Russell's *The Problems of Philosophy*

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The Problem of the External World

- Descartes introduced the question of whether there exists an external world: a physical world independent of one's own mind.

- He used his alleged knowledge of the existence of God to answer in the affirmative.

- Hume argued that philosophy could give no satisfactory proof of the external world's existence.

- Kant called the failure to prove that a physical world exists a "scandal to philosophy" and tried to provide such a proof.

- In the twentieth century, Bertrand Russell (1872-1970) made yet another proposal for solving Descartes's problem.

- Russell's approach was to argue that the existence of an external world is the *best explanation* of our sensory experience.

Perceptual Relativity

- In the eighteenth century, George Berkeley (1685-1753) had advanced skeptical arguments against the claim that we know an external world exists.

- One of his arguments appeals to the fact that all human sense-perception is relative to the perceiver.

- Russell endorses Berkeley's premise.

- He notes that even if there are external objects, each of their properties would appear at least slightly differently to every perceiver, since each one is situated differently relative to the object.

- The (alleged) object has no single perceived color, no single perceived shape, no single perceived hardness, and generally no single perceived quality.

- This raises two questions.

  - Are there mind-independently real objects at all?
  - If so, what are their mind-independently real characteristics?

Sense-Data

- We can say at the outset that perceived qualities are not real characteristics of objects.

- Instead, they are private objects, which Russell calls "sense-data."

- So color, shape, hardness, etc. are nothing more than sense-data.

- Sensation is the experience of being immediately aware of sense-data.

- So the sensation of a color, for example, is the immediate awareness of a colored sense-datum.

Existential Doubts

- The entire collection of physical objects, such as tables (if they exist), is called by Russell "matter."

- Berkeley tried to prove that matter does not exist, given that all their alleged qualities are sense-data.

- His relativity argument at least succeeds in showing that we are not certain that matter exists.

- If we are not certain that matter exists, we are not certain that other people exist.

- And as Hume argued in his *Treatise*, we are not even certain that we ourselves existed in the past, since our alleged memories reveal no more than do sense-data.

- The only thing of which I am certain is that I am now perceiving sense-data.

Public Objects

- Common sense tells us that there are public objects, to which the sense-data comprising each person's point of view are related.

- But I cannot argue philosophically for the existence of material objects on this basis, since I do not yet know that there are other persons with points of view.

- So, the only evidence for the existence of public objects is the sense-data making up my private experience, which does not seem to be a very promising start.

    - It is possible that there are no public objects, but only my own dreams, as Descartes had noted.

Simplicity

- To determine what to believe, I should compare the dream explanation of my sense-data with an explanation in terms of public objects.

- I then find that an explanation in terms of public objects is simpler than the dream explanation.

- Specifically, what is to be explained is the gaps I find in my sense-data.

    - Sense-data appear for a time, disappear, and then very similar ones appear.

- If there are public objects, I can easily account for the appearance of similar sense-data as being caused by the same object as caused the original sense-data.

- But if my sense-data are produced by dreaming, I would have to have a more complex account in terms of some some hidden mechanism which produces them in a fairly regular fashion.

Explaining Behavior

- Another way in which the public-object explanation is simpler than the dream explanation has to do with patterns of behavior of sense-data.

- Apparent human behavior is better-explained by appeal to public objects.

- If I have a body and there are other bodies which behave like mine, then I can explain rather simply why sense-data of motions and articulate sounds are produced in those apparent bodies.

    - My body produces characteristic motions and sounds.
    - Other people have bodies.
    - Their motions and sounds associated with those bodies are associated with their minds.

- Moreover, I can even explain why I have dreams on the basis of the behavior of public bodies.

Belief in Material Objects

- We instinctively believe that material objects exist.

- The argument from the best explanation gives us a reason not to reject our instinctive belief.

- It is the task of philosophy to provide a systematic explanation of the relation of material objects to sense-data.

- If a coherent explanation can be given, then we have all the more reason to accept our instinctive belief.

- The more harmonious a system we can produce, the less likely it is erroneous.

Space and Time

- Our sense-data are ordered in a private space that differs from the public space of material objects.

- Our knowledge of physical space is based on systematic changes in the sense-data in our private space.

- The explanation of changes in private space is that the sense-data are caused by objects whose position changes relative to our own body in public space.

- This explanation is supported by the way data for our different senses cohere with one another.

- It is also supported by the coherence of our own experience with the reports of other people.

- But we can only know of public space what is required to explain the behavior of our sense-data.

- Similar remarks apply to time.

Two Ways of Knowing

- The simplest kind of knowledge is gained by *acquaintance* with what is known.

- We are only acquainted with sense-data, so we cannot know material objects by acquaintance.

- We can also know about objects by *description*.

- The following is an example that assumes that the common-sense view of the world is correct.

- I know that the tallest trees in the world exist without having been acquainted with them.
- I have been acquainted with a number of trees of varying heights, and I know the general principle that if there are objects of varying heights, some of them are tallest.

What We Know by Acquaintance

- Besides sense-data, we are acquainted with various features of our mental life.

- We are acquainted with memory states, allow us to make a connection with our past.

- We have self-consciousness, which is acquaintance with ourselves as being acquainted with sense-data, memory states, etc.

- More controversially, Russell claims that we have acquaintance with universals, such as:

    - Whiteness,
    - Diversity,
    - Brotherhood.

- We must be acquainted with universals in order to be able to use language competently.

Knowing Material Objects by Description

- Knowledge by description involves *definite* descriptions of the form "the so-and-so."

- Thus our knowledge by description is of the form "the so-and-so is such-and-such" ("the F is G").

- If a sentence of the form "the F is G" is true, then three conditions must be satisfied:

    - There exists something that is F,
    - Only one thing is F,
    - That thing is G.

- A special case of a description is one which links sense-data S to a single cause:

    - The cause of S.

- This kind of description can then be embedded in an explanatory sentence:

    - The cause of S is a material object.

- So, I know material objects by descriptions of them as causes of my sense-data.

The Basis of Knowledge by Description

- If I know that the cause of sense-data S is a physical object, it is due to a combination of two factors:

    - My knowledge of S by acquaintance,

    - My knowledge (on grounds of best explanation) of a general principle which connects S with a cause.

- So knowledge by acquaintance of my sense-data is one basis of my knowledge by description that physical objects are their causes.

- Acquaintance alone does not yield knowledge of truths, which is why knowledge of general principles is required for there to be knowledge by description.

- So the other basis for knowledge by description of physical objects is knowledge by acquaintence of universals which are used in general principles.

    - I know by acquaintance the universals "cause," and "physical object."

Assessment of Kant

- Russell credited Kant with first raising the question of how we can make synthetic judgments *a priori*, or independently of experience.

- Singled out for discussion are two kinds of judgment:

    - Mathematical (7 + 5 = 12),

    - Metaphysical (Every event has a cause).

- Russell agreed with Kant that previous modern philosophers were in error concerning how these kinds of judgments are made.

    - The rationalists wrongly believed these judgments to be analytic.

    - Hume wrongly believed them to be *a posteriori*, based on experience.

- Russell argued that Kant's account of the possibility of synthetic *a priori* judgments was interesting but incorrect.

Kant's Solution

- Russell acknowledges that his interpretation of Kant's solution to the problem of synthetic *a priori* judgments is disputed among Kant scholars.

- He agrees with Kant that experience of objects has two components:

- – The experienced material (or physical) object,

- – The sense-data that the object produces in our minds.

- What distinguishes Kant's view is the extent to which the mind plays a role in experience.

  - – The specific qualities we discover in sense-data are due to the object.

  - – The relations of the sense-data, in space and time, and causally, are due to the mind itself.

- The mental character of the relating of sense-data is what allow us to judge *a priori* about the spatial, temporal, and causal features of objects.

Kant's Error

- On Russell's interpretation, the physical object which causes sense-data is identified with an unknowable thing in itself.

- The result of relating sense-data, on the other hand, is phenomena, which are knowable *a priori*.

- On Kant's view, the *a priori* status of the relations of sense-data guarantees their necessary application to the phenomena.

  - – For example, two phenomena added to two phenomena are always four phenomena.

- However, there is no guarantee that the nature of the mind will remain the same.

  - – "It might happen, if Kant is right, that to-morrow our nature would so change as to make two and two become five."

- The fatal error in Kant's approach is to make *a priori* judgment depend on the nature of the mind, whereas it should be independent of how it is that we think.