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BOOK SYMPOSIUM

Worlds, Voyages and Experiences: Commentary on Pelczar's Sensorama

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1. Introduction

Mill believed that the physical world is nothing more than potential for experience. The existence of a banana in my fruit basket consists (at least roughly speaking) in nothing more than the fact that I would experience this banana were I to look in the basket. The same is true for the existence of anything else in the physical world. Needless to say, this radical form of idealism has not caught on; it is widely believed that there are insurmountable problems that any attempt to develop the position will face. So it is surprising, and refreshing, to find that Michael Pelczar has devoted an entire book to developing and defending a version of the Millian idealist metaphysics. Has he succeeded in finding a defensible version? Here, I'll try to briefly explain why I think his version is still highly problematic, despite his ingenuity in constructing and defending it.

Pelczar's view is actually more radical than Mill's, because unlike Mill, he thinks that the potential experiences that constitute the physical world are not in space or time (even when they are actual and not merely potential). Mill allowed experience to exist in time, if not in space. Pelczar's project therefore has two phases. First, he argues that, despite initial appearances, we have no strong reason for thinking that conscious experiences exist in time, and moreover a satisfactory metaphysics of extended streams of consciousness can be given without supposing experiences to be temporal. Then, in the second phase, he explains how we can construct the spatio-temporal physical world out of these experiences, so understood. The rough idea here is to appeal to what Pelczar calls 'experiential voyages': experiences that a hypothetical conscious being who travelled over the whole of space-time would have. The physical world consists in a set of potential experiential voyages.

I want to comment on both the first and second phase of the project, starting with the first phase (which is very interesting independently of its broader purpose).

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2. *Do we have evidence that experience is temporal?*

Pelczar thinks that the main objection to his atemporal view of consciousness will be that we have very strong prima facie evidence that experience *is* in time, evidence that it will be hard to find convincing defeaters for. His strategy is to argue that, in fact, we have no prima facie evidence at all that experience is in time, and so an atemporal view at least deserves a place on the table.

Pelczar thinks that if we have evidence that consciousness is in time, it comes from our experiences of events changing over time, such as visual experiences of motion, or auditory experiences of temporal patterns of sound. He argues that these experiences do not give us reason to believe that experience itself is in time, even if they present other kinds of events as in time. His strategy is to argue that at least some experiences of environmental events changing do not themselves involve change in experience; experience of change does not always involve change in experience. But we have no way of distinguishing unchanging experiences of change from those, if any, that do involve experiential change. Therefore, we have no introspective reason for thinking that experience *ever* changes, or that experience is even in time at all.

I have argued elsewhere that experience of change does not necessarily involve change in experience,[1] so I am very sympathetic with one of Pelczar's main claims here (although I do not find his route to it compelling). But we might question his further assumption that the only prima facie evidence, we have for experiential change is from experiences of external changes. For one, I would argue that in perception we are often consciously aware of more than just environmental objects and events: we are also aware of ourselves actively exploring the environment by shifting our attention around and moving our gaze. Some of this perceptual exploration involves moving our bodies and sense-organs but some of it – in particular shifts in attention – involves *purely psychological change* that has no perceptible correlate in a physical object changing. And these psychological changes are clearly something we can be aware of.[2]

Second, there might be strong prima facie evidence that experience is in time, that doesn't come from introspecting our current experiences. What about the evidence we get from episodic memory that we had experiences in the past? And what about the correlations between physical events and experiences we observe? Our experiences seem to be caused by external physical events, and we have evidence from neuroscience that they correlate strongly with events in the brain. Doesn't that give us strong reason for thinking experience itself is in time?

1 Lee (2014b).

2 For a little more on this point, see Lee (2014a).

It turns out that, in the end, Pelczar has available a blanket response to any such argument; however, it doesn't come until late in the book (194–95) and is only very briefly developed. He points out that once we have constructed the physical world from potential experiences, we will be able to find correlations between actual experiences and neural events in people's brains, much as we would under a more conventional metaphysics. Even though, on the idealist metaphysics, experiences cannot be reduced to, or even caused by, these physical events, they are nonetheless systematically correlated with them. This means that experiences can be said to be 'in time' in a derivate sense – they can be thought of as inheriting their temporal locations from their neural correlates.

With derivative experiential timing in place, he could argue that any evidence we seem to have that experience is in time doesn't distinguish between experience being *directly* or *derivatively* in time. I think that in this context, this is a more convincing way to argue that we don't have prima facie evidence that experience is in time than the arguments presented in the first part of the book – indeed I think it would make those arguments redundant. I wonder why this is not the line he takes, given that he makes it available to himself.[3]

3. *Pelczar's account of experiential unity*

The next part of Pelczar's story is his atemporal account of what unifies different experiences into a stream. If the physical world is constituted by potential experiential voyages, and experiential voyages are streams of consciousness, we need an account of what a stream of consciousness is, including an account of what unifies (atemporal) experiences into a stream. Here, he appeals to two relations, 'phenomenal integration' and 'constitutional integration', both of which do not involve time or causation. Phenomenal integration is the relation two experiences stand in to each other when there is some overlap in the way they present or represent the environment as being. Constitutional integration is the relation two experiences stand in to each other when they literally overlap – they share some experience as a part.

Is Pelczar right that these relations are enough for stream unity? I doubt it, although I think this account, or any other account he might offer in this context, is going to be a little hard to assess, for two reasons:

3 It's true that this would require developing an idealist theory of neural correlation. What he offers us here is not convincing. The account he briefly sketches is that a series of physical events realizes a series of experiences just if there a mapping between them on which each experience makes its physical correlate highly probable. But surely this probabilistic relation is not sufficient – for example, my observing food in the fridge might make it highly probable that I went shopping recently but my recent shopping is not a neural correlate of my fridge experience. Nonetheless, it doesn't seem to me implausible that a better idealist theory of neural correlation could be developed.

First, many of the reasons we have for thinking that experiences in a stream are typically linked in causal and spatio-temporal ways probably depend on the assumption that experience exists within space-time and is realized in the brain. But that is not an assumption we are entitled to make here, given that we are arguing about the viability of Pelczar's idealism. But there might be a limit to what we can say completely a priori about the nature of phenomenal unity. For example, for all I know a priori, it might be that there is simply a primitive unity relation that binds the stream together that cannot be further analysed. I'm not attracted to this view (which Dainton has argued for) but not for a priori reasons.[4] (I also doubt whether adding in introspection as a further source of evidence is going to make much difference here.)

Second, if you think that experience is realized in a fairly messy way in the brain, you might be sceptical about whether there is any one simple relation that experiences in a single 'stream' stand in to each other. There might be lots of different kinds of connections that exist between adjacent experiences in a typical human stream of consciousness, and it may be very unclear which, if any, are essential for sequential 'unity'. Pelczar thinks he needs a neat unity relation to regiment potential experiences into the streams that make up his potential 'voyages'. That may be so (although see below) – but the existence of such a relation is hardly an uncontroversial starting point. I think he is better off taking it as a *postulate* of the theory that there is some relation that bundles potential experiences into sequential streams. Maybe we don't know what the relation is, or maybe it is primitive. It's not clear to me that this would be such a bad move to make; but if he makes it, there may be less need to defend the particular account of unity he offers us.

And that would be just as well – because I don't see that there's much independent positive reason to accept that either phenomenal or constitutional unity is necessary for experiences to belong to the same stream. In the case of phenomenal integration (the sharing of content between adjacent experiences), we might wonder whether actual human streams are always integrated in this way, let alone all possible streams. Take visual experience: we are constantly re-foveating from one target to another; why think that this doesn't cause a failure of 'integration' in the visual stream? In general, how do we know that human experience in other modalities doesn't involve a similar kind of resetting that causes a failure of 'integration'? It seems to me that if we discovered that this kind of resetting was common, we wouldn't conclude that there was radical discontinuity in the stream, because there would still be other kinds of connections (e.g. memory connections) between stages unifying them together.

What about mereological overlap? What should we make of the claim that this is the secret ingredient that unifies experiences in the stream? Pelczar here

4 For Dainton's arguments (2000).

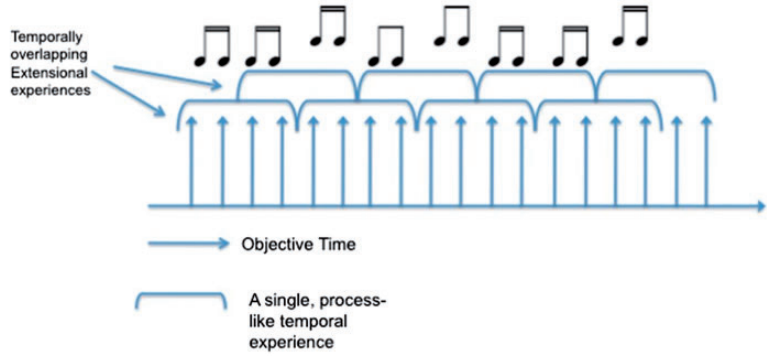

Figure 1. The overlap model.

is inspired by Barry Dainton, who holds a similar 'overlap' model of phenomenal unity (Figure 1).[5]

Overlap is supposed to be independently motivated for two reasons: (i) It would explain 'phenomenal continuity' – the feeling of one experience flowing into the next and (ii) if we don't postulate such an overlapping structure, we end up with a view that suffers from the 'repeating content' problem. And of course it's handy for Pelczar, because it is not a temporal notion.

It's actually very obscure what the feeling of phenomenal continuity is,[6] but whatever it is, I can't see how it would be explained by overlap. For any sequence of overlapping experiences (E_1, E_2 … E_N), we can consider an alternate sequence (E'_1, … E'_N), such that E_k and E'_k have the same phenomenology; the difference is that there is no mereological overlap in the alternate sequence. It seems clear that by stipulation all the phenomenology captured in the first series is also captured in the second; so overlap is just not the kind of thing that can explain phenomenology.

Against this, Pelczar will respond that a non-overlapping model of the stream of consciousness *can* be ruled out for phenomenological reasons (despite the argument just given), because it leads to the 'repeating content' problem: supposedly, the E′-series would involve an apparent stuttering that the E series wouldn't. Imagine, for example, hearing a sequence of sounds that are close together in time. You might have one experience that takes in the first two, and then another experience that presents the second and the third. On the overlap model, your experience of the second note can be a shared part of these two broader experiences, whereas without overlap, we will have to say that there are two separate experiences of the second note. Allegedly, this means that there will be a stuttering or repeating of the second note in experience (Figure 2).

5 See Dainton (2000), Lee (2014b) and Lee (2014a) for more discussion.

6 See Lee (2014a) for more detailed discussion.

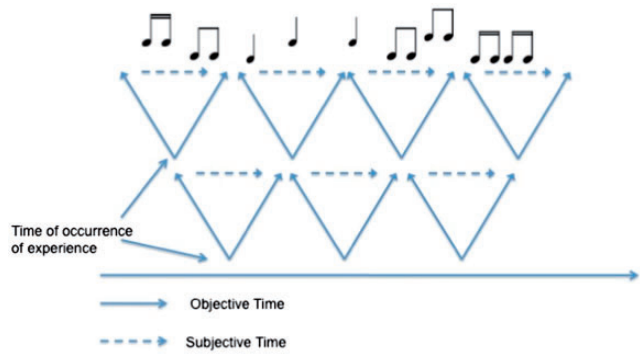

Figure 2. Stream without overlap.

I have to confess I've never seen the force of this objection. The E′-series does not contain a first-order experience of stuttering. Neither is there any reason to think that the ordinary operation of memory would give us an appearance of anything repeating. Ordinary memory here means iconic memory, working memory and whatever other psychological memory systems integrate information across time post-perceptually: and of course there's no reason why any of those would generate a 'stuttering' appearance: their goal is to form accurate representations of how events in the external environment are playing out over time, and that does not include any stuttering. Why is this supposed to be a compelling problem? If there's no problem here, then I'm not sure there's any independent motivation for thinking that there is mereological overlap between experiences of the kind Dainton believes in, let alone that it's the kind of thing that could explain phenomenal continuity, and constitute phenomenal unity.

Again, maybe in the end none of this matters, because Pelczar could simply take the existence of an atemporal unity relation as primitive postulate, and not commit to this particular account. I suggest that these problems ought to push him in this direction.

4. *A world of potential?*

Finally, let me say a few things about the second phase of the project where Pelczar puts his atemporal streams of consciousness to work in constructing the physical world.

Can the physical state of the universe be recovered from the set of potential experiential voyages that could be had around it? Obviously, the notion of an experiencer traversing the whole of space-time and observing everything involves considerable idealization, to put it mildly! We're not talking about a human observer presumably – almost all of the universe would simply be too

inhospitable for them to observe anything, one would assume; for example, there is no way to recover the state of the surface or interior of the sun from the observations that would be made up close by a human. But, surprisingly, we are not told much about the kind of idealization on our observer we are supposed to imagine. Pelczar's idealized observer seems to be not maximally idealized. In particular, Pelczar spends much time addressing the concern that some things will be imperceptible to them, and so cannot be directly recovered from experiential voyages. And the fact that the observer has a body is taken as a serious problem, to which Pelczar gives a cunning solution. But why not just idealize these problems away, by considering a super-observer who is able to perceive micro-states that are imperceptible to us, or who does not need a physical body to move around and observe (this is not unreasonable given that the observer already needs a physically impossible body that can allow observation of environments like the centre of the sun, and that can time travel to allow for complete space-time coverage). In fact, once we are playing the game of considering an idealized observer, why require that the potential experience take the form of a sequential experiential voyage around the universe? Why not just consider a potential experiencer who can take in the entire state of space-time in a single experience? In this way, we might end up with a Berkeleyian version of the view, on which the physical state of the universe is constituted by a single potential experience – the experience that a Berkeleyian god would have, were they to exist.

Once we see that the potential experiences have to be highly idealized, there is another problem that becomes salient – what explains the experiences that actual, non-idealized humans have? I think Pelczar regards them as simply realizations of the experiential potential that grounds everything, but clearly things are not so simple, because what are realized are unreliable, often misleading experiences that differ considerably from anything our potential voyager would experience. Relatedly, given that there is so much experiential potential in the world, why is it that only a tiny amount of it is actually realized? What explains the existence of the experiences that are actual and not merely potential? I would like to understand better how Pelczar would answer these questions.

Finally, I think that Pelczar overestimates the theoretical virtues of his idealist position. I think he regards the global reduction of everything to potential experience as having a beautiful theoretical simplicity that would make the theory attractive if it could be pulled off – that is, if something like our ordinary vision of the physical world could be recovered from his potential experiences. But the theory does not have any such theoretical virtues. The collection of many potential voyages, each of which involves a different experiential path through space-time, is surely a vastly more complex basis for reality than a single physical space-time system would be. Worse, there will be many correlations between the different potential voyages (since they present the same physical events) that must remain completely unexplained,

since unlike on a conventional metaphysics, they have no categorical ground that unifies them – everything is pure potential. Excessive complexity and a plethora of unexplained correlations are exactly the kind of features that make a theory unattractive, of course.

Pushing towards a more idealized observer would again help here: if reality is constituted by the one potential experience of an all-seeing deity, then we really do have an elegant and simple account (we wouldn't even have to suppose that the deity exists, although their existence would at least have to have some potential!). The lesson of this intriguing book might therefore be that, for all his metaphysical radicalism, Pelczar has not gone far enough in his attempt to find a defensible idealism.

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