

ON RUSSELL'S INTERPRETATION OF CAUSAL THEORY

Russell seeks to establish the causal theory of perception in his two books : 1. *Problems of Philosophy*¹ and 2. *The analysis of Matter*.² The causal theory states that our knowledge of an external object is indirect to the extent that it is based on the percepts produced by the object in our mind in the form of sense-data, which are immediately apprehended by acquaintance. Russell says that "the real table if there is one, is not immediately known".³ What we know immediately are the sense-data, from which we infer the existence of the table. To him, sense-data are "the things that are immediately known in sensation : such things as colours, sounds, smells, hardness, roughness and so on."⁴ He gives the name 'sensation' to such experience which has immediate awareness of the things (like colours, shapes etc.). So, whenever we see a colour, we have a sensation of the colour. But, the colour itself is not a sensation; it is only a sense-datum.

If we want to know anything about the table, we can know it only by means of the sense-data like brown colour, oblong shape etc. We are not sure that the table is sense-data or that the sense-data are the properties of the table. Thus, though the sense-data themselves do not constitute the object, they are indispensable factors for the perception of an object.

While we are perceiving the table, we are not doubting the colour or shape of the table but only about the object; whether there is such an object called table. What the senses immediately tell us is not the truth about the object but the truth about the sense-data. According to Russell, the sense-data themselves are neither true nor false. But they lead us to have two kinds of self-evident truths of perception and in the ultimate analysis, these two would become one. The first truth asserts the existence of sense-datum. When we see a patch of red we say that 'there is such-and-such a patch of red'. We are assuming the existence of red colour, 'there is that'. The second truth includes an analysis. When we see a round patch of red we judge that 'the patch of red is round'. This judgement analyses the datum into colour and shape and recombines them as 'the red colour is round in shape'.

The knowledge of the table as a physical object is known through the acquaintance with the sense-data, so it is called by Russell as 'knowledge by description'.⁵ By description he means that the table is the physical object which causes such-and-such sense-data.⁶

It appears that Russell's position with regard to the knowledge of the object is paradoxical. When we say that the object is not known directly but sense-data are apprehended directly, we are involved in difficulties. We are certain about the existence of sense-data and not about the physical object which is not immediately known. It is difficult to say whether the table has any brown colour or not, since we know only the appearance of the table. We cannot say whether any colour or shape belongs to the table, since Russell himself says that "a colour 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". If it is so, then the question arises whether the real object is ever known. To this, Russell's answer would be that we know the real object by description. For example, the table is the physical object which causes such-and-such sense-data. The existence of real table is inferred from the existence of sense-data with which we are acquainted directly and the table is the cause of this acquaintance.

In the 'Analysis of Matter' Russell states that the causal theory of perception is pre-supposed by science. The process which is involved in perceiving the table is: the process which is started from the table "traversing the space between the table and the eye, changing its character when it reaches the eye, changing its character again in the optic nerve and the brain, and finally producing the event"⁸ which we call 'seeing the table'. Thus, the perception of an object depends upon the external causes, without which we cannot infer the existence of an object.

Russell accepts the belief in simple causal laws and in the existence of external objects. This belief makes us to infer the unperceived percepts and the percepts of the other men. In cases like where others do practically the same thing as we are doing, for example, applaud when the curtain goes down, Russell says, "...we have a sharp stimulus, followed by a very definite act, and our perception of our own act is closely similar to a number

of other perceptions which we have at the same time".⁹ We infer that all the other people have had perceptions which are similar to our own.

We see others acting as we should act in response to a certain kind of stimulus which however we are not experiencing at the moment. For this Russell gives the following example.¹⁰ Suppose you are a short person in a crowd and are trying to see something which is being exhibited on a screen. You hear a burst of cheering but you cannot see anything. If you manage to perceive the exhibition even a few moments later, it is natural for you to think that the others cheered because they saw the same exhibition. Their perception is not identical with yours because it occurred earlier. Hence, it can be said that if the stimulus to their cheering was a perception analogous to your subsequent perception, then they had perception which you could not perceive. This experience leads us to conclude that "the percepts you call other people are associated with, percepts which you do not have, but which are like those you would have if you were in their place."¹¹ Though we do not see our face, our head and our back, yet we experience these by our tactual sensation and we imagine what a movement of an invisible part of our body ought to look like. This is a process of becoming acquainted with groups of visual sensations which correspond to similar tactual sensations. The causal theory of perception involves two types of inference. Firstly, from our perceived percepts we infer the unperceived percepts of other people. Secondly, we construct the physical object from both perceived and unperceived percepts. The causal theory does not claim certainty. It is regarded as a good inductive inference, since we are knowing the objects by accepting the other man's percepts and the similarity of that to our own percepts.

In the 'Problems of Philosophy' the pre-reflective belief in the existence of external objects is simple and direct. According to Russell "this belief is ready in ourselves as soon as we begin to reflect... and is called an instinctive belief..."¹² In 'The Analysis of Matter' Russell justifies this belief by basing it on the scientific method. The relation between the sense-data and the object is not a direct and simple relation. It is a complex one, since it includes two processes. Firstly, from the perceived per-

cepts we infer the unexperienced percepts and secondly, these percepts lead us to assume a belief in the existence of the external world.

In the *'Problems of Philosophy'* Russell seeks to develop a philosophical analysis of the nature of our belief in the existence of independent physical objects. The adequacy of this philosophical analysis can be questioned. This would lead us to a discussion of the distinction between knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge by description and the associated theory of descriptions. In *'The Analysis of Matter'* on the other hand, where the causal theory is sought to be justified as a legitimate hypothesis, the questions would be different : 1. Is there not a circularity involved in basing a theory of perception on scientific methods when science itself seems to pre-suppose the common sense view? 2. Would the causal theory explain adequately our knowledge of independent physical objects? 3. In what sense is it legitimate to call our belief in the existence of independent object, an inference?

But with this difference, we find that, in both sources the theory of knowledge is explained as structural. We know only the structure of the object but not the object as it is.

Though the causal theory enjoys the support of science, it seems to have its own defects. It is a self-refuting theory, since it accepts the facts on which it is based, are unknowable. When we perceive only the percepts and not the physical objects, then we cannot have the knowledge of the various causal processes to which the argument refers. The causal theory ends in a circular argument when we say that this theory is based on scientific facts; the percepts are known through scientific facts and these scientific facts are in turn based on percepts. The causal theory establishes the existence of physical objects while pre-supposing precisely their existence in its account of the origin of percepts in us. When we say that perception involves causal process we are not saying that what is perceived is causally dependent upon the external object. If we say so, then we are confusing the perception with what is perceived. Therefore, the causes of our perception are the objects which are having the ontological status since they are things-in-themselves. So, we know only an 'appearance' of an object.

According to Russell, knowledge by acquaintance is a direct cognitive relation where we are directly aware of the object itself without any intermediary process of inference or any knowledge of truths. The cognitive relation is not meant to be that sort of relation which constitutes judgement but it is that sort of relation which constitutes presentation. Knowledge by description refers to an object by means of the characteristics which that object possesses 'the-so-and-so'. Any description known to be truly applicable to a particular must "involve some reference to a particular with which we are acquainted".¹³ Here is one way in which Russell's statements can be interpreted: "all our knowledge, both knowledge of things and knowledge of truths, rests upon acquaintance as its foundation, and, that...knowledge concerning what is known by description is ultimately reducible to knowledge concerning what is known by acquaintance."¹⁴ Therefore, all knowledge should be reduced to knowledge by acquaintance.

Thus, the theory of knowledge by description is fundamentally based on the theory of knowledge by acquaintance without which we cannot know the percepts. The theory of perception can be explained properly when we have direct acquaintance with the percepts and the direct relation between the knower and the known. When we have these two, then it is possible to know the object by description.

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NOTES

1. Bertrand Russell, 'Problems of Philosophy', Oxford University Press, London, 1962.
2. Bertrand Russell, 'The Analysis of Matter', George Allen & Unwin Ltd., London, 1959.
3. Bertrand Russell, 'Problems of Philosophy', Oxford University Press, London, 1962, p. 11.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 47.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 47.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
8. Bertrand Russell, 'The Analysis of Matter', George Allen & Unwin Ltd., London, 1959, p. 197.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 202.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 203.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 203.
12. Bertrand Russell, 'Problems of Philosophy', Oxford University Press, London, 1962, p. 24.
13. Enger R. E. and Denonn, L.E., 'The Basic Writings of Bertrand Russell', Simon and Schuster, N.Y. 1961, Part V, p. 26.
14. *Ibid.*, Part V, pp. 218, 223.