Metaphysics Handouts
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Handout 2

Analytic realism: Russell

The fixed point. Mathematics has always counted as certain as knowledge gets, yet some philosophies conclude that it's either false outright or tainted by the inaccuracies of the senses. Russell takes this as a defect of the philosophies. 137
His own view, he says, recommends itself partly on general grounds and partly on grounds drawn from the principles of mathematics. The mathematical grounds begin with two demands: mathematics must be absolutely true, not roughly true, 133
and it must apply to the physical world. So the main question turns out to be, 'What the world must be like if $2 + 2 = 4$ is exactly true and yet useful?' The general grounds are quicker and flimsier. Neither idealism nor empiricism fits the facts 137
about knowledge, and each refutes itself. Idealism regresses: if existence depends on being known, knowledge exists only if it's known, and so on. And the empiricist principle that nothing is known except through the senses can't itself be known through the senses.

Question 1. Is it legitimate to let the certainty of mathematics decide between metaphysical systems, or is explaining that certainty, perhaps explaining it away, exactly the job the systems compete for? And is the charge against empiricism an argument or a trick, given that a principle can be a rule for using evidence rather than a piece of it?

Arithmetic as a law of thought. Take the proposition:

(2-1) $2 + 2 = 4$.

The idealist says (2-1) expresses a 'law of thought': we'll always be forced to believe that two things and two more make four, though apart from the mind there might be five, or three, or no number at all. Russell's reply separates what a belief 137
is about from the fact that we can't help holding it. The content of (2-1) isn't that the mind has some property. For it to be true, things must have a certain property, and properties of the mind have no bearing on that. So a law of thought is a law that forces us to believe something that might be false, and idealism, followed through, destroys every reason to believe that mathematics is true. Put generally, what's called 'a priori truth' becomes an unavoidable illusion: we can't help 137
believing it, but it isn't what is the case. 136

Example 2. In the Müller-Lyer figure you can't help seeing the two lines as unequal, even after you've measured them. The compulsion is a fact about your visual system and says nothing about the lines. The idealist turns arithmetic into a Müller-Lyer illusion that nobody can ever measure.



Question 3. Could the idealist answer that things are themselves mind-constituted, so that no gap between belief and fact ever opens? What would 'there might be five things' then mean?

Arithmetic in the sensible flux. Empiricism also looks for something actual for (2-1) to be about, and pins its hopes on sense-data, while the idealist settled on thought. But sense-data have no exact boundaries and no precise unit, so 137
of sense-data you can't say 'here are two things and here are two more'. That's the clash between the 'sensible flux' and the discreteness of mathematical concepts. Count the clouds: is that wisp a third cloud or the ragged edge of the 137
second? The general defect is worse. If all evidence rests on the senses, we know nothing but sense-data, and every law and prediction is then not only rash but without any probability: to say that these data make that event probable is to use a principle of probability, which no evidence from the senses can prove. 137

Question 4. Does counting need exact boundaries, or only some way of individuating? Two coins on a table are two, though their edges blur under a microscope.

Two worlds. Both rivals search for something actual, mind or sense-data, to be the subject matter of arithmetic. The 137
way out starts with a concession. The empiricist's complaint is sound, but it affects only applied mathematics. Pure mathematics is indifferent to what actual things there are, so it can be exact however messy the flux. Its propositions can 137
be expressed by universals alone: where you'd expect a particular entity as the term of a relation it has a variable, and so only the concept of an entity of some kind. So pure mathematics has no actual constituents, neither mental, as the 137
idealist thought, nor physical, as the empiricist thought. There are two worlds, a 'world of existence' and a 'world of essence', and pure mathematics belongs to the second. Idealism's crucial mistake was to lodge the world of essence inside 138
one region of the world of existence, i.e. the mind, and that mistake has so far blocked any satisfactory philosophy of mathematics, or indeed of a priori knowledge generally. 138

The realist thesis. Platonism, then, isn't a dogmatic assumption. It's what you're left with if (2-1) is exactly true and yet about nothing (empirically) actual. Russell calls the result 'analytic realism'. The realist half has two parts. The 133
first says that existence doesn't depend on knowledge. The regress shows that existence doesn't imply being known, so there could be a wholly material world, and things nobody knows. Notice how little this proves: it defeats the a priori 134
arguments that nothing can exist unknown, yet doesn't show that any particular thing exists independently of us.

The second part says what knowing is, and it does much more work. Knowing an object is a direct relation between a mind and the object. Nothing changes in the mind, knowing isn't having an idea of what's known, and mind and object needn't share a nature. That's what enables us to know essences without dragging them into the mind. Universals don't 134
exist as particulars do. They 'subsist'. They don't depend on the mind causally, since they aren't in time, or logically, 135
since a simple depends on nothing and a complex only on its constituents. So the laws of logic are as objective as the law 136
of gravity. The mind can recognise relations between universals, but it can't create them. 136

Sense-data (=Lockean and Berkeleyan ‘ ideas ’ repackaged) are different. There’s no general reason against naive realism, on which sense-data are the physical objects and persist unperceived. But the traditional empiricist view is that a sense-datum depends causally on the subject as well as on the object, and exists only while a relation, partly spatial and partly psychological, holds between them. So sense-data are subjective, but causally, not logically, and they’re objects before the mind, not in it, inner sense apart. The physical object is then a ‘ thing in itself ’ in a deflationary sense: not known directly, its very existence resting on a precarious induction, yet describable, so that we can know all that physics says about it. The sensible and physical worlds most plausibly share no member and merely correspond, and in dreams the correspondence fails. 136 135 136 136

Question 5. If knowing changes nothing in the mind, what’s the difference between a mind that knows (2-1) and one that doesn’t, and where does error get in? And if what we know of the physical object is what physics says about its relations, has Kant been escaped or restated?

Remark 6. See Handout 3 for further details on ‘ direct ’ knowledge relation.

THE ANALYTIC THESIS. Whenever a bears R to b there’s a complex, a in relation R to b. Complexes presuppose simples, simples don’t presuppose complexes, and a constituent is exactly the same thing inside a complex as outside it. Russell’s opponents hold that a constituent, as such, isn’t quite what it is in itself, but is changed by becoming a constituent. That’s the doctrine of internal relations, and he diagnoses it as a confusion of the practical identity of people and things in daily life with logical identity. 134 134

Example 7. A man changes when he marries. Does that make the spouses anything but two people, each of whom we can consider on their own, incompletely but without error? No. Marriage causes changes, so the husband isn’t quite the man the bachelor was, but the analysis of a complex is ‘ not its biography ’. 134

The atoms come in two flavours:

Definition 8. A ‘ particular ’ is a term that can occur in a complex only as a term, never as a predicate or relation. A ‘ universal ’ is a term that can also occur as a predicate or relation: diversity, causality, father, white. 135

Universals are Russell’s Platonic ideas. Particulars keep the logical side of the old notion of substance, being only subjects of predicates or terms of relations, and drop its metaphysical side, permanent and independent existence. A particular may last an instant and may depend causally on other existents, and only particulars exist in the narrow sense. Known universals are ‘ concepts ’, known particulars ‘ sense-data ’. The view is ‘ logical atomism ’, and its atoms are purely logical: they needn’t persist in time or occupy space. 135 135

Example 9. So motion is handled without anything flowing. Take the complex ‘ a at point p at time t ’. Put t' for t and there may be no such complex, while there is one of a at p' at t', and then a has moved between t and t'. Take a away and the complex is gone, but let the complex go and a, p and t all remain. That asymmetry is the analytic thesis. 135