

## 24.01 Classics of Western Philosophy

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### VI. Russell

#### Lecture 22. The Problems of Philosophy

1. *Chapter II: The existence of matter.* If we cannot be sure of the independent existence of objects, then *a fortiori*, we cannot be sure of the existence of other people, since we know them only via their bodies. Perhaps ‘the whole outer world is nothing but a dream, and...we alone exist’. Russell says that while this skeptical hypothesis can’t be proven false, there is no reason to believe it. He consciously invokes Descartes and the method of doubt.

2. *Russell’s evaluation of Descartes.* In presenting the method of doubt, Descartes performs a great service to philosophy. But his *cogito* argument is not as secure as he thought. What is quite certain is not the existence of the ‘I’, as in e.g. ‘I am seeing a brown colour’—only that ‘a brown colour is being seen’. There is no guarantee of an individual persisting beyond that perception. But I am certain that e.g. a brown colour is being seen. We are, in short, *certain of our own sense data*.

3. *Can we regard sense data as signs of physical objects?* Common sense says of course, and that denying this would be absurd. But what are our reasons for thinking sense data are signs of physical objects? One reason is that we want physical objects to be *public*. Sense data are private to the minds of the perceiver—yet we want to say that somehow we all perceive the same table, that it is the one table that can be seen, touched, bought or sold.

4. *Publicity reason is question-begging* (1106). These reasons for thinking sense data are signs of physical objects presuppose that there are other people, but this begs the question at issue. A condition of knowing that there are other people is knowing that there are physical objects, which is precisely what is in question.

5. *Other reasons for believing in the existence of matter*

We must therefore, if possible, find, in our own purely private experiences, characteristics which show, or tend to show, that there are in the world things other than ourselves and our private experiences.

We can only appeal to reasons that aren’t question begging, reasons that don’t draw on anything beyond our own experience.

6. *Inference to the most simple explanation.* There is no logically valid argument whose conclusion is that physical objects exist. However, the hypothesis that they exist gives us a more straightforward and simple explanation of our sense data than any other. Consider what happens when we watch a cat cross a room. If it is merely a bundle of sense data, it ceases to exist when it vanishes from sight, under the table; and mysteriously springs into being again a moment later. And as for the case of the hungry cat—

...the behavior of the sense data which represent the cat to me, though it seems quite natural when regarded as an expression of hunger, becomes utterly inexplicable when regarded as mere movements and changes of patches of colour, which are as incapable of hunger as a triangle is of playing football. (1107)

7. *Chapter III. The Nature of Matter.* Having established, as well as he can, the existence of matter, Russell asks, what is the nature of matter? And he offers an answer very like Descartes', except that he takes it from science, rather than from an *a priori* argument. 'The only properties which science assigns to [matter] are position in space, and the power of motion according to the laws of motion'. Science, according to Russell, does not actually deny the existence of other properties of matter, but no other properties are useful to its task of explanation.

8. *Appearance and reality, again.* Russell contrasts the light we see directly with the light described by physics; likewise, the space we see directly with the space of physics. He also says the real space is 'public', and the apparent spaces are 'private (*Query*—but how can the real space be 'public' if no-one ever directly sees it?) What then is the relation between the sense-datum appearance and the scientific reality? Again Russell's reply is very like that of Descartes. The sense data are caused by the physical things, and correspond to them: the structure of the sense data corresponds to that in the physical world, without necessarily resembling it in any other way. Our knowledge of physical reality is, in a certain sense, relational:

We can know the properties of the relations required to preserve the correspondence with sense data, but we cannot know the nature of the terms between which the relations hold (1109).

For example, we can infer from the differences in colour that there are differences in the corresponding wave-motions, but this doesn't mean we know the physical objects as they are in themselves: 'the physical objects themselves remain unknown in their intrinsic nature, so far at least as can be discovered by means of the senses' (1110)

9. *The value of philosophy.* Russell concludes with some reflections about philosophy itself.

Philosophy is to be studied, not for the sake of any definite answer to its questions, since no definite answers can, as a rule, be known to be true, but rather for the sake of the questions themselves; because these questions enlarge our conception of what is possible, enrich our intellectual imagination and diminish the dogmatic assurance which closes the mind against speculation; but above all because, through the greatness of the universe which philosophy contemplates, the mind also is rendered great, and becomes capable of that union with the universe which constitutes its highest good.