

Phenomenalism

Scott O'Connor

Metaphysics: Phil 205

October 2, 2017

Introduction

Things must be a certain way for us to have any experiences of them. For instance, things must have color and shape for us to see them, they must be spatially separated from us and other things if we are distinguish them from one another and from ourselves, etc. Let us call the features and relations that things must have for us to perceive them *phenomenal properties*. Metaphysicians have been interested in the following question:

- Do we experience things *because* they have phenomenal properties, or do things have phenomenal properties *because* we experience them?
- Compare: Is piety good *because* God loves it, or does God love piety *because* it is good?

We shall call *phenomenalists* those who believe that things have phenomenal properties because we experience them. It is a view that Aristotle attributes to Protagoras:

...all things believed [ta dokounta panta] and [all] appearances [ta phainomena] are true' (1009a8).

'The things that appear to us' (ta phainomena) are things as they appear to our senses, i.e. the contents of our sense perceptions. The 'things that we believe' (ta dokounta) are general things as we believe them to be, i.e. the contents of our beliefs in general. We can believe things that we do not sense and *vice versa*

Phenomenalism (PHEN): Anything that appears thus and so to someone, and anything that someone believes to be thus and so, is thus and so (i.e. all appearances and all beliefs are true).

Distinguish the following two claims:

1. For *some* property F, an object O is F because O appears F to someone.

2. For *any* property F, an object O is F because O appears F to someone.

The first claim says that objects have just some properties because of how they appear to us. The second claim says that any property an object has is explained by how it appears to us. PHEN makes the second claim. The schematic argument for PHEN:

- P1. No object has an essence.
- P2. If no object has an essence, then we cannot speak and think about things.
- P3. But we can speak and think about things.
- P4. We can speak and think about things if they have an essence because of how they appear to us (even if they have no essence independently of how they appear to us.)
- C. Therefore, things have an essence because of how they appear to us.

P1. Essence

The word 'essence' is from the Latin word 'essentia', which was coined to translate a phrase invented by Aristotle, 'to ti en einai.' This roughly translates as 'what it was for something to be.' He introduced it to describe the stable natures that changing beings have over time. The phrase was then extended to discuss the natures of non-changing beings. For our purposes, we will define *essentialism* as the conjunction of the following two claims:

- Each thing belongs to some kind K such that if that thing ceases to be a K, it will cease to exist...e.g., Socrates dies if he ceases to be human, Flipper dies if he ceases to be a dolphin.
- For every kind K, there are a unique set of individually necessary conditions that are jointly sufficient for membership of that kind, e.g., being rational and being an animal are each necessary conditions for being human. They are also jointly sufficient for being a human; anything that satisfies both is a human and nothing is a human that does not satisfy both.

Some standard objections to essentialism:

1. It is possible for objects to change kinds without ceasing to exist, e.g., Lot's wife, some fish, werewolves, etc.
2. There are no necessary and sufficient conditions for kind membership, e.g., species evolve, amputees are still members of their kind, etc.
3. Belief in essentialism leads to prejudices.
4. Things change always and in every way, and nothing is constant about them.

P2. Essence and thought/language

For not to signify one thing [a unitary thing, a determinate thing] amounts to not signifying anything at all. (Aristotle)

1. To think and speak about something is to think and speak about one thing as opposed to another, e.g., to think and speak about Socrates is to think and speak about Socrates as opposed to something else.
 2. In order to think and speak about one thing as opposed to another, we must be able to indicate what distinguishes the thing that we are thinking and speaking about from other things, e.g., to think and speak about a cloud we must be able to indicate what distinguishes the cloud from other things.
 3. In order to distinguish the thing that we are thinking and speaking about from other things, we must either indicate one of its accidents or its essence.
 4. We can only distinguish one thing from another by indicating one of its accidents if that thing also has an essence.
 - a) If A is an accident, then A is predicated of some subject S.
 - b) If A is predicated of S, then S must be a determinate subject, e.g., friendliness is predicated of some individual person.
 - c) If S is determinate, then S must have an essence.
- C If an object does not have an essence, then we cannot think and speak about it.

Moral: thought and language about things is possible only if they have essences, e.g., I can think and speak about x only if there is some essence E such that x is E.