

PHI 1500: Major Issues in Philosophy

Session 5

September 16th, 2015



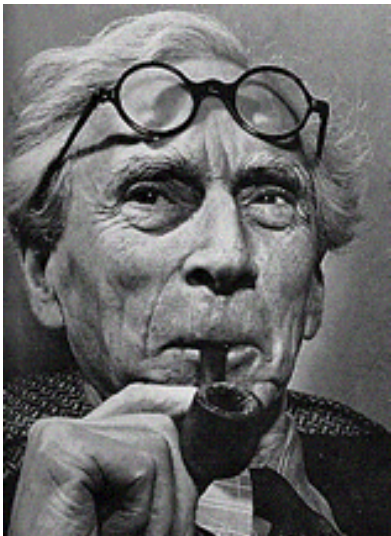
Epistemology: Russell

Bertrand Russell (1872-1970) was a British philosopher, well known for his work on logic, language, and epistemology.

- He is one of the major figures associated with **analytic philosophy**,
 - an approach to philosophical problems which emphasizes
 - a) use of formal logic, and b) analysis of how language works.

“Appearance & Reality” (a chapter from *Problems of Philosophy*) addresses the question: ***How can we be certain that we know anything?***

- *In other words, “Is there any knowledge in the world which is so certain that no reasonable man can doubt it?”* (1)
 - » He takes this to be “really one of the most difficult [questions] that can be asked.
 - » When we have realized the obstacles in the way of a straightforward and confident answer, we shall be well launched on the study of philosophy –
 - for philosophy is merely the attempt to answer such ultimate questions...after exploring all that makes such questions puzzling, and after realizing all the vagueness and confusion that underlie our ordinary ideas.” (1)



Whereas Locke was concerned with *where our ideas come from*,
Russell is concerned with *whether our ideas really correspond with reality*.

- “It seems to me that I am now sitting in a chair, at a table of a certain shape, on which I see sheets of paper with writing or print.
- By turning my head I see out of the window buildings and clouds and the sun.
- I believe that the sun is about ninety-three million miles from the earth; that it is a hot globe many times bigger than the earth;
- that, owing to the earth's rotation, it rises every morning, and will continue to do so for an indefinite time in the future.
- I believe that, if any other normal person comes into my room, he will see the same chairs and tables and books and papers as I see,
- and that the table which I see is the same as the table which I feel pressing against my arm.
- All this seems to be so evident as to be hardly worth stating, except in answer to a man who doubts whether I know anything.

» *Yet all this may be reasonably doubted,*

» *and all of it requires much careful discussion before we can be sure that we have stated it in a form that is wholly true.” (1)*

While Locke insisted that our senses are a source of knowledge, **Russell is skeptical that our senses can give us *knowledge* about reality.**

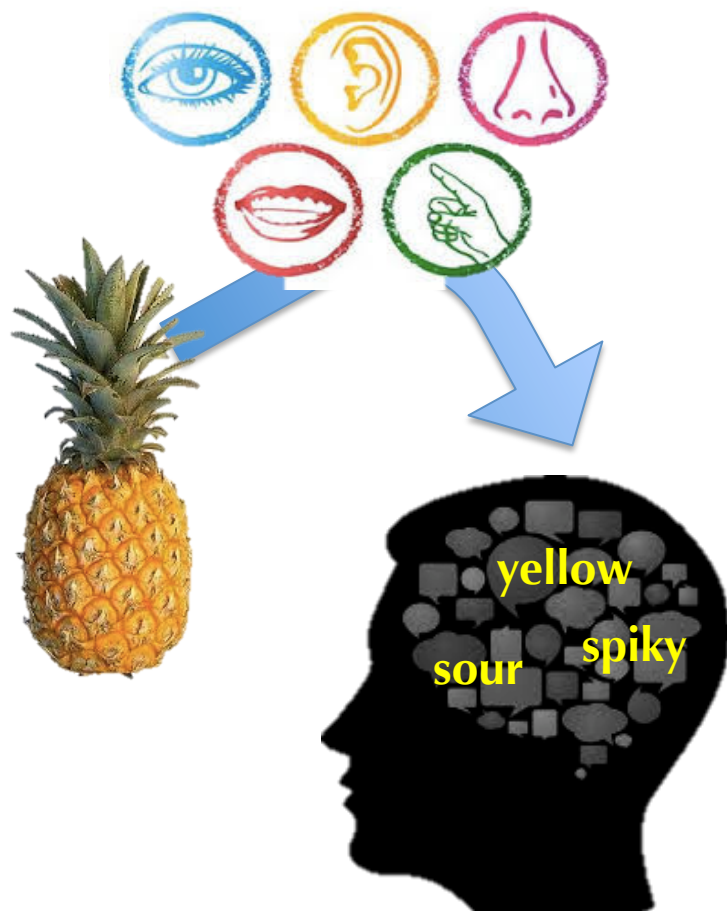
– “In the search for certainty, it is natural to begin with our present *experiences*, and in some sense, no doubt, knowledge is to be derived from them.” (1)

• [Russell is affirming that at least some of our knowledge is *a posteriori*, i.e., derived from experience.]

– “...*But* any statement as to what it is that our immediate experiences make us *know* is very likely to be wrong.” (1)

➤ The reason for this, Russell will explain, is that there is a distinction between *appearance* & *reality*:

➤ “between *what things seem to be* and *what they are.*” (2)

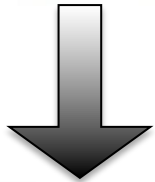


“To make our difficulties plain, let us concentrate attention on the table.

- To the eye it is oblong, brown and shiny;
 - to the touch it is smooth and cool and hard;
 - when I tap it, it gives out a wooden sound.
- Any one else who sees and feels and hears the table will agree with this description, so that it might seem as if no difficulty would arise;
 - ***but as soon as we try to be more precise our troubles begin.***

» Although I believe that the table is 'really' of the same color all over,

- the parts that reflect the light look much brighter than the other parts, & some parts look white because of reflected light.
- I know that, if I move, the parts that reflect the light will be different, so that the apparent distribution of colors on the table will change.



- It follows that if several people are looking at the table at the same moment, no two of them will see exactly the same distribution of colors,
- because no two can see it from exactly the same point of view, and any change in the point of view makes some change in the way the light is reflected.” (1)

“It is evident from what we have found, that *there is no color which preeminently appears to be the color of the table, or even of any one particular part of the table* –



- it appears to be of different colors from different points of view,
- and there is no reason for regarding some of these as *more really* its color than others.

- And we know that even from a given point of view the color will seem different by artificial light, or to a color-blind man, or to a man wearing blue spectacles, while in the dark there will be no color at all....

» [So] **color** is *not* something which is *inherent* in the table,
» but something *depending upon the table and the spectator and the way the light falls on the table.*” (2)

- Another way of expressing this is to say that **color** is:
 - *not* a **primary quality** of an object, which is the same no matter what conditions it is in or who is perceiving it,
 - but a **secondary quality**, which can vary depending on the conditions in which the object is perceived. ⁶



“In daily life, we assume as *certain* many things which, on a closer scrutiny, are found to be so full of apparent *contradictions* that

➤ ***only a great amount of thought enables us to know what it is that we really may believe,” i.e., what we can know with certainty.*** (1)

- When, in ordinary life, we speak of the color of the table,
- we only mean the sort of color which it will seem to have to a normal spectator from an ordinary point of view under usual conditions of light.
 - But the other colors which appear under other conditions have just as good a right to be considered real;
 - and therefore, to avoid favoritism, we are compelled to deny that, in itself, the table has any one particular color.” (2)



- So, on the one hand,
 - ***the table appears to have some particular color.***
- But on the other hand,
 - ***it appears to have no particular color at all.***

- This is what philosophers call a ***paradox!***
 - These **two seemingly-true facts contradict each other,**
 - so only one of them should describe the real truth about the table.

➤ ***Which one is true?***

“The same thing applies to the *texture*.

- With the naked eye one can see the grain [of the wood], but otherwise the table looks smooth and even.
- [But] if we looked at it through a microscope, we should see roughnesses and hills and valleys, and all sorts of differences that are imperceptible to the naked eye.



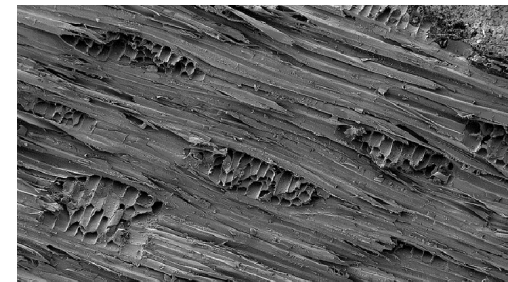
➤ ***Which of these is the 'real' table?***

- We are naturally tempted to say that what we see through the microscope is more real,
 - but that in turn would be changed by a still more powerful microscope.



If, then, we cannot trust what we see with the naked eye, why should we trust what we see through a microscope?

- Thus, again, the *confidence in our senses* with which we began *deserts us.*" (2)

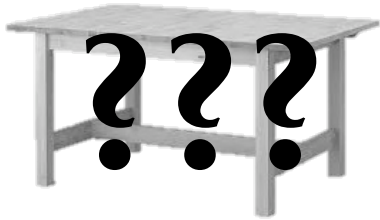
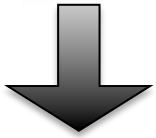


➤ Russell is arguing that **each one of our five senses gives us *contradictory information*.**

➤ Thus, **our senses are unreliable sources for knowledge.**

Russell asserts that:

- “the senses seem *not* to give us the *truth* about the table itself,
- but *only* about the *appearance* of the table.” (2)



- » “...it becomes evident that the real table, if there is one, is *not the same as what we immediately experience* by sight or touch or hearing.
- » **The real table, if there is one, is *not immediately known to us at all*, but **must be an inference from what is immediately known.****
- » Hence, *two very difficult questions* at once arise; namely,
 - 1) *Is there a real table at all?*
 - 2) *If so, what sort of object can it be?”* (3)

- Russell is saying that ***we do not really know that there is a real table***,
 - because we only have inconsistent, unreliable evidence from our senses about its *appearance*.
 - We assume this evidence to be true, and from it we use our reasoning to *infer* that a real table exists.
 - ***But knowledge of the table’s true reality requires evidence more reliable than what our senses can provide us.***

Russell suggests some *new technical terminology*, to discuss clearly what he has just deduced:

- “Let us give the name of '**sense-data**' to the things that are immediately known in sensation: such things as *colors, sounds, smells, hardnesses, roughnesses, and so on.*”

- » [These are the same things that Locke called 'sensible qualities'.]

- We shall give the name '**sensation**' to the experience of being immediately aware of these things.



➤ *...if we are to know anything about the table,*

- **it must be by means of the sense-data** -- *brown color, 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 [i.e., *primary qualities*].

- Thus a **problem arises as to the relation of the sense-data to the real table, supposing there is such a thing.** (3)

Let's take stock of Russell's *arguments*.

- He has argued so far that our senses do not supply reliable evidence, but only give us inconsistent sense-data.

Call this **argument A**:

- 1) If we can know anything with certainty about the real table, then we must have reliable evidence for its existence.
- 2) We do *not* have reliable evidence for the table's existence.

- 3) Therefore, we *cannot* know anything with certainty about the real table.

» *What form does argument A have?*

- Premise 1) expresses an epistemological principle called **reliabilism**:
 - that knowledge requires reliable ways of gathering evidence and drawing conclusions from that evidence.
- Premise 2) implicitly *assumes that empiricism is true*:
 - that experience is the only means by which we could get any ideas,
 - so that the only evidence we could possibly get would ultimately depend upon our senses.

Call this **argument B**:

- 3) We cannot know anything with certainty about the real table.
- 4) If we cannot know anything with certainty about the real table, then we should doubt whether the table really exists.

- 5) Therefore, we should doubt whether the table really exists.

» *What form does argument B have?*

- *(Hint: the premises don't have to be in the usual order.)*

➤ Premise 3) was the conclusion of argument A.

- We can tell that argument B is the main one, and A is auxiliary, because argument A served to defend a premise of argument B.

➤ Premise 4) is an expression of **skepticism**.

➤ In general, ***to be skeptical of x is to think that:***

- ***if we don't have true knowledge about x, then we should withhold belief about x.***

Russell's *central claim* is that

- **we should be skeptical about the existence of physical things** (like tables),
- i.e., *we should be uncertain that there are real objects underlying appearances.* 12

Russell wants to investigate *the relationship between sense-data & reality*.

- “The real table, if it exists, we will call a 'physical object'.
 - Thus we *have to consider the relation of sense-data to physical objects*.
- The collection of all physical objects is called '**matter**'.
 - » Thus our two questions may be re-stated as follows:
 1. *Is there any such thing as matter?*
 2. *If so, what is its nature?*” (3)

Russell explains a view held by **idealists**, like **Bishop George Berkeley** (1685-1753), on the nature of matter.

- **Berkeley aimed “to prove that there is *no such thing as matter at all*,**
- **and that the world consists of nothing but minds and their ideas.”** (Russell 3)



- » **Idealism** is a metaphysical doctrine (a view about the nature and structure of the world),
 - which challenges the widely-held view (called **materialism**) that physical objects exist independently of our minds.
- » Berkeley held that *nothing exists outside of our minds*.
 - This would mean that **everything that exists is merely an idea**.

“[Berkeley] admits that there must be *something* which continues to exist when we go out of the room or shut our eyes...

– [So ideas *can* exist independent of when we are perceiving them or thinking about them.]

- ...but he thinks that this something cannot be radically different in nature from what we see,
- and cannot be independent of seeing altogether, though it must be independent of *our* seeing.”

– [I.e., if you have an idea of the table because you saw it, the table doesn't exist merely in *your own* mind – but it does exist *only in the collection of minds* which are aware of it.]

“He is thus led to regard **the 'real' table** as **an idea in the mind of God.**

- Such an idea has the required permanence and independence of ourselves,
- without being...something quite unknowable,
 - in the sense that we can only infer it, and can never be directly and immediately aware of it.” (4)



Russell suggest that “we might state the argument by which [idealists] support their view in some such way as this:

- 'Whatever can be thought of is an idea in the mind of the person thinking of it;
- therefore *nothing can be thought of except ideas in minds,*
- *...anything else is inconceivable, and what is inconceivable cannot exist.*” (4)

➤ So the **idealists believe that we can *know what*** (those things we think of as) **physical objects are really like,**

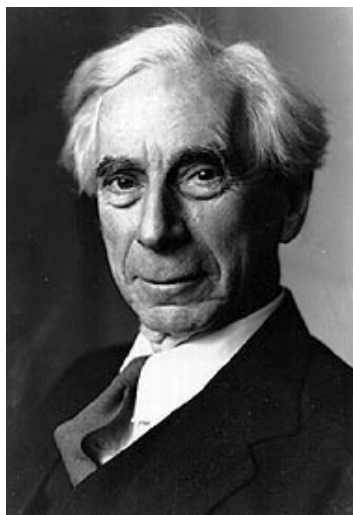
- because one only needs to be aware of the idea of the thing in order to know it.

➤ Materialists counter that **awareness of an *idea of an object is insufficient for knowledge about the object,***

- » because how something appears to us as an idea in our mind can diverge from how the thing really is: ***appearance ≠ reality.***

Russell thinks that the idealists **equivocate** when they say “that there can be...nothing known to be real except minds and their thoughts and feelings”

- since they *do* think *there are real things* (God’s ideas)
 - just that what is real isn’t ‘real’ in the sense of *being made of matter.*

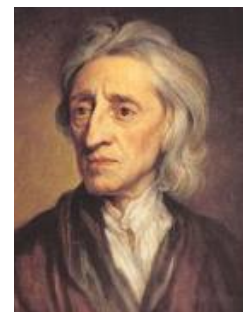


Russell remarks that **most philosophers seem to believe there is a real table, even though they acknowledge that we do not really know that it exists.**

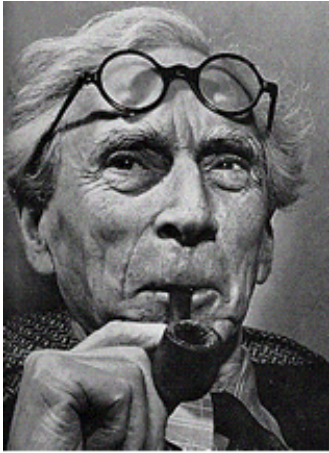
- "...[philosophers] almost all agree that, however much our sense-data -- color, shape, smoothness, etc. -- may depend upon us,
- yet *their occurrence is a sign of something existing independently of us,*
- something differing, perhaps, completely from our sense-data whenever we are in a suitable relation to the real table." (4)
 - People continue to act as if we know that there are real objects underlying appearances,
 - despite lacking proof of anything beyond our sense-data.

But the mere fact that many philosophers (and ordinary people) believe there *is* a real table *does not guarantee* that it really exists.

- *(To believe that the table exists just because many people do would be an example of which fallacy?)*
- Hence, Russell thinks **we should remain skeptical of the existence of real objects underlying appearances.**



Russell states this conclusion as follows:



- “Thus what we directly see and feel is merely 'appearance', which we believe to be a sign of some 'reality' behind.” (5)
 - » ...and **since appearances don't allow us to *know* what reality is like,**
 - » **we ought to be *skeptical* about our beliefs in the existence of real things.**
 - » “...*doubt* suggests that perhaps there is no table at all.” (5)

But some “bewildering” questions still remain:

- “...*if the reality is not what appears, have we any means of knowing whether there is any reality at all?*”
- *And if so, have we any means of finding out what it is like?”* (5)

Russell remarks that:

- “Philosophy, if it cannot answer so many questions as we could wish,
- has at least the power of asking questions which increase the interest of the world, and show the strangeness and wonder lying just below the surface even in the commonest things of daily life.” (5)

- 1) If we can know anything with certainty about the real table, then we must have reliable evidence for its existence.
- 2) We do not have reliable evidence for the table's existence.
- 3) Therefore, we *cannot* know anything with certainty about the real table.
- 4) If we cannot know anything with certainty about the real table, then we should doubt whether the table really exists.

- 5) Therefore, ***we should doubt whether the table really exists.***

If **Russell is right** that we should be skeptical about the existence of objects beyond their appearances,

➤ ***would that change the way that you live your life, and how?***

Philosopher **William James** (1842-1910) thought that:

- if being skeptical vs. believing in physical objects has no practical impact on the way we act on the world,
- then each person should just believe whatever makes it easier for them to get through life.

➤ ***Should we be skeptical, with Russell,***
➤ ***or believe what we want, like James?***

