

LETTER

7 SEP 2025

1

Just read a Marxist paper online (not without its virtues) by David DeGrood (don't know anything about him) that mentions Mill's phenomenalistic *idealism*. He imitates caustic manner of Marx in *The German Ideology*. A good book, but Marx does not slay the glowing *core* of Stirner.

DeGrood gives himself a way when he calls Mill an idealist. Lenin wrote a forgotten book against Mach's empiriocriticism. Caught up in political-heroic roleplay, these critics miss the point. Theory is bent to The Cause. Mach is an "idealist" because I can't be bothered to understand him. Because he lacks the proper *piety*.

The attempt to explicate empirical objects *empirically* in terms of situated perception is *impious*. What such critics miss is the eliminativism involved. Consciousness does not exist. This is phenomenalism. And yet this is called idealism. As if matter is reduced to mind. Instead the the old dualistic confusion about "mind" and "matter" is replaced with an economical and sturdy explication. Which few understand.

Phenomenalism is no longer "ingredient ontology." It is post-dualist. Post mind-and-matter. That is its virtue. It is more materialistic than idealist. Or a successful fusion of the virtues of both. We share the world. Objects don't always do what we want them to do. Objects are given through particular nervous systems. More exactly, perception is situated. Belief too is situated. We learn to employ inherited sign systems. Philosophy grows out of the ordinary practical life. Our sharing the world through language is taken for granted.

When people call Mill an idealist, I suspect they are passing on gossip. That they haven't read his book on Hamilton. If empirical objects are interpersonal possibilities of sensation, then

streams of experience “meet” in objects. *Experience is constituted by pieces of objects.* That is of course an oversimplification. A perception is a piece of the empirical object. *And* a piece of the stream of experience. The objects of the world are splintered. So we have object *splintered* ontology.

As I wrote elsewhere, my work is close to Harman’s. I also emphasize the “transcendence” of objects, relative to those special objects, namely empirical “subjects.” Consciousness, for me, is no kind of internal stuff. Not a ghost in a machine. But the being or presence of the world. The situated “presencing” of a situation in the world that tends to be organized around the body of the object that is “conscious.”

In practical terms, the world is left unchanged. I can starve, fall from a skyscraper. Phenomenalism is a careful explication of the way *we already live* with and discuss these “physical” objects.

2

Mach and Mill are *secular* thinkers. You don’t hear them celebrated by “reactionary” spiritual types. These spiritual types often like genuine idealism. They want people to *reduce* the physical to the mental. Because they are against the materialistic secular worldview. Because they believe perhaps in a personal God or something more abstractly divine that secular types refuse to take seriously.

Berkeley is something else. His immaterialism remains valid enough, but his subjective idealism just replaces matter with God. The critiqued Matter that was supposed to hide behind things was a mystification. A newfangled mystification. Berkeley preferred the original and pointed out the nonsense in the new stuff.

Metaphysical realism is a generalized scientistic monotheism. It assumes *one* system of a “real” truthmakers. The very notion of truth as something beyond strong belief is metaphysical and theological. I see scientism as an anti-scientific ideology that

mystifies science.

3

But I don't think the world runs on such theoretical niceties anyway. Phenomenalism or "ontoperspectivism" resolves a prominent confusion. But this confusion is relatively harmless. Phenomenalism won't save the world. Indirect realism is confused way of talking about what one is doing in practical life. This confusion is not filtered out because no one much acts on it. Those who defend indirect realism in a philosophical conversation go on to *live* a belief in their access to the things themselves.

What spiritual types and "Marxists" have in common, when they critique theoretical philosophy, is the unworldly assumption that this stuff *matters*. The world does not turn on the issue of mind and matter. Perhaps it matters whether people believe in an afterlife of punishment and reward.

But how does one *measure* belief? I suggest that some people "believe in God" the way that others claim to endorse indirect realism. How do these people *live*? Those who claim to trust in an afterlife cry at funerals. Sure, we can cry for grief, because we lose access to that loved one for now. But only for now. So the story goes.

To believe that story in "serious" way would be to experience death as a mere interruption in the relationship, as if someone moved to another country for a few years. But we are all immortal, right? What's a few decades of absence? What indeed is our entire life down here? If one "really" believes?

On the other side, we have the "indirect realist." The mystique on this side is directed at a "true reality" that is beyond even all *possible* manifestation. The truthmaker is out there, even if we live forever without contact.

Indirect realism also allows for a post-Christian supernaturalism. If consciousness is a "non-physical" stuff that we are trapped in, then we get the drama of Plato's Cave. We get Hoffman's stuff.

Is it coherent ? No. Does that matter ? No. The consumer is in the market *for* mystification. We are bound by our desire to bind. What we need is a secret for special people only.

Phenomenalism does not offer a grand narrative. It doesn't block them. The world's transcendence with respect to this or that person is maintained. It is not even directly atheistic, even if atheists are perhaps more likely to endorse it.

Is it anti-mystical ? I'd say it's anti-mystification. Its "fusion" of subjects and objects *echos* mysticism. But this is an echo of content and not style. Perhaps mysticism is best thought of as a *style of comportment* toward others. It's more about the way the content is presented than the content itself.

Logical positivists, who sometimes embraced phenomenalism, are often taken to admit the "objectivity" of physical claims and exile spiritual claims as a matter of taste. Let us grant that this is at least a crude rendition of a "positivistic" pose, often called "scientistic," that is alive and well.

The crude positivist says that morality, for instance, is a matter of taste. In contrast to "objective" reality. What our positivist forgets is that perception is situated. I come to take certain "sense contents" as constituting a public object because *other people also recognize it*. If 99 out of 100 people see the "same" lights in the sky, then those 99 will not label their own "sense contents" as a hallucination. The one who didn't see the lights is in a tough situation. Does he need his eyes checked ? Or have the others lost their minds ? And so on.

I call this kind of forgetting the situatedness of perception "the hard problem of the physical." People talk as if they knew what they meant by "the physical." In one sense, they do. But this is their *tacit* phenomenalism. The couch I can sit on is "physical." But philosophers use "physical" for something obscure too.

Scientistic philosophy is often accidentally anti-scientific on this issue, because it is anti-empirical and mystified. Scientism involves a *piety*. Does science involve its own piety ? Perhaps. But

it's a different piety, directed at the way that humans treat beliefs with respect to one another. Scientistic piety is directed toward metaphysical truth-makers. Taking itself as anti-theological, it merely indulges in a rival theology, which reminds me of deism. But this scientistic deism reduces God to divinely transcendent pseudo-physical truthmakers.

4

Ingredient ontology is the game of saying what everything is “really made of.” If you want afterlife and the traditional supernatural, you tend to argue for Mind as this ingredient. If you want Matter, the situation is more complicated.

Feuerbach is one of my favorite philosophers, and he was in some sense a materialist. But he's a sober and even existential “materialist.” This innocent version of materialism does without metaphysical realism. Instead it emphasizes the “transcendence” of objects in the world we share. It is anti-idealistic. The world is outside *me* and a world outside *you*. But phenomenism is materialistic in this sense.

As Ayer saw and emphasized, phenomenism is not “measurably” or “pragmatically” different from metaphysical realism. It is simply not so confused about perception. Metaphysical realism is a mystification. But secular metaphysical realists only disagree with Ayer on a theoretical explication of perception. Not necessarily on a general scientific sense of the world.

I was myself an indirect realist for many years. I just absorbed it. It's a confused theory, but no one lives it. And it allows for a delusive sense of sophistication. I didn't believe in ghosts, except for the *official* ghost of representational consciousness.

Now I might side with the eliminativists if they weren't blind to the problem of the physical. Phenomenism allows for a plausible story about everything being “physical.” Radical pluralism is better, but basically one can repurpose the ontological difference. Consciousness is being, and “the physical” is things that

are. But these physical things are splintered and arranged to constitute the streams of “consciousness” associated with those apparently rare physical things that “have” this “consciousness.”

The details aren’t so hard to work out when the general strategy is assimilated. I’ve gone into these details elsewhere.

Phenomenalism might be so marginal because it’s just hard for people to think outside of ingredient ontology, outside of dualism. As I see it, many philosophers are wrestling with problems that have been solved for a long time now. This solution (phenomenism) isn’t a mathematical proof. Nor is it mathematically precise. Nor is it even finished. The solution can be refined, as it was refined in the move from Mill to Ayer. Phenomenalism is also greatly enriched by its assimilation of phenomenology. My work is something like the enrichment of Mill and Mach by Heidegger and Husserl.

What phenomenism adds to a grasp of phenomenology is an adequate big picture. Heidegger indicates his phenomenism in his discussion of Leibniz, though he doesn’t call what he’s doing phenomenism. I use “ontoperspectivism” as another name that emphasizes Leibniz’s perspectivistic monadology. Phenomenism is “ontological” perspectivism. Husserl’s concern with bracketing is a distraction which suggests dualism. But his presentation of objects as systems of adumbrations is potent, and helps us understand Leibniz and Mill. With Heidegger, we get a relentless critique of dualism and the myth of the subject as bubble of representation. Heidegger also calls our attention to the ontological difference. This is a huge help, for it allows us to understand consciousness as important and yet not a thing or a stuff. Consciousness is exactly the being of the world. So it is not found as a particular being in the world.

I should not forget to mention William James, who is equal to any thinkers so far in this context.