Introduction to Philosophy II // Spring 2017

Handout 6

Matter: Russell

The demise of dualism. Russell postulates that common sense divides the world into mind and matter. His purpose is to defend this dualism of common sense both against materialism (only matter exists) and idealism (only mind exists). 399

Is dualism really a commonsensical commitment? This seems reasonable. In our everyday existence we are aware of our mental life, its reality is not in doubt. And we are aware that there is an external world out there (Hume's 'belief in the body'). It is not part of the everyday evidence that mind is composed of material elements, or that it resides in the brain, or identified with it. On the other hand, matter is not obviously mental. Though Berkeley pretends otherwise, it took him many pages to lead us back, so to speak, to the commonsensical commitment to mind and rejection of matter.

At all events, Russell begins in fact by examining what may be called 'naive realism', the view that what we perceive is what really is out there in the external world. And he thinks there are two reasons why this view was undermined. One comes from physics. It teaches us that ordinary objects are composed of minute particles, and not even particles—fields and forces. Their existence cannot be assimilated to some commonsensical belief. This physical claim, Russell notes, is as metaphysical as any. 400

Now we do not need to appeal to physics to shew this sort of *compositionality* of ordinary objects. That these objects are not what they seem from the outside is evident to any hunter who examined his kill, and to any female companion who had the kill cooked.

One may think that common sense asserts further that ordinary objects *resemble* the minute parts of which they are composed. But again, it is far from obvious that there is anything 'common' in this view. If it were, we could not easily explain a pagan belief in spirits and deities. And at all events, this view has been challenged from the dawn of philosophy. 'All is water' reflects the sweeping rejection of the alleged common sense. One supposes that in twenty six centuries this insight, even if initially the privilege of the few, penetrated the domain of common sense.

The other challenge to naive realism comes from psychology and physiology. One part of it is the idea that the mind continuously *interprets* the input of the senses. The other part is that there is, as it were, a screen between the mind and the external input. Nerves and sense organs transform the information they receive in such a way, that no guarantee is left for a 'correspondence' between the original source and its image in the mind.

The world in a flux. Russell concedes the force of these arguments against commonsensical realism. They show that common sense, as a whole, leads to contradictions. It is not clear what the premisses are which lead to these contradictions. He accepts the realist view of perception: what we perceive is not our ideas (or not merely our ideas), but things outside the mind. This view may belong in the body of doctrines of common sense. But he rejects the thesis of constancy, that material (physical) objects continue to exist when perception of them ceases. 401

The materialist argues that sense data are in a flux, but that material objects are persistent, relatively so at least. Hence sense data cannot be identified with material objects. Now Russell argues that material objects, as they appear in physical doctrines, are themselves 'logical constructions'. It is the sense data, utterly lacking persistence, that are the ultimate constituents of matter.

An ordinary material object, such as a table, is, on this present view, merely as a succession of different temporal stages. These stages ('particulars') are connected to each other causally. Russell speaks of 'intrinsic causal laws' here. One should wonder how Russell, or anyone else, can discover these laws. Are they to be discovered at all? or are they to be imposed by us, in the hope of better arranging our experiences, making them intelligible? It seems we have ventured into Hume's terrain, with its doubts about our causal beliefs, and then we are on a fast track to scepticism. I think Russell shows no awareness of these pitfalls. The discussion of causation in 409–410 does not offer any help. 402

Logical constructions. So on the present picture, we have a temporal and causal succession of particulars which can be arrange for convenience sake into 'wholes'. These wholes are constructions 403

and ‘logical fictions’. Tables and chairs are so arranged by our common sense. More extravagant physical objects are so arranged by physicists.

It is, I think, not immediately clear in our text what these constructions should look like. Here is one option. We begin with sentences about sense data. Such sentences will contain names and predicates referring to points in space (or spacetime) and their qualities (e.g., colours). We then postulate relations between points present to us at different moments in our experience. As the level of this relational complexity increases, we will eventually be able to identify some of these more complex sentences with sentences about the familiar material objects. Thus we will be able to establish the truth-functional identity between the two kinds of sentences. It might not be correct to say that we have given a paraphrase of the material object statements, because the identity of meanings should include showing some form of necessary identity between the two kinds of statements. But we may have achieved a reductive elimination of one class of statements in favour of another.

Refutation of idealism redux. Idealists (read: Berkeley) were misled by a number of confusions. One was the already discussed before the confusion between an act and its object. Enough said of that. Another was the contrast between the permanence of material objects and the flux of sensations. Once, however, we realise that the constituents of matters are in a flux too, the motivation for idealism is undermined.

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