

THE REFUTATION OF PHENOMENALISM<sup>1</sup>

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The rights and wrongs of phenomenalism are perhaps more frequently discussed among English speaking philosopher in recent times than any other topic. The situation is a somewhat peculiar one: the discussion has shifted from the days when the issue was one between those who believed in the existence of entities in some sense incapable of being sensibly experienced, and those who asserted that the existence of such non-sensible entities was either meaningless or false. It is now far more a domestic discussion between philosophers who agree in rejecting non-sensible entities – Lockean substances, Kantian necessary connections and non-sense entities and non-sensible characteristics – and agree that, in some sense, the analysis of what is meant by a material object provided by the empiricists – Berkeley, Hume, Mill, Russell – is in principle correct, but disagree about the adequacy of specific suggested analyses. They agree, that is to say, that the proposition that something is a material object must in principle be capable of being translated into or deduced from a proposition or propositions about the direct experience, past, present and future, actual or hypothetical, of a real or imaginary empirical observer; any alternative explanation of how material-object propositions are to be analysed is naturally rejected out of hand, because it is held that they involve the introduction as constituents of the real world of non-sensible entities or non-sensible characteristics, and this is regarded as inadmissible on grounds originally advanced by Berkeley – that the symbols describing such alleged entities or characteristics, when examined carefully, do not refer to anything analysable into or conceivable by analogy with entities or characteristics found in experience. The meaning of words or sentences, or any other entities used in order

<sup>1</sup> The text is prefaced by this note: ‘Alternative beginning: from p. 3 (sub fin) insert on page 3 of Manuscript.’ The MS in question appears not to survive.

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to describe, must, it is held, either be capable of translation into other words, sentences etc. whose function is already familiar, or else explained by ostension, i.e. by an act of pointing to an object or a situation by reference to which the use and therefore the meaning of such descriptive symbols is established. If this is true of all descriptive symbols, it must hold of those referring to material objects. A language defined in terms of purely formal rules will, *ipso facto*, have no 'existential import' to refer to something, to describe anything. Some, at any rate, of the symbols which compose the language must refer to constituents of experience, and ultimately the rules which establish what a given group of symbols describes can be established only by some sort of actual pointing to an actual experience. All this is commonplace enough and does not need labouring.

Now it appears to follow from this that in some sense phenomenalism must follow from this alone; unless direct experience of non-sensible entities occurs, the words referring to such entities will, in the last analysis, turn out to refer to nothing; and those, at any rate, who do not claim to have such experiences and do not credit others with having them will be obliged to subscribe to the proposition that the fundamental phenomenalist thesis follows from the very analysis of empirical meaning – since it makes no sense to say that there are Lockean substances and the world is composed solely of characteristics capable, at any rate in principle, of being directly experienced.

What is common to all phenomenalist 'reductions' is the translation of apparently categorical propositions about material objects (e.g. 'There is a tiger in the next room') into hypothetical propositions about the possible experiences of an observer. ('If X were to alter his present perspective etc., tigerish data etc. would begin to occupy his visual, tactual etc. sense fields etc.'). This reduction of categorical propositions about material objects into sets of hypothetical propositions about direct experience, upon which the whole of the modern interpretation of phenomenalism, theories of logical constructions etc. rest, seems to me the heart of the problem, and to spring from and lead to fallacies which make the phenomenalist programme impossible to carry out, because the task proposed rests on a mistake. In fact, I wish to argue that the problems with which so many phenomenologists have so manfully and so vainly grappled are, as they are themselves so fond of denominating the problems of their predecessors, pseudo-

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problems, and incapable of solution, not because they are in principle unanswerable, but because they do not exist. Let us begin with some familiar objections to phenomenism.

1. One of the most familiar objections urged against, say, Berkeley or Russell or Mill is that in converting categorical propositions about material objects into hypothetical propositions about objects of sensation, introspection, thought, imagination etc. – let us call these for short ‘sense data’ – the ‘observer’ who occurs in the protasis of the hypothetical proposition is himself irreducibly material, and so leaves the reduction to sense data incomplete. Professor H. H. Price has suggested that in order to ‘dissolve’ the observer a second proposition could be constructed in terms, presumably, of a second observer, who actually or potentially observes the body of the original observer; and a third observer to observe the second, and so on: this would admittedly not eliminate, but would form a series progressively reducing or dissolving, the ‘unreduced’ material object content of the original proposition. We would as it were get a Chinese box series of propositions, tending to an ideal limit, each of which would whittle away a little more of the materiality of the original observer without ever succeeding in eliminating it completely. A related and equally weighty criticism is the thesis that the behaviour of such observers cannot be described without reference to material objects which determine his position in space, his movements etc. Without discussing this in detail, it is perhaps enough to say that, if the material object is not completely eliminated – if the phenomenist reduction only forms an ideal limit of an infinite series – the translation enjoined by phenomenism cannot in principle be complete, and this has troubled many a phenomenist ever since Russell and Whitehead, Broad and Price entered the field with their various theories of perspectives, multiple location etc.

2. Yet another objection frequently urged is that the ‘reduction’ of categorical propositions about material objects, involving as it must hypothetical propositions about observers and their experiences, appears to commit us to something like the existence or reality of hypothetical sense data, or unsensed sensibilia. Again there is no need to examine this objection in detail; what it comes to is that if categorical propositions about the actual experiences of actual observers are meaningful only in so far as they describe those experiences, hypothetical propositions can possess meaning

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only in so far as they also are descriptions of something and not nothing: as there are no actual data for them to describe, something needs to be postulated for them to refer to; these postulated entities are, it is urged, at least as mythological as the undesirable Lockean substratum. Phenomenalism, which was invoked to slay the metaphysical hydra of objects beyond experience, is accused of causing it to sprout an infinite number of new heads in the form of hypothetical entities, unsensed sensibilia etc., unknown equally to physics and to common sense, and in the end breeding a new metaphysics and a new pseudo-problems of their own.<sup>2</sup>

3. It has been asserted that the promised 'reduction' of ordinary common-sense expressions into sense datum language by such methods as that of Descriptions, Logical Constructions etc. cannot in fact be performed. Phenomenalists are challenged to provide an equivalent in sense datum currency of propositions about material objects, and when they decline to produce the precise equivalent they are accused of uttering counterfeit cheques; and this holds even more obviously of scientific entities: statements about gamma particles or the curvature of space cannot, however many intermediate hypothetical propositions are inserted, be reduced to sense datum language: the promise to do so has not been kept. It is said that, although phenomenalist language might be intolerably clumsy and prolix, it could nevertheless in principle be substituted for the ellipses of common speech: that normal language has the character it has in order to serve the use that it serves; that sense datum language would doubtless be much too precise and definite, as well as intolerably lengthy and tedious, for ordinary use, but that in principle the translation could be effected by the shedding of certain degrees and kinds of vagueness, ambiguity and indefiniteness, indispensable to communication between plain men. We are told that it is necessary only to try to put this programme into practice to see that it is a Sisyphean labour and will not work: no phenomenalist has ever offered a logical construction which was an adequate analysis or 'reduction' of a material object proposition into sense datum terms. The claim, although it cannot perhaps be formally refuted, turns out to be hollow every time the bluff is called.

<sup>2</sup> At this point the following note is inserted: '— Florence Nightingale:'.  
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4. Finally, there are the familiar difficulties about dealing with propositions about other minds, communication etc. in the corresponding Humean fashion.

These are some of the most familiar array of anti-phenomenalist arguments. I should like to suggest that, formidable as it is, it may be altogether the wrong approach to the subject, for despite its anti-phenomenalist air it is all really so much concealed pro-phenomenalist propaganda. The suggestion implicit in all these criticisms is that, while the phenomenalist goal may well be the right one, the particular avenues offered by phenomenologists thus far are blocked by various types of logical or epistemological obstacles – that the operation is desperately needed if we *were* ever to eliminate unverifiable or indescribable entities – but that the techniques offered by various philosophers have all, so far, broken down. This position is not unlike the situation with regard to, say Fermat's theorem: what the theorem asserts is very likely true – at any rate not demonstrably self-contradictory – and it is the *kind of* assertion which *should be* demonstrable or refutable by normal mathematical technique. The phenomenalist attempts at reduction or analysis so far conducted have ended in failure, but they and only they are the *kind of processes* which can in principle be applied. Some kind of phenomenalist analysis *must* be correct, for the alternative is a return to Lockean or Cartesian or Kantian metaphysics, and that is impossible to contemplate. This is the bogey used to drive philosophers back to make yet another attempt to find a viable phenomenalist analysis.

The attitude adopted throughout – perhaps because of faulty theories of truth – is that some brand of phenomenism is the only possible valid view, or at least inherently plausible, though beset by technical defects: once it has been reformulated to meet these the problem is solved. But my thesis is that phenomenism is not *prima facie* plausible, let alone indispensable, and that improvements will not render it more so. Instead, therefore, of returning to the all too familiar examination of the validity of the current objections to phenomenism and the ways in which they can or cannot be met, I should like to suggest that it would be better to examine the actual procedure of phenomenist reductions – to see what it is that makes common sense so uncomfortable, and to see whether this discomfort is purely emotive, or due to the less fundamental characteristics of ordinary language, as is sometimes maintained.

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