

# Isaiah Berlin and Radical Empiricism<sup>1</sup>

I first heard of Isaiah Berlin sometime in the late 1960s when I was studying philosophy at the University of Chicago and became interested in the problems of epistemology. There was a beautiful anthology of the best recent articles on this subject, or at least as restricted to sense-perception which turned out to be what I was most interested in. This anthology, published in 1965, was edited by Robert J. Schwartz and called *Perceiving, Sensing, and Knowing*; and it contained the paper “Empirical Propositions and Hypothetical Statements” by Isaiah Berlin, originally published in *Mind* in 1950. This is the paper I’ll touch on here, but first I want to say that only much later did I realize all of the following: that Isaiah Berlin wasn’t just a run-of-the-mill analytic philosopher discussing problems of empiricism; that in fact epistemology was just one of his many interests; that actually there are no less than two Berlins; and that the more important one, at least in his own eyes from the 1950s onwards and certainly those of posterity, was the one we’ve been mainly discussing at this conference so far: that is, Isaiah Berlin the philosopher of history and the historian and critic of political, social, and cultural ideas; something he was very good at, probably better than anyone else in the middle of the last century and trained in the British analytic philosophical tradition.

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<sup>1</sup> This is an amended version of a paper read at *In Praise of Plurality: An International Conference in Honor of Sir Isaiah Berlin (1909-1997)* hosted by the Department of Social and Political Theory and the School of Political Science and Diplomacy at Vytautas Magnus University, Kaunas, Lithuania, on Nov. 7, 2009.

## PREMATURE BURIALS

But he was very good at the epistemology of sense-perception, too; something evident, for example, from his unpublished lectures on George Berkeley (entitled “Berkeley’s Theory of the External World”), which I’ll also comment on. Now one theme common to both some of these Berkeley lectures and the paper “Empirical Propositions and Hypothetical Statements” that I just mentioned is phenomenalism, a doctrine which may also be called radical empiricism and which Berlin aimed to criticize. In the very first sense of that paper he proclaims: “It is becoming the fashion among empiricist philosophers to assume that phenomenalism is really dead at last.” But a few sentences down he continues: “if phenomenalism is dead, the memory of it still haunts the writings of modern discussions of the nature of the external world to a surprising degree; from Eddington's notorious two desks, to the more refined and penetrating analysis of better equipped philosophical authors, it makes its presence clearly felt, usually taking the form of a sharp distinction; now between observation statements and those concerning material objects; now between two or more senses of the verb ‘to see’; at other times between ‘basic’ or ‘protocol’ sentences and those of ordinary speech; or between various ‘modes’ of speech; or between ‘strong’ and ‘weak’ verification. Such versions of it are almost always formally guaranteed to carry no ‘metaphysical’ implications; nevertheless their striking resemblance to the older discredited variety is hard to overlook. Hence, an examination of its latest manifestations is not such a flogging of a

dead horse as at first it may seem to be; for if it is dead, its ghost walks, and should, if possible, be laid.”<sup>2</sup>

In the rest of his now classic (and in any case forcefully argued and elegantly written) 1950 paper Berlin attempts to do just that: to lay the ghost of phenomenalism. But 12 years later, in 1962, the American philosopher Wilfrid Sellars attempts to do pretty much the same thing, saying, “Once again, as so often in the history of philosophy, there is a danger that a position will be abandoned before the reasons for its inadequacy are fully understood,”<sup>3</sup> thereby implying that Isaiah Berlin may have criticized phenomenalism for the wrong reasons, and that he, Sellars, will now do it for the right reasons. But yet another decade later, the British philosopher Anthony Quinton, in 1973, not only implies that Sellars is in some respects mistaken in the way he criticizes phenomenalism but declares outright that Berlin is in error; and of course gives his own reason for thinking that phenomenalism is false.<sup>4</sup> A bit earlier, in a 1969 British Academy lecture entitled “What’s Really Wrong With Phenomenalism?”, it was J. L. Mackie that had done so; and there were many others like him.

The debate still continues today, although in the last 40 years or so it has lost the intensity and fire that characterized earlier periods, a fire evident in such remarks as Elizabeth Anscombe, a very feisty philosopher, made in 1961: “I always hated phenomenalism and felt trapped by it. I couldn’t see my way out of it but I didn’t believe it. It was no good pointing to difficulties about it, things which Russell found wrong with it, for example.

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<sup>2</sup> [berlin.wolf.ox.ac.uk/published\\_works/cc/empiric.pdf](http://berlin.wolf.ox.ac.uk/published_works/cc/empiric.pdf) p. 32.

<sup>3</sup> “Phenomenalism”, in *Science, Perception and Reality*, (Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd; London, and The Humanities Press: New York; 1963), p. 60. Sellars’s paper was first presented at the Wayne State University Symposium in the Philosophy of Mind in 1962.

<sup>4</sup> See Anthony Quinton, *The Nature of Things* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, London and Boston, 1973), pp. 174-177; 203-05.

The strength, the central nerve of it remained alive and raged achingly. It was only in Wittgenstein's classes in 1944 that I saw the nerve being extracted, the central thought "I have got *this*, and I define 'yellow' (say) as *this*" being effectively attacked."<sup>5</sup> So now it's Wittgenstein that has the treatment, the 'medicine', as Anscombe says a bit later in the same text, for the disease of phenomenalism.<sup>6</sup>

But what is this thing, it's high time to ask at last, what is this thing called phenomenalism or radical empiricism that all these philosophers aim to refute, to declare dead, and to bury; although it keeps on rising from the dead, and walking?

## STANDARD PHENOMENALISM

Roderick Firth, one of those who believed it was true (I was lucky to be able to take a course from him at Harvard) defined radical empiricism as the thesis "that the meaning of any statement about the physical world can be expressed, at least in theory, by a conjunction of other statements which refer only to sense-data (sensible appearances)"<sup>7</sup> or, as Isaiah Berlin puts it, to "data of actual or possible direct sensible acquaintance, past, present and future, on the part of real or possible observers ('sensible' is here used in the widest sense—to cover all states, activities or dispositions capable of being studied by empirical methods)."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> G. E. M. Anscombe, *Metaphysics and the Philosophy of Mind* (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1981), p. viii.

<sup>6</sup> Anscombe never explains, in a way I can understand, how this 'central thought' cures or even bears on phenomenalism.

<sup>7</sup> "Radical Empiricism and Perceptual Relativity", in John Troyer (ed.) *In Defense of Radical Empiricism. Essays and Lectures by Roderick Firth* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., Lanham, Boulder, New York, Oxford, 1998), p. 63.

<sup>8</sup> berlin.wolf.ox.ac.uk/published\_works/cc/empiric.pdf p. 33

So the idea is that (1) there are these sense-data, or sensible appearances, or data of direct sensible acquaintance ('sensible' here means, putting Berlin's point a little but not much differently, 'apprehensible by the senses of sight, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, and feeling') as well as statements about these data, and that (2) statements about them are equivalent in meaning to statements about physical objects. That's phenomenalism, or at least one (the standard) sort of it.

Let's clarify this by means of an example. Suppose it's night, a pleasant clear spring night, and you're out in the countryside, looking at the sky, and you see lights, lots of them, and you say, "Oh, what a beautiful night sky, there's so many stars out"; but now you see one of the lights moving and think: oh no, that's not a star, it's a falling meteor; but no, we're not in Latvia, so it's probably not a meteor, it looks more like it could be an airplane moving now that night flights have resumed out of Kaunas; but wait a minute, they haven't really, there have never been night flights out of Kaunas—so what could it be? Is it the nutty neighbor far out there playing with his strobe lights, the one that wanted to rent out his field and shed for rave parties? And there's another light much further down and it's steady; is it a star like so many others, or is it the light on a distant neighbor's barn?

So we have all these lights, still or moving, and we can't really doubt we see them, they're there, they're directly observed, but what we can initially doubt, what we don't yet know pending further empirical investigation is, What physical phenomenon are these lights—lights *of*? What are they *caused by*? What physical object might they be *identical with*?

So, on the one hand, we have (1) all these lights, still and/or moving (these are the sense-data), and we have (2) statements about them (these are the observation statements expressed by so-called basic or protocol

sentences); and, on the other hand, we have (3) physical objects, say, stars in the sky, strobe lights, meteorites, barn lights; and, of course, all the objects close-by: for instance, the grass I'm standing on, the pole I'm leaning against, my car there to the right (objects we dimly see at night, and fully in day-light), and we have (4) statements about these physical objects.

And now suppose we ask, How are these two sorts of statement related? The phenomenalist answers as follows. He claims (a) that type-(4) statements about physical objects are identical in meaning with type (2) statements about actual and possible sense-data, about actual and possible objects of observation; (b) that the latter statements are both categorical but also (and mainly) hypothetical in form; and (c) that they are entirely hypothetical for objects that have already existed before there were any observers on earth and for parts of objects that, even if there are observers around, no one does actually observe.

For example, no one observes my heart, or my liver now, or his, or hers, or anybody else's in this room; or, for that matter, anybody's in the whole wide world—unless some person's heart or liver is being operated on this very minute in China or Argentina, for example. But that doesn't mean that the insides of our bodies do not exist even if no one is seeing or feeling them. They do exist, but according to the phenomenalist that's just to say that if some surgeon opened up parts of our bodies, she would see what's in them: that's what it means there are unseen body parts: if somebody looked, they'd see them. And if we had existed about a hundred million years ago, we would have seen dinosaurs: that's what it means to say dinosaurs existed about a hundred million years ago. At least that's what phenomenologists from George Berkeley through John Stuart Mill down to the logical positivists and

some non-positivist Anglo-American philosophers in the 20<sup>th</sup> century have claimed.

## CATEGORICALS AND HYPOTHETICALS

Berlin firmly opposes phenomenalism on the grounds, it appears, of his allegiance to (common sense, anti-idealist) metaphysical realism, which is the view that there is an external world, a physical reality independent of any conscious beings or their observations, thoughts, convictions, or feelings. He makes this clear when he says that “the view that nothing can in principle be significantly said to occur without explicit and implicit reference to observers is a major fallacy which rests on failure to distinguish between the causal propositions of natural science or common sense and propositions about meaning.”<sup>9</sup> His case against phenomenalism centers on the claim that it tries to reduce actualities (expressed by categorical statements) to possibilities (expressed by hypothetical statements). This, according to him, cannot be successfully done: no categorical statement can be analyzed in wholly hypothetical terms. In other words, statements to the effect that “things or events existed, or exist, or will exist, or were, are, or will be, characterised by this or that characteristic”<sup>10</sup> (these are categoricals) cannot be analyzed in terms of what “might exist or would exist, or would have existed”<sup>11</sup> if certain conditions of observation were realized; that is, if observers looked at the right place at the right time (these are hypotheticals).

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<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*, p. 54.

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*, p. 55

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*

But why not? As Anthony Quinton says, “ ‘This piece of sugar is soluble’ is plainly categorical but it is exactly equivalent in meaning to the hypothetical ‘if this piece of sugar is put in water it will dissolve’.”<sup>12</sup> And many other such examples can easily be given. For example, the categorical statement “People are largely dissatisfied with the current Lithuanian administration” is roughly equivalent to the hypothetical statement that if people were given the opportunity most of them would vote for a change of, or in, the Lithuanian government.

Thus it seems that some categorical statements can, after all, be analyzed in wholly hypothetical terms. Part of the reason Berlin thinks they cannot is that he believes that a hypothetical statement “may be true and yet nothing exist at all.”<sup>13</sup> But why does he believe such a thing? He claims that categoricals (to repeat) “state that things or events existed, or exist, or will exist, or were, are, or will be, characterised by this or that characteristic; and not that something might exist or would exist, or would have existed”; and then adds that the truth of the latter (hypothetical) proposition “is logically compatible with the non-existence of anything whatever.”<sup>14</sup>

But can hypotheticals really be true even though nothing at all exists? I am inclined to agree with Quinton when denying Berlin’s claim he says that “hypothetical statements must have, as it were, a categorical basis. In the first place every hypothetical, whether simple (if  $p$  then  $q$ ), counterfactual (if  $p$  had been the case then  $q$  would have been) or explanatory ( $q$  because  $p$ ), presupposes the acceptance of a general statement which there can be no reason to accept inless it either has positive confirming instances itself or is derived from some yet more general statement with positive confirming

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<sup>12</sup> Anthony Quinton, *The Nature of Things* (Rouledge & Kegan Paul, London and Boston, 1973), p. 175.

<sup>13</sup> berlin.wolf.ox.ac.uk/published\_works/cc/empiric.pdf p. 50

<sup>14</sup> ibid., p. 55.

instances. If a hypothetical form of words is to make a statement, true or false, something must exist, then, to provided the essential confirming instances.”<sup>15</sup>

Quinton goes on to say that this “rules out Berlin’s objection. The phenomenalist can answer that his hypotheticals have their categorical basis in observed correlations between actual impressions [by ‘impressions’ Quinton means ‘sense-data’]. Unless there are some actual impressions no hypothetical can be asserted as true. But there is an embarrassing consequence for phenomenism in that it renders the hypothesis of a material world which is never perceived by anyone, in which there is no sentience whatever, unintelligible.”<sup>16</sup>

This is an essential point about phenomenism. What Quinton’s criticism of Berlin, if justified, shows is that phenomenism needs the claim that the material world is always perceived by someone (e.g., God). In his unpublished lectures on George Berkeley (who indeed advances a theistic kind of phenomenism) Berlin, too, makes this point: “Indeed it is all too clear that Berkeley’s God is not due to theological bias on his part, but is desperately necessary to prop his system as he expounds it.”<sup>17</sup> In Berlin’s eyes, far from making phenomenism plausible, this is yet another point against it.

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<sup>15</sup> Quinton, p. 175-176.

<sup>16</sup> Quinton, p. 176.

<sup>17</sup> berlin.wolf.ox.ac.uk/lists/nachlass/berkeley.pdf p. 44.

## CONCLUSION

But there are other eyes, different from Berlin's. For example, the recently deceased Oxford philosopher John A. Foster spent much of the last three decades in developing and defending a Berkeleyan type of phenomenalism.<sup>18</sup> Now it's important to emphasize that the phenomenalism Foster champions is not the standard sort we've been discussing and Berlin hoped to bury. This standard sort may also be called the translation thesis or analytical phenomenalism, for it simply holds that claims about physical objects can always be translated, or analyzed, into claims about our sense-data, sensations, impressions, and suchlike. Foster, like Berlin, Quinton, and most other contemporary and recent philosophers, holds that such translations simply aren't and won't be forthcoming. The reasons they give are more or less different but their conclusion is the same: standard phenomenalism is just false.

Nevertheless Foster, supported by exceedingly strong arguments, thinks that unless some sort of phenomenalism is true, we will not be able to explain both that we perceive the physical world and that we have knowledge about it. If so, this means that other versions of phenomenalism will have to be found and formulated; and that's exactly what Foster has done in developing what he calls reductive phenomenalism and also what John Bolender seeks to accomplish in expounding his factual

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<sup>18</sup> His most important books include *A World For Us: The Case for Phenomenalistic Idealism* (Oxford University Press, 2008); *The Nature of Perception* (Oxford University Press, 2000); *Ayer* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985); and *The Case for Idealism* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982).

phenomenalism.<sup>19</sup> A non-standard phenomenalism much along Fosterian lines has also been developed by Howard Robinson.<sup>20</sup>

The failure of standard phenomenalism doesn't spell the failure of empiricism, even the radical empiricism that William James in his *The Meaning of Truth* explicated (somewhat differently from Firth) as consisting "first of a postulate, next of a statement of fact, and finally of a generalized conclusion. The postulate is that the only things that shall be debatable among philosophers shall be things definable in terms drawn from experience," the fact is that relations are just as directly experienced as the things they relate, and the conclusion is that "the parts of experience hold together from next to next by relations that are themselves parts of experience."<sup>21</sup> I think that Isaiah Berlin would agree, if not with all of this, then at least with the postulate: he was an empiricist and certainly believed that "the only things that shall be debatable among philosophers shall be things definable in terms drawn from experience"; and in fact he applied this postulate to his discussions of political theory, as Gintautas Mažeikis, for one, reminded us in his response to one of the papers at this conference.

So what Isaiah Berlin teaches us is that those who do not accept his wholesale rejection of radical empiricism in the Firthian sense (phenomenalism) must look for better versions of it, which is exactly what the few philosophers still left defending it are doing.

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<sup>19</sup> John Bolender, "Factual Phenomenalism: A Supervenience Theory". *Sorites: An Electronic Journal of Analytic Philosophy* (1998) vol. 9: 15-30.

<sup>20</sup> in his *Perception* (Routledge, 1994).

<sup>21</sup> William James, *The Meaning of Truth*, Authorama.com

## ISAIAH BERLINAS IR RADIKALUSIS EMPIRIZMAS

### Santrauka

Nors I. Berlinas (1908-1997) svariausiai pasireiškė kaip istorijos filosofas ir filosofijos, kultūros ir visuomenės idėjų istorikas bei kritikas, jis paliko ryškių pėdsakų ir empirinio pažinimo teorijoje. Kai kuriuos iš jų šiame straipsnyje ir apžvelgiame. Vadovaudamasis britų analitinės filosofijos metodais, I. Berlinas kritikavo loginį pozityvizmą ir ypač fenomenalizmą, kitaip dar vadinamą radikaliuoju empirizmu. Pastarasis – tai tezė, kad teiginius apie išorinius, fizinius reiškinius galima išversti į tam tikrus teiginius apie psichinius, dvasinius reiškinius. Straipsnyje aptariamos problemos, su kuriomis susiduria kai kurie bandymai, įskaitant I. Berlino, radikalųjį empirizmą pakirsti. Baigiama išvada, kad jeigu, priešingai I. Berlinui, nenorima metafizinio idealizmo atsisakyti, būtina ieškoti sveiko proto kritikai atsparesnių radikaliojo empirizmo variantų.