

ON PHENOMENALISM: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

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In this paper, my aim is to analyze the theory of phenomenalism and its basic assumptions in the philosophies of Berkeley, Russell and Ayer. I will also analyze the way phenomenalism and its sense-datum theory has been opposed by Austin and Strawson. My main argument is that phenomenalism as a theory of reduction of the objects to sense-data can never be sustained because no such reduction is possible and that we can never give up the conceptual system in which the material bodies and persons are primary particulars.

Keywords: Phenomenalism, Sense-data, Skepticism, Knowledge, Certainty, Reductionism.

I

Phenomenalism is the philosophical theory which reduces reality to phenomena. There is no reality over and above the reality of phenomena. There is, therefore, no distinction between appearance *and* reality. Appearances are numerically identical with reality. Phenomenon is what appears. Sense-data are phenomenal entities: they are constitutive of phenomena. Berkeley without his God is supposed to be a phenomenalist. Russell too would be a phenomenalist, if he gives up his view about the public physical reality. Moore and Price would be phenomenologists if they gave up their views concerning the *physical* occupants. Other than the Vienna circle philosophers, Ayer is the only important philosopher of the English-speaking world who is committed to phenomenalism.

Consider Berkeley's case. Berkeley remarked that "the table I write on, I say, exists; that is, I see and feel it; and if I were out of my study, I should say it existed, meaning thereby that if I was in my study I might perceive it, or that some other spirit actually does perceive it."¹ In this passage Berkeley explains the existence of the table in terms of his perceptions, his seeing and feeling. He further explains the existence of an unperceived table in terms of his possible perceptions and the possible perceptions of other persons like him. So, Berkeley has reduced the existence of a material table to the existence of actual and possible perceptions. Consider now his second remark, "The question whether the earth moves or not amounts in reality to no more than this, to wit, whether we have reason to conclude...that if we were placed in... such or such a position and distance, both from the earth and sun, we should perceive the former to move among the choir of the planets..."² Not only the physical bodies but also their movement, i.e., the occurrence of their movement, depends on our perceptions. Berkeley reduces the existence of

physical reality to the reality of the self' and its actual and possible perceptions. Of course, in Berkeley's philosophy, God plays a major role. In the absence of the human perception Berkeley makes an appeal to God's perception. We have quoted from Berkeley by avoiding his God. But we could not avoid the use of 'I', i.e., the owner of perceptions. Berkeley's use of 'idea' for perceptions makes essential the existence of the *owner* of ideas. The invention of sense-datum in place of 'idea' has this superiority that it requires no owner. While criticizing Descartes, Russell pointed out that 'I' is superfluous in reporting about the existence of a sense-datum. Saying 'there is a colour-patch' would do where Berkeley would have said; 'I see a colour-patch'. Superiority of 'sense-datum' over 'idea' consists in the fact that ideas require the existence of those who have them. But sense-data are neutral. They require neither the physical objects nor the spiritual perceivers. A consistent phenomenalist would reject everything that lies behind the phenomenon, be it a human self or a material not-self. As Mundle points out, "All types of entities other than sense-data are dismissed as 'fiction' or 'logical constructions'. Phenomenalists could, and perhaps should, retain minds to be aware of, and to interpret, sense-data; but usually they have deemed minds to be a theoretical luxury, talk about which is to be analyzed, like talk about tables, in terms of talk about sense-data."³ So a phenomenalist rejects the commonsense view that distinguishes us from tomatoes and cigarette cases. We are supposed to have a self--whatever its interpretation--which is lacking in the case of a tomato or a cigarette case. And when it is said that a tomato or a cigarette case does not possess a self what is meant is merely our ordinary commonsense view. It is not denied that a philosopher may come to discover a self even in a tomato or a cigarette case. For Leibniz a tomato shared in having a self with a human being. A phenomenalist stands on the other pole. For him a human being is not very unlike a tomato. Both lack self. According to Ayer a self is a "logical construct out of sense-experience."⁴ And Ayer explains the nature of sense-experiences in terms of 'sense-contents'. The term 'sense-content' stands for what is commonly known as 'sense-datum'. This becomes clear from Ayer's remarks on Berkeley's use of the term 'idea'. He writes, "we replace the word 'idea' in this usage by the neutral word 'sense-content' which we shall use to refer to the immediate data not merely of 'outer' but also of 'introspective sensation', and say that what Berkeley discovered was that material things must be definable in terms of sense-contents."⁵ So Ayer's analysis of self involves three other terms for explanation, viz, 'self-content', 'sense-experience' and 'logical construction'. Concerning the relationship between the former two terms, if a sense-content is not taken as a part of a sense-experience, it has to

be taken as an object of the latter. And to accept the former as an object of the latter is to accept the legitimacy of the act-object analysis of sense-experiences.

According to Ayer, such an analysis cannot be legitimate, for it involves the metaphysical assumption of *acts* of experience. Such an assumption could be granted, with suitable formulation, if sense-experiences failed to be explained without it. But sense-experiences can be successfully explained without it, and hence this assumption has to be rejected. Now, if a sense-content is a part of a sense-experience, then the relation of the former to the latter is that which holds between a part and the corresponding whole. This relation cannot be the same as the relation of the former to a logical construction. As Ayer says, "...When we refer to an object as a logical construction out of certain sense-contents, we are not saying ... that the sense-contents are in any way parts of it."⁶ So Ayer means that when certain sense-contents enter as *parts* into the construction of an object, the object is a non-logical construction out of them, whereas when they do not enter as parts into the construction of an object—though in some sense, they are able to construct the object in question, then the object is a logical construction out of them. This implies that sense-contents have two different relations to their objects. Their relation to an experience is different from their relation to a logical construction. Let us describe these relations as 'being the parts of' and 'being the elements of'. Thus sense-contents are *parts* of an experience but *elements* of a logical construction. This is supposed to imply that the notion of 'logical construction' is not applicable either to a sense-content or to a sense-experience. As Ayer says, "... one cannot significantly speak of a sense-experience, which is a whole composed of sense-contents, or of a sense-content itself as if it were a logical construction out of sense-contents."⁷ A sense-experience, therefore, can be described as a non-logical construction out of certain sense-contents.

Ayer wishes to remain Humean with a difference. For Hume the human self is as much a fiction as a physical tomato, he therefore reduces both of them into the occurrences of experiences. The only difference is that the human self involves in its construction certain experiences which are not involved in the construction of tomatoes and cigarette cases. For example, pleasure and pain are not ascribed to tomatoes and cigarette cases. They are ascribed only to the human self. Ayer wishes to give the sense content analysis to both human selves and tomatoes, yet also wishes to distinguish them. If tomatoes and cigarette cases are the logical constructs out of sense-contents, then the human self too should be the logical construction out of sense-contents. Consistency

demands it. Like Hume, Ayer considers self as a logical construction out of sense-experiences. And a sense-experience for him is a non-logical construct out of sense-contents. Sense-contents are parts of sense-experiences. One would feel that if self is a logical construction out of sense-experiences, it would mean the same as saying it is a logical construction out of sense-contents. Ayer has introduced a qualitative difference between sense-contents. The sense-contents which are parts of sense-experiences have to be distinguished from these sense-contents which are no such parts. Sense-contents which create the fictions of tomatoes and cigarette cases are not parts of experiences. If they are parts of experiences, then tomatoes and cigarette cases would become conscious. It is only in the case of the human self that sense-contents are parts of experiences. But in making them such parts the neutrality of sense-content is given up. To retain their neutrality, the sense-experiences themselves would become neutral, thereby converting the human self into a tomato or a cigarette-case. If a human self is not like a tomato or a cigarette case, then the neutrality of sense-content has to be given up. They would become subjective.

Though Ayer does not accept that sense experiences are logical constructions, for the sake of consistency he would very well have accepted that sense experiences are logical constructions out of sense-contents. Logical constructions can be arranged in a hierarchical order--primary logical constructions, secondary logical constructions and so on. Sense-contents may be taken as the elements of a primary logical construction. And by saying that an object is a primary logical construction it is meant that its elements themselves are not logical constructions. Following this convention one can define a sense-content as simple, in the sense that it cannot be analyzed further. It can be taken as the basic epistemological unit. And if a logical construction is a complex---if it can be analyzed further--then the sense-contents would be excluded from being logical constructions. To be logical constructions, sense-contents are required to be complex, which they are not. But none of these assumptions is applicable to the case of a sense-experience, for a sense-experience is complex because it is a whole 'composed of sense-contents'. It is possible to maintain that a self is a higher order logical construction of which the elements, i.e., experiences, themselves are logical constructions out of sense-contents. Self can be analyzed in terms of experiences, and experiences themselves can be analyzed in terms of sense-contents.

The immediate elements of a logical construction may themselves be logical constructions, as is the case of the object denoted by the word 'army'. An army is a logical construction out of this and that soldier, and a soldier is a logical construction out of this and that sense-content. There are several other objects which are higher-order logical constructions. An army, a nation, a club and a gang are higher-order logical-constructions. So, it is not essential that the immediate elements of a logical construction have gotto be sense-contents. However, it is essential that the ultimate analysis of all logical constructions must reveal sense-contents as their elements. "If we analyze a secondary logical construction, we arrive at the elements which are primary logical constructions. And if we go further, we arrive at the sense-contents which cannot be analyzed any further."⁸

The relevant question is about the qualitative difference between different logical constructions. If the self is a logical construction, the question arises (as expressed in the traditional terminology) how is the self-distinguished from the not-self, i.e., how is a person distinguished from, say, a tomato? In a sense there is no fundamental distinction between the two; the distinction is of secondary importance, for both of them are logical constructions. The distinction of one logical construction from another has been explained by Ayer in terms of sense-contents which are elements of these constructions. One logical construction is distinguished from the other, because at least some of the elements of one logical construction are different from the elements of the other, or, in case the elements are the same, the elements of one logical construction are related differently from those of the other. As Ayer says, "what differentiates one such logical construction from another is the fact that it is constituted by different sense-contents or by sense-contents differently related."⁹ And concerning the nature of sense-contents he says that they are neither mental nor physical. "...The distinction between mind and matter applies only to logical constructions."¹⁰ Ayer's explanation of the meanings of 'logical construction' and 'sense-contents' implies that the difference between the self and a tomato is as if merely a difference as to the sense-contents involved and the relations between these sense-contents. So, a self is not very different from a tomato. If the tomato's *physical occupancy* is a fiction, so is the self's *spiritual occupancy* a fiction.

II

The difference between Berkeley and the recent phenomenals is that phenomenals has been given a linguistic twist by our philosophers. A phenomenalist is not interested in the existential questions. His concern is not

to show that sense-data exist when a common man says that a material object exists. As Austin points out, the phenomenologists “are concerned with logical relations obtaining between two different *languages*, the ‘sense-datum language’ and ‘material object language’, and are not to be taken literally as concerned with the *existence* of anything.”¹¹ Phenomenologists of our time claim that a statement about a material object is translatable in terms of statements about sense-data. Such a translation is possible if the statement about a material object *entails*, as we have already pointed out while discussing Austin, sense-data statements.

For a singular material object statement, one requires many sense-data statements. No definite number of sense-data statements is possible. We have already seen while discussing Ayer that an empirical proposition that is not a basic proposition is only weakly verifiable. And it is weakly verifiable because the process of verification does not terminate; non-termination of the process implies that the sense-data statements which verify a given material object statement do not have a definite number. This means that a material object statement entails an indefinite number of sense-data statements. How then can a material object statement be equivalent to the sense-data statements? The equivalence presupposes definite numbers. Suppose a material object statement is ‘this is a table’. To translate this statement in terms of sense-data statements one says things such as ‘this is hard’, ‘this is coloured’...and so on. The expression ‘so on’ signifies that the translation requires an indefinite number of sense-data statements. But if someone requires an indefinite number of steps to achieve something, then it is recognition on his part that the goal cannot be achieved. If the translation of a material object statement in terms of sense-data statements requires an indefinite number of sense-data statements, then it is recognized that no such translation is possible. If a material object statement would genuinely entail sense-data statements, then the number of sense-data statements must be definite. So also, it is not possible to establish the equivalence of a material object statement with the sense-data statements because of the indefinite character of sense-data statements. This shows that the material object language is precise and the sense-datum language is imprecise. How can a precise language be translated into an imprecise language?

Statements about sense-data which are supposed to be entailed by a material object statement refer to both actual and possible sense-data. Talking about possible sense-data is talking in terms of hypothetical statements, so the translation in question would include both categorical and hypothetical statements. The categorical statements assert the existence of sense-data,

whereas the hypothetical statements only entertain their possibility. As Ayer remarks, “the inclusion of possible as well as actual sense-data among the elements of the material things must be taken only to imply a recognition that some of these statements about sense-data will have to be hypothetical.”¹² Consider the material object statement ‘this is a table’. This would be translated in terms of such sense-data statements as ‘this is brown’, ‘this is hard’ etc. The existence of the table has been described in terms of the occurrence of sense-data. Suppose I make a statement about the existence of an unperceived table, a statement such as ‘there is a table next door’. The logical nature of this statement is not at all different from the earlier statement about the table. The expression ‘there is’ performs the function of ‘this is’, both are categorical statements and both refer to the existence of a table. The only difference is that one of them asserts the existence of a perceived table and the other asserts the existence of an unperceived table. If ‘there is a table next door’ has to be translated in terms of sense-data statements, then those statements have to be hypothetical. One would be saying something like this: if someone opens the next door, then he would obtain sense-data connected with a table.

The difficulty is that a categorical statement cannot be equivalent to a hypothetical statement. A hypothetical statement is not meant for an unconditioned assertion of existence. Isaiah Berlin opposed the reduction of a categorical statement about the existence of a physical object in terms of the hypothetical statements about sense-data. As he points out, “Existential propositions expressed categorically--in indicative sentences--tend, as it were, to “point” towards their “objects”; and demonstratives which appear in existential propositions, like, “this is”, “there is”, “here we have”, often function as substitutes for such acts of pointing to things or persons or processes. The characteristic force of the categorical mode of expression is often exactly this--that it acts in lieu of a gesture, of an ‘act of ostension’, “Here is the book”, I say to someone looking for it, or I could point to it and say “the book”, and convey roughly the same information by both methods. But hypotheticals normally do the opposite of this. Hypotheticals, whatever they describe or mean, whatever they entail or convey or evince, in whatever way they are verified, or fail to be verified, do *not* as a general rule, directly assert that something has been, is being, or will be occurring, or existing, or being characterized in some way: this is precisely the force of the conditional mood.”¹³ Berlin means to say that reference to something that is occurring now cannot be reduced to something that would possibly occur if certain conditions were satisfied. Thus, the difficulty is not only that the number of sense-data statements is indefinite. There is an added difficulty created by the

possible sense-data. Corresponding to actual and possible sense-data are categorical and hypothetical statements. A categorical statement about a material object cannot be equivalent to hypothetical statements about sense-data. The linguistic turn that phenomenalism took has increased the difficulties in accepting phenomenalism.

III

We have shown above that most of the sense-datum philosophers give secondary importance to persons and material bodies. They consider them as some kind of fiction generated by the non-fictitious entities called sense-data. Sense-data have been given primary importance, material objects and persons secondary importance. Strawson succeeds in giving primary importance to those objects which were given no respect by the sense-datum philosophers. Strawson opposes the sense-data philosophers by focusing his attention on material objects and persons, showing that they are the primary or basic particulars, which have to be identified in order to identify anything else in the world. How can the priority of sense-data over material objects be accepted? Reference to sense-data presupposes reference to material objects. Price introduced sense-data with the help of a tomato. Similarly, Moore uses his right hand and Ayer his cigarette case. The 'tomato', the 'right hand' and the 'cigarette case' are the physical object expressions. So, they were already known before sense-data were known. This clearly shows that the existence of sense-data depends on the existence of material bodies, that material bodies are primary particulars and sense-data are the secondary particularism. So, the objects that are given secondary importance by the sense-datum philosophers have been given primary importance by Strawson, and those which have been given primary importance by sense-datum philosophers have been given secondary importance by Strawson. There is a clash of two metaphysical systems.

Strawson describes his metaphysics as descriptive metaphysics, whose function is to make explicit the structural features of human understanding. The kind of metaphysics with which he is involved is the kind of metaphysics that was done by Kant and Aristotle. He distinguishes his kind of metaphysics from the other kinds that he calls reversionary metaphysics. Sense-datum philosophy would appear as propounding reversionary metaphysics. One may object that sense-data philosophy is not involved in any metaphysics whatsoever. It is to eliminate metaphysics that Ayer evolved the verification principle, and Ayer is a sense-datum philosopher. But phenomenalism, to which sense-data philosophers are committed, itself is a metaphysical system.

Reducing everything to what is given in immediate experience is certainly a very attractive metaphysical move. An immediate experience is what is occurring here and now. If a sense-datum reports an immediate experience, then this would lead to momentary phenomenalism. So, a revision was made and the possible sense-data were introduced to make phenomenalism more enduring. The metaphysics of phenomenalism comes directly in conflict with Plato, for whom momentary objects have hardly any significance. Strawson constructs his metaphysical system by rejecting both Plato and phenomenalism. If Plato is committed to permanence, phenomenalism is committed to change. Both extremes are to be rejected. Strawson starts with the four-dimensional spatio-temporal structure, one temporal and three spatial dimensions. Material bodies and persons, who own material bodies, completely fit into this spatio-temporal frame. For a material body accommodates itself in all the three dimensions of space. And since it is found in this or that place, at this or that moment, the dimension of time is also satisfied. This would have created a difficulty if the persons were not owners of bodies.

Just as Russell makes sense-data the objects of acquaintance, Strawson makes material bodies objects of acquaintance. Of course, he does not use the expression acquaintance, he invents his own idiom. He does not say we are acquainted with material bodies. He says that we *identify* material bodies directly. Just as Russell uses demonstratives like 'this' and 'that' for exhibiting his acquaintance with sense-data, Strawson uses these demonstratives for identifying material bodies. However, one's reference to material bodies cannot always be in terms of demonstrative identification. Demonstrative identification is possible only in the presence of the object. But we also refer to objects which lie outside our experience. As Strawson says, "But now consider the case where demonstrative identification, in the sense I have given to this phrase, is not possible, because the particular to be identified is not within the range of those sensibly present. What linguistic means of identification are available to us? it may seem, in the non-demonstrative identification of particulars, we depend ultimately on description in general terms alone."¹⁴ These remarks echo Russell's distinction between knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge by description. Where acquaintance fails, we have only knowledge by description. For Strawson, where demonstrative identification fails, we have to resort to descriptions. And just as Russell connects knowledge by description to knowledge by acquaintance, Strawson maintains, "The situation of non-demonstrative identification may be linked with the situation of demonstrative identification."¹⁵ Russell too links descriptive knowledge to knowledge by

acquaintance. In this connection we must remember that Russell considered 'names' as disguised descriptions. So, using a name is as good as using a description. Strawson exhibits Russell's influence on his thought also when he says, "A name is worthless without the backing of descriptions."¹⁶

The only significant difference between Russell's view and Strawson's is that Russell accepts sense-data as primary particulars whereas Strawson accepts material bodies as primary particulars. By using demonstratives 'this' and 'that' Russell succeeds in picking out only sense-data. But by using the same demonstratives Strawson succeeds in picking out material bodies. Consider the following analogy: a hunter is in search of a tiger. He observes a striped colour-patch, he aims his gun at that colour-patch, and fires. The tiger is dead. This means that the hunter knows very well that the colour-patch is identical with the skin of the tiger. So, firing at the colour-patch would lead to the killing of the tiger. Would the Strawsonian hunter do anything else? Would he be observing the tiger directly in order to aim at it and consequently to kill it. If he wishes to fire after ascertaining whether the striped colour-patch does or does not belong to the tiger, then he may not get a chance to kill the tiger.

There is every likelihood that the tiger may kill the hunter when he is busy in ascertaining whether the striped colour-patch does or does not belong to the tiger. Russell's hunter is far more intelligent than the Strawsonian hunter. Even if we ultimately succeed in identifying material bodies, we cannot escape the prior identification of colour-patches, noises, smells etc.

Strawson succeeds in eliminating sense-data by introducing the condition of re-identification of a particular which was identified earlier. Unless a particular is re-identified it cannot function as a primary or a basic particular. Re-identification presupposes the continued existence of an object, even if we do not perceive it. Since a sense-datum cannot be re-identified, it cannot be sensed twice, it cannot be considered as a primary particular. Only material objects and persons can satisfy the condition of re-identification. Therefore, only they can function as primary or basic particulars in Strawson's ontology. To ensure that sense-data never acquire the honor that is given to the material bodies and persons, Strawson introduces the distinction between independent identification and dependent identification. If a given particular 'x' depends for its identification on the particular 'y', then 'y' is a primary particular and 'x' is a secondary particular. According to Strawson, sense-data are the particulars of the dependent type, hence they can never become primary particulars. He says, "The dependent type is the class of what might be called 'private particulars'-- comprising the perhaps overlapping groups of

sensations, mental events and, in one common acceptance of this term, sense-data. The type on which it is dependent is the class of persons.”¹⁷ Strawson has clearly converted sense-data into private particulars, i.e., they are particulars which occur to a given person and are restricted to that person. All this follows from the definition of a sense-datum. Strawson is aware of the fact that sense-data are primary particulars according to sense-datum philosophers. He turns the tables against the sense-datum philosophers. As he remarks, “On other criteria than the present, private experiences have often been the most favored candidates for the status of ‘basic’ particulars; on the present criteria, they are the most obviously inadmissible.

IV

The principles of individuation of such experiences essentially turn on the identities of the persons to whose histories they belong. A twinge of toothache or a private impression of red cannot in general be identified in our common language except as the twinge which such-and-such an identified person suffered or is suffering, the impression which such-and-such identified person had or is having. Identifying references to ‘private particulars’ depend on identifying references to particulars of an altogether different type, namely persons.”¹⁸ Strawson is sufficiently clear. Since identification of sense-data depends on the person to whom they appear, the sense-datum philosophers are wrong in considering sense-data as basic particulars. They are particulars of the dependent type.

It is through introduction of the concept of re-identification that Strawson has tried to meet Hume’s skepticism. For Hume, the objects that occur in one observational stretch are numerically different from the objects that occur in the succeeding observational stretch. Each stretch of observation would have its own spatial system. Strawson shows that Humean doubt is self-refuting. As Strawson remarks, “Each new system would be wholly independent of every other. There would be no question of *doubt* about the identity of an item in one system with an item in another. For such a doubt makes sense only if the two systems are not independent, if they are parts, in some way related, of a single system which includes them both.”¹⁹

So Humean doubt makes sense only in a unitary spatial system. But his doubt is aimed at the production of multiple spatial systems. As Strawson argues against Hume that “his doubts are unreal, not simply because they are logically irresolvable doubts, but because they amount to the rejection of the whole conceptual scheme within which alone such doubts make sense.”²⁰ Thus Strawson succeeds in refuting skepticism.

Though Russell and Moore were responsible for introducing sense-data for the first time, they did not give up material objects. More attention was paid by Price for trying to see whether sense-data coincide with the surfaces of material objects. It is only at the stage of Ayer that sense-data became quite independent and self-sustaining. Material objects were converted into pure fiction. Austin subjected Ayer's views to exhaustive criticism. But he had no metaphysical system of his own.

He took the help of language analysis. Strawson builds up his own metaphysical system to counter the metaphysics to which sense-datum philosophers were committed. He attempted to show that the Humean doubts are self-refuting. For the 20th century philosophers Hume stands as the only skeptic worth considering. So refuting Hume is considered as refuting skepticism. Strawson refutes Hume to enable us to discover external reality.

To conclude: the sense-datum theory has failed to account for its validity because it failed provide reductions of the objects to sense-data. The material objects and the persons or selves have reasserted their primacy in our conceptual system as Strawson has amply proved. Phenomenalism as a metaphysics is too revisionary to be accepted at all.

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⁸ See Urmson's, "The Impossibility of Reductive Analysis" in *Philosophical Analysis*, Chapter 10. Pp. 147 – 162.

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