

Objections to Russell’s phenomenalism

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1 Inference to the best explanation

The first objection to Russell is less an objection to his final view than to the motivations for that view. Recall that Russell argues that, if the sense datum theory of perception is true, then if we are to have any knowledge of material things, one of the following must be true:

- There is a known correlation between sense data and material things.
- Material things are analyzable as classes of sense data.

Further, he claimed, if the first is to be true, then we must have some evidence for the correlation; and that the only way to have evidence for the correlation is to have experiences of the correlated items together.

But is this the only way we can have evidence of a correlation? Examples of inference to the best explanation in science; belief in unobservables.

A response on Russell’s part: even if we have this sort of evidence for the existence of material things as distinct from classes of sense data, we could have no real conception of what those material things were like, other than that they were the causes of such-and-such sense data. Reply: inference to the best explanation as giving grounds for beliefs about the properties of things as well as their existence.

2 Modal properties and classes

Recall the axiom of extensionality from Russell's logical system:

The axiom of extensionality.

$$\forall a \forall b [\forall x (x \in a \equiv x \in b) \rightarrow a = b]$$

If a and b are sets with the same members, they are the same set.

It's natural to think that this principle holds necessarily, not just in the sense that the axiom of extensionality is a necessary truth, but also in the sense that every set has its members essentially, or necessarily. That is,

$$\forall a \text{ Necessarily } (\forall b [\forall x (x \in a \equiv x \in b) \rightarrow a = b])$$

$$\forall a \Box (\forall b [\forall x (x \in a \equiv x \in b) \rightarrow a = b])$$

For any set a , it is a necessary truth that any set b with the same members as a is identical to a .

(How is this different than the claim that the axiom of extensionality is necessary? This is related to the questions about scope that we talked about in connection with 'On Denoting', except that here what's in question is the scope of 'necessarily' rather than the scope of 'not.')

This means that no set could have had different members than it actually has. So, if material objects are sets of appearances (sense data), no material object could have been composed of different sense data than those that in fact compose it.

But this is not how we ordinarily think of material objects. We usually think that, for example, this desk could have been a slightly different color than it actually is without ceasing to be this very desk. But this kind of claim is hard to make sense of, if the desk is a set of sense data.

Russell's reply to this kind of argument at this time: skepticism about necessity and possibility, and the idea of modal properties.

3 Which sense data?

Consider how we would translate into the language of sense data a simple claim like

I see a table.

Part of the analysis of this claim would be

I see a table-like sense datum.

This is too vague; but there are deeper problems with it. Even if we accept the view that material objects are logical constructions out of sense data, we want to be able to distinguish between seeing a table and hallucinating a table. This seems to indicate that we need to add to the analysis claims like the following:

If I were to have the experiences which I would call ‘walking toward the table’, then at the same time as I had those experiences I would see steadily larger table-like sense data.

If I were to have the experiences I would call ‘walking around the table’, then my visual sense data would change continuously as follows:

Moreover, ordinarily the claim that I see a table entails the possibility of non-visual sensory experiences, such as touching the table, running into it, etc. So it seems that the analysis of our original statement should also include claims like the following:

If I were to have the experiences I would call ‘walking around the table’, then eventually I would have the following tactile experience:

The idea, then, is that the true analysis of material object statements is given in terms of a very long series of claims about what my sense data are, and what they would be in certain other specifiable circumstances.

Another way of putting this claim is that the analysis of material things will have to be given partially in terms of sense data that I have, and partially in terms of sense data that no one has experienced.

The epistemological problem with analyzing material things in terms of unexperienced sense data: to know something about the table I have to know things about sense data which no one has ever experienced. But how could I know things about such sense data?

It seems that the analysis of material objects must also include sense data experienced by other people. If I say

There is a table there.

and you say

There is not a table there.

(pointing to the same place) we take these to be contradictory: it cannot be the case that both of us are correct. This gives us a constraint on our analysis of material object statements: it must be the case that our analysis explains why both of our claims cannot be true at the same time.

The problem is that this constraint is not met by an analysis of material objects in terms of my sense data. If I say ‘I am experiencing table-like sense data’ and you say ‘I am not experiencing table-like sense data’ then what we say is *not* contradictory.

This leads us to modify the analysis of material object statements to include not only one’s actual sense data at the time of the statement and hypothetical facts about what sense data one would have were certain other events to occur, but also facts about *the sense data of other people*. Why this is a natural amendment anyway; we want to distinguish between material objects and persistent hallucinations of a single individual.

But this leads to a problem: our knowledge of the existence of material objects is then only as good as our knowledge of the existence of other minds and our knowledge of what those other minds would be experiencing in other possible circumstances. But how, on Russell’s view, can we know of the existence of other minds?

4 The problem of other minds

In *Our Knowledge of the External World*, Russell gives the following view of the nature of minds:

“Therefore we shall say that a person is a certain series of experiences.” (150)

This amounts to the claim that persons are ‘logical constructions’ out of sense data which stand in certain relations to each other. (Maybe some relation of continuity could be spelled out.)

So construed, how can we know that other minds exist?

4.1 *The argument from analogy*

One traditional way of justifying our knowledge of other minds is via the argument from analogy: there is correlation in my body between things that happen to my body and mental events; I observe similar things happening to the bodies of others; therefore I conclude that the same mental events are going on in their case as well (and hence that they have minds).

Problems with this justification:

1. Induction from our case to the case of every other person we know does not seem very secure. Compare: you see one white squirrel, and infer that all squirrels must be white.
2. The argument is even less convincing when we take into account Russell’s view that material objects, including bodies, are constructions out of sense data. Since we have yet to establish that anyone other than me exists, they must be constructions out of my sense data (at least for purposes of the argument). But then the argument

says that I should conclude from the fact that there are certain correlations between my sense data and my mental events that there are also correlations between *my* sense data and other mental events, which are not my own. It's difficult to see what would justify this inference.

4.2 *Knowledge that others exist as a 'unifying hypothesis'*

In the end, Russell does not seem to think that our knowledge of other minds is very secure at all. In *Our Knowledge of the External World*, he puts the matter as follows:

“[The hypothesis that other people have minds] is a hypothesis which systematizes a vast body of facts and never leads to any consequences which there is any reason to think false. There is therefore nothing to be said against its truth, and good reason to use it as a working hypothesis.”

Compare: the thesis that there is a green monster in outer space that constantly evades detection but controls the weather systems on earth.

Why this seems like a shaky ground on which to base all of our knowledge of the material world.

(For more in depth discussion, see Soames, *Philosophical Analysis in the 20th Century*, v. 1, ch. 7.)