

Phenomenalism
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1. Theories of perception

Theories of perception can be somewhat simplistically divided into two camps by their answers to two questions: first, whether in the case of illusion or hallucination there is something that we see which is as we see it; second, whether in the case of veridical perception which is subjectively indistinguishable from illusion, what we see immediately is the same thing as what we see in the case of illusion. Direct realism claims that in the case of veridical perception, we see the physical objects themselves; and that therefore, we do not see the same thing in cases of veridical perception and illusion. It may go on to say that in illusion, there is nothing which is as we see it; or it may accept that there is (in which case it is a 'mixed' direct realist theory). Indirect realism, idealism and phenomenalism all answer affirmatively to both questions. Indirect realism goes on to say that what we see immediately – sense data – in cases of veridical perception represents physical objects; idealism denies that there are such physical objects; while phenomenalism claims that (talk of) physical objects are in fact (talk of) sense data.

The arguments for rejecting direct realism stem fairly directly from the two questions asked; for surely, one might say, when I experience an hallucination or an illusion, there is nevertheless *something* that I see. And surely, in cases in which veridical perception and illusion are subjectively indistinguishable, I see the *same thing*. So in all cases of sensory experience, what I am directly aware of is not a physical object, but sense data. These arguments can, of course, be responded to, but that is not our concern here.

2. Phenomenalism

Phenomenalism argues that it has the edge over both indirect realism and idealism. Against the former, it claims that we cannot have knowledge, or perhaps even any intelligible understanding, of a realm of causes (between physical objects and our experience) which are outside our experience. Against the latter, it claims that our beliefs about a world of physical objects can, in general, be justified; so we needn't embrace the counter-intuitive claims of idealism. The arguments in favour of idealism are, in fact, claims the phenomenalist, arguments in favour of scepticism about the physical world; but scepticism is unjustified.

So phenomenalism claims, intuitively, that we can know about the world of physical objects through our sensory experiences; but, counter-intuitively, it is wrong to think of physical objects as in themselves completely independent causes of our experiences, for this is something we cannot know, and could only lead to scepticism. There are two famous defences of phenomenalism: Mill's more 'metaphysical' account and Ayer's linguistic account.

3. Mill's phenomenalism

Mill derives his account from an empiricism about ontological questions ('what there is') and his associationist psychology. We have only our experience to go on in establishing what there is. He famously describes physical objects as 'permanent possibilities of sensation'. When we interact with physical objects, for example looking for something on a desk, we are presented with a series of new sensations. Certain sensations which were possible come about. I could move this piece of paper, and experience a new shape of the colour beneath it. There are all sorts of

possible sensations that would occur under certain conditions. We have come, from experience, to expect this sequence of sensation; you could say that we are certain it will happen. And so we come to think of certain possibilities for sensation as being *permanently* available, under certain conditions. The certainty we have is not unwarranted – it is grounded in our experience.

We associate the permanent possibilities of certain sensations together, since whenever I have one, the conditions of having another associated with it are to hand. These ‘clusters’ of possible sensations are what physical objects are. A piece of paper is the permanent possibility of certain sensations that we associate together. Only some of the sensations in fact occur; but the physical object is a collection of those that do and those that could occur. We derive the complexity of ideas of space, distance, perspective from the complex associations between sensations that we make (automatically – none of this need be thought through!).

We then think of physical objects as the cause of the sensations that do occur. This isn’t exactly wrong, though perhaps it is peculiar to think of a collection of possibilities causing an actuality. Where we do go wrong, Mill thinks, is if we think this cause is something that could exist quite independent on sensation.

4. Ayer’s linguistic phenomenalism

Ayer takes a different tack. He defends phenomenalism through his analysis of statements concerning physical objects. He claims that the function of philosophy is to give definitions in use, showing how the sentences in which a symbol or type of symbol (such as words for physical objects) occurs can be translated into equivalent sentences which don’t contain it or its synonyms (he contrasts this with dictionary definitions, in which symbols are defined in terms of synonyms). Philosophical definitions, then, can deepen our understanding of terms in a way dictionary definitions do not, i.e. they can still be informative to someone who already knows what all the terms mean in the dictionary sense. Our initial understanding of terms may amount to no more than practical ability to use them and know how to verify them; but philosophical analysis can reveal unsuspected logical complexity. Since the analysis translates sentences containing the term under analysis into sentences that do not, we come to see how the term is ‘standing in for’ something more complex. Such terms denote ‘logical constructions’: “the introduction of symbols which denote logical constructions is a device which enables us to state complicated propositions about the elements of these constructions in a relatively simple form” (*Language, Truth and Logic* 53).

Phenomenalism claims, in Ayer’s terminology, that physical objects are logical constructions, and their elements are sense data. This does not mean that physical objects are *constructions* of sense data (such a view would be more akin to idealism); but that the content of propositions about physical objects is in fact *entirely* concerned with features and relations of sense data. Propositions about physical objects can be *translated without loss* into propositions about sense data:

the symbol ‘table’ is definable in terms of certain symbols which stand for sense-contents, not explicitly, but in use. And this...is tantamount to saying that sentences which contain the symbol ‘table’...can all be translated into sentences...which do not contain that symbol, nor any of its synonyms, but do contain certain symbols which stand for sense-contents.” (53)

To say that a physical object of a certain exists is to say that certain sorts of sense data have been, are being, and would be experienced under certain conditions.

5. Objections

Phenomenalism has fallen from grace. Here are four reasons why:

1. Experiences of physical objects have a logical and reliable pattern. What is the *explanation* for this? Commonsense regards claims about physical objects as providing such an explanation; phenomenals must say that such claims are themselves simply a redescription of the pattern of our experiences. Phenomenalism loses a level of explanation compared to realism.
2. Phenomenalism has a problem with induction. All that can justify the phenomenalist in thinking that future sense data will occur under certain conditions is finding regularities in our actual experiences thus far. But although our sense data follow a pattern, it is not obvious that this pattern can be captured without reference to material objects.
3. Phenomenalism's claim that statements regarding physical objects can be translated into statements about what was, is, and would be experienced under certain conditions invites the challenge: 'go on, then, prove it!'. This challenge may prove insurmountable, for the specification of the conditions under which the various sense data would be experienced must be in terms of other sense data. The translation of a claim about a table being in a particular room must not refer to the room (as a physical space) at any point. Phenomenalists have responded by appealing to the idea of a *sensory route*, a series of juxtaposed and often overlapping sense data that would be experienced in 'locating' the table. But there are *many* different sensory routes to a given location, yet the claim regarding the table is a claim of uniqueness. Furthermore, we can often understand the claim that a certain material object or set of objects exists at a certain physical location without having any clear idea of the relevant sensory route, e.g. 'Penguins exist at the South Pole'. Finally, the conditionals in which the analysis is given may be falsified by situations that would not falsify the claim referring to the physical object, e.g. I won't experience certain sense data if I suddenly go blind upon entering the room, but the table will still be there.
4. The spirit of phenomenalism leads to solipsism, for if statements about what is beyond experience are analysed in terms of experience, then statements about *your* experience can only be statements about *my* experience, as I have no experience of your experience.

Further Reading

Mill, J. S. *Examination of Sir William Hamilton's Philosophy*

Ayer, A. J. *Language, Truth and Logic*, Ch. 3

The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (plato.stanford.edu): articles on Mill and phenomenalism