the part of the stick that is bent is actually "in the head", distinct from something out in physical space. It would seem that a better explanation would be that the water distorts the straight stick insofar as the light and the water refract the stick in a certain way, casting a shadow like image in the water, that can be seen to ripple with the oncoming waves.

Once the stick is taken out of the water, the stick is straight again (well, hopefully). There seems to be no reason to believe that the stick is *actually*bent while it is in the water. To be sure, one can, based on inductive experiments, hold the stick with one hand while at the same time look at it in the water. The stick should feel straight to the hand and look bent to the eyes. Common sense, coupled with both a physiological explanation as well as a physical explanation of the conditions of which the stick is being viewed in, will yield a perfectly cogent explanation of why the stick *appears*bent, but in fact *is* not actually bent.

Thus, these so-called illusion arguments can be counteracted by the fact that although one sense gets "deceived", other senses, at the same time one is experiencing, say, a stick, do not. What this example shows is that there is no reason to think that the stick is actually bent while immersed in water, nor any reason to suppose that the illusion is "in the head", and thus no reason to think that one is being "deceived" by suffering mere non-representational effects of physical objects, like the stick. A reasonable conclusion is that there is an objective, unchanging stick, as the representational realists hold, but gets somewhat mis-represented under certain *physical* conditions, easily discovered to be so with further investigation.

In response to the hallucination argument, it is not necessarily clear that hallucinations (after images, mirages, dreaming, imagining, etc.) are as similar to "ordinary" waking experiences as the supporters of the argument seem to profess. Moreover, the mirage example is fundamentally flawed insofar as mirages, as modern science explains, are in fact caused by some complex process of light passing through two air layers of different temperatures if the light hits at an oblique angle (Halladay, Mirages are Real!).

A mirage, if the latter explanation is accepted, is not a hallucination at all, but an experience of something that would seem to inescapably have an "external" cause.

Therefore, there seems to be solid ground for selecting certain sensory experiences over others in regards to deciphering which in fact are most likely the veridical ones, if one accepts the fact that hallucinatory experiences are fundamentally different from normal waking experiences. Thus, it does not follow, that the immediate object of sensory experience is in fact a sense-data in all cases, or that the effect of the cause of a particular experience is all that different from its cause. A more commonsensical conclusion would be to classify those sensations belonging to hallucinations and illusions as fundamentally distinct sensory experiences than the experiences of normal waking reality.

Another concern is that linguistic phenomenalistic statements seem, in practice, problematic. Such statements do not seem to be equivalent to material object statements and thus are not as complete translations as Ayer and company held them to be. The translation of material object statements into sense-datum statements as a series of hypothetical statements — even when the apodoses of these describe experiences — seems to avoid asserting the actual existence or occurrence of physical objects or portray something quite different, like a promise or a warning. For instance, "If you touch that, you will get burned." "If you go to the next room, you will see a book on the table" which may function as a request or suggestion that the person go there (The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy, 663).

Another facet of the translation problem comes in the form of "tainting" the phenomenalistic analysis with having to include in sense-data statements, in order to preserve meaning, references to material physical objects. For example, consider a coin. The statement "sensa of a round, shiny-like, solid seeming shape would not differentiate the coin from say, a piece of round metal.

The urge in the latter case is to include something more accurate, so the statement about the coin does not entail a round piece of metal. The translation would probably have to be something like, "a shiny-like, round, non-coin, metal-like sensa." However the analysis is now tainted with material-object language and thus is not a completed translation. So, the conclusion associated with this argument is that there is no need to reduce material object statements into a language that does not preserve its meaning, *viz*. sense-data language.

Another manifest problem with linguistic phenomenalism, as Roderick Chisholm (1916-1999) pointed out, is that the necessary and sufficient connections that were supposed to be part of the hypothetical statements linguistic phenomenalists use to verify the existence of material objects break down. For example, there might be some illusion or hallucination in which the sensum statements would be true and the material-object statement false. For instance, all the white computer mouse-like sensa might be present, and yet the object might be something that looks and feels like a computer mouse, but is not.

Moreover, the material-object statement might be true and the sensory ones false. There might be a mouse on the table, and yet one might not get the sensa of it (i.e. the light might fail, one might be inattentive or ignorant, it may be hidden, and so forth). Thus, there are cases where statements referring to sets of sensations that are supposed to entail statements about other sets of sensations, do not. Chisholm argues that what sensations one would have if one were to have certain others always depends upon, in part, the conditions of both the perceiver (neurological characteristics) and the physical conditions in which the perceiver is in. Therefore, concludes Chisholm, trying to assert the existence of physical objects in terms of hypothetical statements — necessary and sufficient connections between sensations — like the phenomenalists do, without appeal to both the neurological state of the perceiver and the physical conditions under which the perception is taking place is "doomed" (The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy, 664).

Lastly[88], if one is not "allowed" to explain the existence of sensations by appealing to any external cause, what then, is the explanation for the law-like sensations — which constitute the existence of material objects — that perceivers experience of the world? The phenomenalist might respond by saying that it is not further explainable, based on the principle of verificationism — that it is just a fact of experience that sensations occur in the law-like patterns that they do. It seems incredible that there is no explanation or further reason regarding our experience of the world and the physical things in it. Perhaps, as the phenomenalist asserts, we can never know any explanation that involves reference to things beyond experiences, but this is a skeptical argument about the material world. Phenomenalism is not supposed to be a skeptical view, however.

In conclusion, phenomenalism seems to be an awkward work around to other competing theories that, in light of a pragmatic, commonsensical approach to making claims about the material world, is simply not needed to explain our experiences of the material world. There is no reason to believe that physical objects disappear when not being perceived and thus the phenomenalists "worry" about the persistence of substances or material things distinct from experience is not needed. The arguments in respect to our immediate awareness of things while experiencing the world, which are taken to be sense-data, do not seem completely cogent. Furthermore, there is no reason to believe

that we are brains in a vat — no evidence. Thus, the skeptical arguments against direct or representational realism, on the face of it, are harmless.

Consequently, because of the obscurity of sense-data, and the fact that the skeptic's assertions against the existence of the physical material world are based on sand; postulating the existence of *material* physical objects, each being afforded a distinct, ontological status, which we are directly aware of in experience, would, in my opinion, be the best explanation of sensory experience. I conclude that the most plausible theory of perception out of the three outlined in this paper, is direct realism, in where illusions and hallucinations can easily be categorized as perceptions of things, just different from ordinary ones, explained by appeal to science.

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