

Physical Objects as Possibilities for Experience

Michael Pelczar: *Phenomenalism: A Metaphysics of Chance and Experience*.
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The leading idea of this clever and densely-argued book is that physical objects are a kind of tendency or propensity. More exactly, they are tendencies for the occurrence of precisely the sorts of experiences that perceivers have when they perceive such a physical object. Consider, for example, the moon. There is a tendency for it to be experienced in certain ways by those who perceive it. According to what Pelczar calls *phenomenalism*, the moon just is this tendency. Likewise for other physical objects.

Phenomenalism in this sense is not new: it springs from John Stuart Mill's suggestion that physical things are "permanent possibilities of sensation", where by "possibilities" he means something like tendencies or propensities. Mill's view dropped off the philosophical radar long ago. But Pelczar seeks to resurrect it. Or something like it. He contends that a suitably modified version of the view offers a better account of reality than any of its competitors.

It seems undeniable that there are experiences and also tendencies for these experiences to occur in lawlike ways. Most would add that these tendencies must be grounded in some underlying reality. And for them this reality is the physical world. Pelczar does not deny that there may be such a further reality. But he sees no benefit in supposing it. Everything that one could hope to explain can be explained solely in terms of experiences and the tendencies for them. It is therefore best, he claims, to take the tendencies themselves to be the physical objects.

Pelczar offers two main arguments for this view. The first is the *Regularity Argument*:

1. The physical world is what explains the regularity of experience.
2. What explains the regularity of experience is that there is a propensity for experiences to occur certain ways.
3. Therefore, the physical world is a propensity for experiences to occur certain ways. (p. 51)

The key premise here is (2). Pelczar maintains that what explains the regularity of experience is what explains it in the most parsimonious way. He then argues that the phenomenalist explanation is the most parsimonious one. The obvious alternative would be to suppose that the propensity for experiences to occur as they do is grounded in a common world of non-mental things with categorical properties, and that these non-mental things explain the regularity of our experiences. According to

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Pelczar, however, it would be more parsimonious to explain the regularity just by appealing to the propensity itself. Accordingly, we should take the propensity to be the explanation of the regularity. And since what explains the regularity just is the physical world, per (1), it follows that this propensity is the physical world.

At this point we may be tempted to offer a competing argument. Call it the *Grounding Argument*:

1. The physical world is that natural reality which ultimately grounds the regularity of experience.
2. What ultimately grounds the regularity of experience is a world of natural and non-mental things with categorical properties.
3. Therefore, the physical world is a world of natural and non-mental things with categorical properties.

This argument allows that the regularity of our experiences can be explained in terms of the existence of a propensity for those experiences to occur as they do, but recognizes that this propensity must itself be grounded in some more fundamental categorical reality.

The thought behind premise (2) of this argument is essentially that the dispositional must be grounded in the categorical. Pelczar calls this the *Armstrong doctrine*, after D. M. Armstrong (p. 64), and gives two reasons for declining to accept it. The first is that it remains an open scientific question whether a certain kind of disposition—i.e., the probabilities associated with quantum mechanics—has any categorical basis (p. 65). It may turn out that it does not, in which case the Armstrong doctrine would be false, at least in its unrestricted form. The second is that “it’s easy to imagine categorically identical possible worlds that differ in their probabilities” (p. 65). For example, there seems to be a possible world that satisfies the following three conditions: its radon atoms have about a 90% chance of decaying within four days; due to a statistical fluke, about 50% of its radon atoms actually decay within four days, just as in the actual world; in every other respect it is identical to the actual world. This world is therefore categorically identical to the actual world, yet differs from it with respect to the probabilities for radioactive decay. If there is in fact such a possible world, then the Armstrong doctrine is false: the dispositional need not always be grounded in the categorical.

The other main argument for phenomenalism is the *Correspondence Argument*:

1. There’s a perfect correlation between physical things and possibilities for ideal things (“possibilities of sensation,” for short).
2. The best explanation for this correlation is that there’s no difference between physical things and possibilities of sensation.
3. Therefore, there’s no difference between physical things and possibilities of sensation: physical things just *are* possibilities of sensation. (p. 112)

The key premise this time is (1). To establish this premise, Pelczar first needs to establish that for every physical thing there is a corresponding possibility for ideal things, that is, for experiences of the sort we have when we perceive the physical thing.

He does this by noting that it is the nature of physical things to be perceivable (p. 118). He also needs to establish that for every possibility (i.e., tendency) for ideal things there is a corresponding physical thing. The argument for this is basically the following. We know that there are physical things because our experiences allow us to know what tendencies there are for experiences. Ultimately we know that physical objects exist only because we know what tendencies there are for experiences. So the knowledge of such tendencies suffices for the knowledge that there are physical objects. And in that case the existence of such tendencies suffices for the existence of the corresponding physical things (pp. 113–18).

Besides these two arguments, Pelczar provides further support for phenomenalism in the form of several advantages it holds over its rivals. Some of these advantages concern issues in the philosophy of science (Chapter 7). Others concern the mind-body problem (Chapter 8) and the nature of perception (Chapter 9).

Every metaphysical system must take something as fundamental and unanalyzed, something to which everything else ultimately reduces. Most philosophers today prefer to conceive fundamental reality as non-mental and categorical. This leaves them seeking to reduce the mental to the non-mental and the dispositional to the categorical. But the former reduction has proven notoriously elusive. And if Pelczar is right about his radioactive decay example, the latter reduction is at least in some cases impossible. In light of these difficulties, the phenomenalist asks us to consider inverting this picture, putting experience and chance at the foundation, and attempting to explain the non-mental and categorical features of our world in their terms. It is in this sense that phenomenalism is, as the subtitle indicates, a metaphysics of chance and experience.

This inversion of the usual order is likely to strike most readers as rather counterintuitive, and in the end it may not win many followers. But Pelczar makes an impressive case for the view. If nothing else, this book should at least convince us that phenomenalism is worth taking seriously.