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Limits, Perspectives, and Thought

JOHN SHAND

I

Imagine a universe without human beings. Now imagine a universe devoid of any creatures like human beings, beings who could think about the universe and in so doing consider it as divided up into different kinds of things that could be objects of understanding. Now imagine - this is harder - *your* not being there, or anyone else, to imagine such a universe. Next think about setting about describing in physical laws such a universe in line with a completist physicalist program: that all the facts about the world are physical facts. But where would one begin? Why would one begin? Remember there is no-one around to take more interest in any part of the universe than any other. This contrasts with what we do now. What we do now is take chunks of the universe - stars, planets, water, trees, air, particles - and demarcate the physical laws in such a way as to explain how these objects behave against a background of other objects and ultimately the universe as a whole. But what if we were not around? Why would there be any reason to demarcate groups of physical laws in this or any other way? My suggestion is that there would be none. The grouping of the physical laws to form complex classes and layers of explanations (how trees and water are related; how planets move as part of a solar system) is parasitic upon creatures having particular interests giving them a perspective ('perspective' is being used here in a somewhat technical sense) upon the universe or world, which in turn derives from the kind of limited creatures they happen to be. But the perspective itself is not a physical fact about the universe. Rather it is a way of coming to form a system of facts about the universe. Further, not only might the perspective have been otherwise, there might be none at all. In which case the demarcation of physical laws, given *meaning* by their application to entities picked out as having a certain significance to us, would not get off the ground. At best there might be a random bunching of laws covering regions of the universe. But such random bunchings would have no meaning; they would be unintelligible; they wouldn't really be *about* anything. For laws to be about things you have to have limited creatures who differentiate between parts of the universe, and for whom different parts have a variable significance and value. Things stand out for them; they literally *exist*.¹ Without such creatures, things we take for granted would, in the literal sense, not exist. It is the very limitedness of our perspective and capabilities, such that things are problems for us, and wherefore we literally or metaphorically bump into things, that brings objects into existence for us. Otherwise the universe would be utterly 'flat' and undifferentiated. A limitation of perspective is required for there to be objects of thought, and thus for thought itself. Thus, the intelligibility of the laws of physics is logically parasitic upon our having varying interests in different segments of the universe.

Physicalists, it is contended, presuppose or help themselves to the way the world divides itself up for us in being able to group the laws such that they are about something. But the way that the world divides up is not a physical fact about the world, but rather a

matter of, and dependent upon, our interests and our caring about some things rather than others, for whatever reason. In other words, physicalists draw upon and assume our capacity to pick things out in the world and give them significance, and then say, look, there is nothing but physical facts *there*. But this is disingenuous. Why demarcate a certain set of physical laws at all? That we do it one way rather than another isn't itself a physical fact at all, but rather a matter of perspective born of the kind of creatures we are.

Take trees. We as humans have an interest in trees for all sorts of reasons. But there is no intrinsic reason why all the trees on the earth should be regarded as separate from the earth out of which the trees grow. It's perfectly conceivable that there might be an entity conceptualised as a tree-earth. We don't do that (usually) because we have a reason and interest in separating the two. There are bunches of physical laws that describe regions of the universe; but you could rearrange these into different sets *about* other entities as a result of creatures with different interests. But if there are no creatures with any interests, you wouldn't have any reason to group the laws into sets at all; at best if you did so gather them they would be meaningless and arbitrary groupings. Physical laws are built on a scaffolding of *logically* prior significances, which derive from human beings paying attention to some things more than other - a perspective, a point of view - without which there would be no objects (considered in its broadest sense) for the laws of physics to apply to. Without such logical prior discrimination we wouldn't have any motivation to carve up the universe at all; in which case there would be nothing for the laws of physics individually or in complex groups to be about. There would indeed be nothing for us to think about.²

Take particles. Even these³, to be the subject of a physical law, have to be differentiated from their background and from other particles. There is nothing about physical laws themselves that could determine that physical laws have to concern themselves with particles. They might be conceptualised as part of a larger entity that included the background. We are interested in particles for all sorts of reasons; that is why we formulate laws about their characteristics and behaviour.

Consider the scientific investigation into the origin of the universe. For it to be an object of scientific inquiry, an inquiry into the laws that may have governed such a event or process, there have to be creatures for whom the answer to such questions matter and have significance. Furthermore, the very notion of a universe, indeed of anything, having a *beginning* or for that matter an *end* is a product of creatures who have an interest in the beginnings and ends of things. The *beginning* (or end) of something is not itself a physical fact, for to mark some point as a beginning (or end) is not something that may be derived from a physical description of the events alone. The transition from *one thing to another* depends upon creatures who care that the demarcation is made *there*. There is nothing intrinsic about events that mean that it need be made where it is so that something finishes and something else starts - as far as the events are concerned in themselves it is a meaningless sequence of 'just one damned thing after another'⁴ - in fact even to demarcate determinate things here is going too far without paying our debt to creatures who delineate objects. A beginning or an end is not a physical fact; they are not intrinsically physical concepts at all; and yet physics would be impossible without them.

In sum, physicalists *give meaning* to a set of physical laws being *about* something by helping themselves to a referent that is not demarcated by physical laws. This is where the parasitic nature comes in.

What does this show? It does not show that physicalism is false. But it does show that it is incomplete.

Surely, it will be said, the universe *divides itself up* into meaningful chunks to which the physical laws apply. It's easy to think this given the habitual way we think, and how our interests permeate every aspect of our view of the universe. We are so used to how the universe seems to us that it is hard for us to imagine it seeming any other way. But a stretch of the imagination shows how it could be all have been very different, or such demarcation not there at all. The way we think about the world seems so utterly natural to us that we think all too easily that that how it seems to us reflects how the world divides itself up. But again, we can see that the way that it divides itself up is a product of our interests and concerns: our perspective. As a consequence we could have an entirely different set of physical laws relating to objects in the universe, or, if there is no perspective, no set of physical laws describing the universe at all, for nothing would be differentiated in such a manner that the laws have anything meaningful to grab onto as their referent.

Returning, by way of example, to the discussion of the concepts of a *beginning* and an *end*, it was said that they are not intrinsically physical concepts. I might have chosen any number of other concepts, which I shall call *facilitating concepts*. It is important to be clear about what 'intrinsically' means here. Of course it may still be true that in describing the beginning and the end of something we can use only physical facts and physical laws - but *that it is* the beginning and the end of something that the physical laws are describing is not something that you find among the physical facts or physical laws - *that* depends on a prior demarcating of a segment of the universe. The *meaning* of 'beginning' or of 'end' cannot be derived from any number of physical laws. The transition makes sense only from the point of view of creatures for whom it matters, and without which the event just prior to the 'beginning' and just after the 'end' would give no intrinsic reason to mark a distinction. This distinction may be made in various ways - in time, in space, with reference to certain characteristics - but in all cases it depends upon our being interested to chop up things in particular way.

The upshot of all this is that physicalism needs to acknowledge its debt to logical prior facilitating concepts without which it couldn't even begin, concepts which gain their sense only because there are creatures that have a *limited perspective* on the universe (world) that involves, for whatever reason, their paying variable attention to events, and in so doing their ordering them in such a way that they are given significance, and, in a sense, only in that way exist at all. Such facilitating concepts cannot be reduced to physical laws, and this contradicts the completist claim of physicalism that a *complete* description of the universe would involve *only* physical laws. The ability to carry out such description depends, contrary to what physicalist often claim, on a perspective - a view from *somewhere*, for a view from nowhere would be no view at all, and no view at all would give nothing for the laws of physics to be about. The contrary view carries the taint of hubris, albeit tacitly, that there is some ultimate perspective that is logically equivalent to no perspective at all; a lingering shadow of religion perhaps, suggesting that we may take up something like a God's-eye perspective. We could not *do* physics without being creatures for whom the universe is *not* a place where everything is of equal significance and that would instead be presented to us as one indiscriminate homogeneity; physics requires creatures for whom the universe is separated into significant and

meaningful parts through their caring about some aspects of it more than others. And that requires creatures with limits who generate a perspective. Without that, there would indeed, be no motivation to start thinking about anything at all⁵.

II

It may be objected that my argument is akin to a blatant idealist fallacy. First, one may point out that the argument here is not motivated by the metaphysics of idealism. The way in which objects acquire significance and meaning for us is one that derives from our engagement and interests in the world - our way of being-in-the-world - not from a disinterested, possibly disembodied, mental contemplation as some empirical idealists⁶ might suppose. Setting that aside this as a misinterpretation, there is something to be learnt from looking at the classic rebuttal of empirical idealism. Usually the idealist argument goes like this: in conceiving of an object existing unconceived one is obviously conceiving of it, therefore it is impossible for an object to both exist and be unconceived.⁷ To put it another way, in thinking of the possibility of objects existing unthought of one would in fact tacitly, at least, be thinking of those objects, so they would not be unthought-of objects but thought-of objects, and in thinking of unthought-of-objects, this could not be otherwise. Therefore, objects cannot exist without being thought of. Now it might be thought that the refutation of this is obvious⁸. This is that, while it is impossible for a object to exist unconceived at the same time as it is conceived of, this does not show that there cannot exist an unconceived-of-object at other times. A chair cannot exist unkicked at the same time as it is kicked, but that does nothing to show the impossibility of an unkicked-chair. In the same way there is no problem with there being an unthought-of-chair. But this, I suggest, is a too swiftly draw a conclusion.

Insofar as the object is *characterised and delineated* it is essentially linked to a perspective. The chair is rather a revealing example. It wouldn't make any sense to say there were chairs in the world if there were not objects related functionally to certain creatures in the way that chairs were. Of course that functional relation, at least as a necessary condition, is sitting down. No sitting down, no *chairs*.

It may be thought that this point at best applies only to objects that get their definition partly, at least, through their functional relations. But the central contention here is that this is not so. That a set of characteristics group to form an object cannot be derived from those characteristics themselves alone; there is nothing about those characteristics that means the supposed object should not bleed into its environment and become quite a different object. That it does not is because there are creatures who set boundaries. The distinction between functional relations and the relation to the concern of creatures to order their environment according to their interests, and from a certain perspective, is in fact spurious. It's the same thing essentially.

In the sense required to be an *object of thought*, a *mere* object cannot be an object of thought. When we think of an object we always think of it *as* a certain kind of object delineated by characteristics. A bare 'object' cannot be an object of thought because it would not be being thought of *as* anything. This holds even if we are mistaken as to what the object of our thought is. Regardless, the object is always characterised in *some* way; *as something*. It is in this sense that objects depend for their existence on a thinker - reminding ourselves that this means a creature who is engaged in the world and has a

variable range of discriminating interests and values born of limitations in its capabilities, not just a mere omniscient contemplator for whom, in fact, thought would have no reason to get started. As objects thought of in a certain way objects depend upon a thinker with a limited perspective and capabilities. Bare 'objects' cannot be objects of thought at all and are unintelligible; there would be nothing for the thought of them to be a thought about, and so we cannot have thoughts about them. They could not exist as objects for us.

Physicalism thus depends upon creatures with a limited perspective, and not as it sometimes purports, to be concerned with objects-in-themselves as they would be regardless of any perspective. Without a limited perspective, there would be no objects for the laws of physics to be about. To get off the ground physics required, and continues to require, the logically prior facilitating concepts that may be derived only from the limited outlook of a creature with discriminating values and interests.

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¹ The literal sense deriving from the Latin *existere* to stand out.

² This, it seems to me, may be obliquely connected to Hume's famous phrase that 'Reason is, and ought only to be, the slave of the passions' *Treatise* II.3.3 415. For it applies not only to ethics, but to our thinking about the world in general: some things need to in fact matter to us more than others. So we might make Hume's dictum stronger: 'Reason is, and has to be, the slave of the passions.' Reason alone would never give a motivation to start thinking about anything at all, nor in fact stop thinking and build limits to that thinking. This in turn is connected to the so-called 'frame problem' in artificial intelligence. See Robert de Sousa, *The Rationality of Emotions* (Cambridge MA and London: The MIT Press, 1987), and *Why Think?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). There are of course also deep connections with the tradition of existential phenomenology here, as found in Heidegger, Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, which I don't have the space to explore here.

³ I say this, as they are not the usual examples of what gets called 'medium sized dry goods'.

⁴ To adapt the phrase 'Life is just one damned thing after another' by the American author Elbert Hubbard (1856-1915). The phrase is taken to mean the way that we shape our lives in a *meaningful* sequence of events. Some think this may be done to excess with grand theories of history, as found in say Hegel or Marx, and counter by saying, at least as a corrective to extravagance, that history is just one damned thing after another.

⁵ It may indeed be claimed that God thinking about anything is a contradiction, for if thinking about things requires a limited perspective, then God thinking about the world would involve placing limits on him - there would be points of view and ways of understanding about the world that were not available to Him - which stands in clear contradiction to what is usually regarded as His omniscient nature. So either, one might argue, God can't think - what could possibly motivate an all-powerful being for which nothing was an obstacle or problem, creating no differential of interest? - or there is no God in the usually unlimited sense. We are left with either an unthinking God or a limited God. Neither horn of this is attractive, and so either could stand as a refutation of the existence of God as usually defined.

⁶ By 'empirical idealist' I am of course referring to what has been taken to be the view of Berkeley. I shall not enter into the controversy over the historical accuracy of this position, but rather pursue it for its philosophical interest regardless.

⁷ See Berkeley *Principles*, para. 23.

⁸ It gets a forceful and succinct presentation in J. O. Urmson, *Berkeley* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982) p. 45.