

Russell, Moore and the New Realists

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Sense-data

In his *Problems of Philosophy*, Russell introduces “sense-data” in the following way:

Let us give the name of ‘sense-data’ to the things that are immediately known in sensation: such things as colours, sounds, smells, hardnesses, roughnesses, and so on. We shall give the name ‘sensation’ to the experience of being immediately aware of these things. Thus, whenever we see a colour, we have a sensation of the colour, but the colour itself is a sense-datum, not a sensation. The colour is that of which we are immediately aware, and the awareness itself is the sensation. It is plain that if we are to know anything about the table, it must be by means of the sense-data – brown colour, oblong shape, smoothness, etc. – which we associate with the table; but, for the reasons which have been given, we cannot say that the table is the sense-data, or even that the sense-data are directly properties of the table. Thus a problem arises as to the relation of the sense-data to the real table, supposing there is such a thing. (Russell 1912: 17)

This distinction between sense-data and sensations is also made by Moore:

...I propose to call these things, the colour and size and shape, *sense-data*, things *given* or presented by the senses – given, in this case, by my sense of sight. Many philosophers have called these things which I call sense-data, *sensations*. They would say, for instance, that that particular patch of colour was a sensation. But it seems to me that this term ‘sensation’ is liable to be misleading. We should certainly say that I *had* a sensation, when I saw that colour. But when we say that I *had* a sensation, what we mean is, I think, that I had the experience which consisted in my *seeing* the colour. (Moore 1953: 30)

The term’s meaning was supposed to be neutral between direct and indirect realist theories of perception, so that it was not to be assumed either that sense data must by definition be mind-dependent or that they must be mind-independent. This was important for Russell’s project of ‘constructing’ the external world out of sense-data:

Logically, a sense-datum is an object, a particular of which the subject is aware. It does not contain the subject as a part ...The existence of the sense-datum is therefore not logically dependent upon that of the subject ...There is therefore no a priori reason why a particular which is a sense-datum should not persist after it has ceased to be a datum, nor why other similar particulars should not exist without ever being data. (Russell 1914: 146)

Sense-data are epistemologically privileged, in that they are the only things which I not only know by description, but am acquainted with:

I say that I am acquainted with an object when I have a direct cognitive relation to that object, i.e. when I am directly aware of the object itself. When I speak of a cognitive relation here, I do not mean the sort of relation which constitutes judgment, but the sort which constitutes presentation. (Russell 1911: 209)

Acquaintance with sense-data yields indubitable knowledge of *objects*; illusions are impossible:

And what my analysis of sensation has been designed to show is, that whenever I have a mere sensation or idea, the fact is that I am then aware of something which is ...not an inseparable aspect of my experience. The awareness which I have maintained to be included in sensation is the very same unique fact which constitutes every kind of knowledge: “blue” is as much an object, and as little a mere content, of my experience, when I experience it, as the most exalted and independent real thing of which I am ever aware ...Merely to have a sensation ...is to know something which is as truly and really not a part of my experience, as anything which I can ever know. (Moore 1903: 27)

The first thing to notice is that there are no such things as “illusions of sense.” Objects of sense, even when they occur in dreams, are the most indubitably real objects known to us. What, then, makes us call them unreal in dreams? Merely the unusual nature of their connection with other objects of sense ...Objects of sense are called “real” when they have the kind of connection with other objects of sense which experience has led us to regard as normal; when they fail this, they are called “illusions.” But what is illusory is only the inferences to which they give rise; in themselves, they are every bit as real as the object of waking life. (Russell 1914: 92–93)

The Phenomenal Principle

Sense data theorists have often held it to be intuitively obvious that when we are directly, perceptually aware of something, that thing must have the properties that it appears to have. (

Robinson (1994: 151) provides the following argument, a “combination of the original causal argument and the argument from hallucination”:

It is clearly true that

1. “It is theoretically possible by activating some brain process which is involved in a particular type of perception to cause an hallucination which exactly resembles that perception in its subjective character.
2. It is necessary to give the same account of both hallucinating and perceptual experience when they have the same neural cause. Thus, it is not, for example, plausible to say that the hallucinatory experience involves a mental image or sense-datum, but that the perception does not, if the two have the same proximate – that is, neural – cause.

These two propositions together entail that perceptual processes in the brain produce some object of awareness which cannot be identified with any feature of the external world – that is, they produce a sense-datum.”

Neutral Monism

Influenced by William James, the American “New Realists” took this a step further, claiming that my consciousness is “out there with the cow”:

We have become wedded, or indeed welded to the phrase – my thought is of an object – when we ought to say and mean – my thought is a portion of the object – or better still, – a portion of the object is my thought: – exactly as a portion of the sky is the zenith. (Holt 1914: 149)

If, as Aristotle said, ‘thought and its object are one,’ so are sensations and perceptions one with their ‘objects.’ In fact, there are not sensations or perceptions and their objects. There are objects, and when these are included in the manifold called consciousness they are called sensations and perceptions. (Holt 1914: 219)

In his *Theory of Knowledge* manuscript (1913), Russell explains the view in the following way:

“Neutral monism” – as opposed to idealistic monism and materialistic monism– is the theory that the things commonly regarded as mental and the things commonly regarded as physical do

not differ in respect of any intrinsic property possessed by the one set and not by the other, but differ only in respect of arrangement and context.

The theory may be illustrated by comparison with a postal directory, in which the same names come twice over, once in alphabetical and once in geographical order; we may compare the alphabetical order to the mental, and the geographical order to the physical. The affinities of a given thing are quite different in the two orders, and its causes and effects obey different laws. Two objects may be connected in the mental world by the association of ideas, and in the physical world by the law of gravitation. [...] Just as every man in the directory has two kinds of neighbours, namely alphabetical neighbours and geographical neighbours, so every object will lie at the intersection of two causal series with different laws, namely the mental series and the physical series. 'Thoughts' are not different in substance from 'things'; the stream of my thoughts is a stream of things, namely of the things which I should commonly be said to be thinking of; what leads to its being called a stream of thoughts is merely that the laws of succession are different from the physical laws. (Russell 1984: 15)

Russell later claimed that "sensations are what is common to the mental and physical worlds; they may be defined as the intersection of mind and matter" (Russell 1921: 144). As a neutral monist, he denies the duality of act and object – "the patch of colour and our sensation in seeing it are identical" (Russell 1921: 143) – and hence the possibility of an act of experiencing not directed at any object is impossible.

These objects, however, are irreducibly perspectival. The perspectivity of perception is built into its very definition:

...we may define a "perception" of an object as the appearance of the object from a place where there is a brain (or, in lower animals, some suitable nervous structure), with sense-organs and nerves forming part of the intervening medium. (Russell 1921: 131)

When a mental occurrence can be regarded as an appearance of an object external to the brain, however, irregular, or even as a confused appearance of several such objects, then we may regard it as having for its stimulus the object or objects in question, or their appearances at the sense-organ concerned. When, on the other hand, a mental occurrence has not sufficient connection with objects external to the brain to be regarded as an appearance of such objects, then its physical causation (if any) will have to be sought in the brain. In the former case it can be called a perception; in the latter it cannot be so called. But the distinction is one of degree, not of kind. (Russell 1921: 136)

The porcupine objection

Robinson defends the criticism by Price that the neutral monist view turns an ordinary object into an "infinitely various porcupine, which is not merely here in this room (as we commonly take it to be) but sticks out as it were in all sorts of directions and to all sorts of distances ..." (Price 1932: 56). He points out that

- not all variations in appearance are due to perspective: "If I take off my glasses everything becomes blurred. Are we to assume that there are blurred sensible waiting to be perceived by someone not only in my location, but with exactly my degree of short-sightedness?" (Robinson 1994: 46)
- the theory cannot provide for the unity of things seen: "...it is difficult to see how an elliptical sense-datum could be identical with a round surface, for anything identical with a round surface would have to be round." (Robinson 1994: 46)

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