

Phenomenalism

Phenomenalism responds to scepticism about the physical world by making a logical link between our experience and the world of physical objects. There are two famous defences of phenomenalism: Mill's 'metaphysical' account and Ayer's linguistic account.

MILL'S PHENOMENALISM

John Stuart Mill (*An Examination of Sir William Hamilton's Philosophy*, Ch. 11) begins by saying we have only our experience to go on in establishing what there is. When we interact with material 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 the colour of the surface 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; we are certain it will happen. And so we come to think of certain possibilities for sensation as being permanently available, under certain conditions. Material objects are 'permanent possibilities of sensation'.

We associate certain sensations, and the possibilities of other sensations, together, since whenever I have one sensation, the conditions of having another associated with it are to hand. These 'clusters' of possible sensations are what material 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 material 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 material 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. This is something we cannot know, and could only lead to scepticism. Instead, there is no logical gap between appearance and reality.

AYER'S LINGUISTIC PHENOMENALISM

A J Ayer takes a different tack (*Language, Truth and Logic*, Ch. 3). He defends phenomenalism through his analysis of statements concerning material 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 'table' or words for material objects generally) 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.

It can happen that we discover the term is 'standing in for' something more complex. What is referred to by terms that do this are 'logical constructions'. Ayer argues that material objects are logical constructions – all propositions about material 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. (*Language, Truth and Logic*, pp. 85-6)

Notice that Ayer doesn't claim that material objects are constructed, made out, of sense data; but that propositions about material objects are in fact *entirely* concerned with features and relations of sense-data. To say that a material object exists is to say that certain sorts of sense data have been, are being, and would be experienced under certain conditions. So there is no logical gap between appearance and reality.

OBJECTIONS TO PHENOMENALISM

Very few philosophers accept phenomenalism now. What objections does it face?

First, experiences of material objects have a logical and reliable pattern. What is the *explanation* for this? Commonsense claims that material objects explain our experiences; phenomenalists can only say that our experiences do have these patterns. But first, it isn't obvious that we can actually describe that pattern without referring to material objects; and second, if there is no independent cause of this pattern, what reason do we have to think that future sense-data will follow the same patterns?

Second, phenomenalism's claim that statements regarding material 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 the claim 'there is a table in the next 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 material object, while 'there is a table in the next room' seems to claim just one thing. Furthermore, we can often understand the claim that a certain material object or set of objects exists at a certain 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 material 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.