

## DISCUSSION.

### BERTRAND RUSSELL ON NEO-REALISM.

THERE must be many who agree with the present writer that, in the recrudescence of non-idealistic tendencies, contemporary philosophy has lost more, through the necessity of traversing roads already travelled, than it has gained by the better delimitation of the issue between idealism and realism. All these should read with special satisfaction Mr. Bertrand Russell's papers, in successive numbers of the *Monist* for 1914. In *The Problems of Philosophy* Mr. Russell had already indicated his disagreement with the usual realistic criticism of idealism as 'plainly absurd' and had openly conceived of sense-data as mental.<sup>1</sup> In these more recent papers he gives reason for his dissent from that emphatic form of neo-realism which he aptly names 'neutral monism,' the theory "that the things commonly regarded as mental and the things commonly regarded as physical do not differ in respect of any intrinsic property . . . but only in respect of arrangement and context" (p. 161).<sup>2</sup> According to this view consciousness is a relation between objects comparable to the spatial or the temporal relation; and "ideas of chairs and tables are identical with chairs and tables but are conceived in their mental not in their physical context."

This reduction of consciousness to a relation perfectly comparable with physical relations is opposed by Russell primarily because such a reduction is inconsistent with our introspection. Being aware of my consciousness of x (a color, for example) is different, he shows, from being aware of a relation between x (the color) and y (whether y be taken as another color, or as a physiological process. Cf. p. 185; pp. 172-3; p. 436).

"It is difficult," Russell points out (in the second place) for neutral monism "to define the respect in which the whole of my experience is different from the things that lie outside." It is difficult, in other words, to account for the distinction actually made between myself and other realities. R. B. Perry's naïve explanation of a self, as that which is connected with a nervous system, is disposed of by the obvious fact that "in order to know that such and such a thing

<sup>1</sup> Cf. pp. 27, 29 f., 33 ff.

<sup>2</sup> These references are to the pages of *The Monist*, volume XXIV, 1914.

lies within my experience it is not necessary to know anything about my nervous system." In fact, as Russell is at pains to urge, in a later article (p. 591), "a knowledge of physics and physiology must not be assumed in theory of knowledge."

Neutral monism, in the third place, is entirely unable to account for the individuality of experience. A's experiencing of an object is one fact, and B's experiencing of the object is another fact, and neutral monism has no terms in which to describe the distinction (p. 438).

A final objection to neutral monism is its inability to account for error. If there were no distinction between mental and physical reality we should have to find in the physical world an "entity corresponding to false belief."

In the face of these trenchant criticisms one may well wonder by what right Russell retains his position among the neo-realists. The main reason for his opposition to idealism is, of course, his belief that 'extra-mental' objects exist. It will be well to scrutinize more closely the grounds of this belief. Mr. Russell argues effectively against solipsism in the extreme sense in which "our present experience" is asserted to be "all-embracing." For, he points out, "we may know propositions of the form: 'there are things having such a property' even when we do not know any instance." For example, I may remember that I yesterday knew, what I have to-day forgotten, the name of X, to whom I am being presented. But this disproof of solipsism is as compatible with a personalistic as with a 'realistic' philosophy. In truth, Mr. Russell never argues the existence of non-mental realities. In *The Problems of Philosophy* there occurs, to be sure (p. 74), the implication that the physical object must exist as cause of such and such sense-data. But, for the most part, both universals, "which may be experienced by two minds," and physical objects or 'things of sense,' are assumed to exist, somewhat as Mr. Russell assumes minds other than my own—though he calls this last a mere 'working hypothesis.'

To confess the truth, Russell's philosophy, as so far outlined, resembles nothing so much as old-fashioned Cartesian dualism. Of course he is not a dualist in the 'epistemological' sense of the term which the neo-realists have made fashionable, that is, he wisely rejects the 'representative' or copy-theory of knowledge. But he retains the ultimate distinctness of subject and object of knowledge. From the charge of holding so comprehensible a position Russell, however, is unhappily freed by his cavalier treatment of the self. In Russell's view, consciousness is a *sui generis* relation called experience,

or acquaintance, or awareness, between the subject, "an entity which is acquainted with something," and the object, "any entity with which something is acquainted" (p. 438. Cf. p. 1). But nothing can be known about the subject-term of this relation. "Subjects," he says (p. 441), "are not given in acquaintance"; nothing can be known as to their intrinsic nature; "they are known merely as referents for the relation of acquaintance . . . and other psychical relations."

For this conclusion Mr. Russell argues almost exclusively by reference to "Hume's inability to perceive himself" supplemented by the observation, "I think most unprejudiced observers would agree" (p. 440). It is very difficult to treat this argument seriously. If Mr. Russell is really concerned to eliminate the self from knowledge he should certainly take into account Kant's Third Antinomy and Transcendental Deduction of the Categories as well as Part IV of Hume's *Treatise*, Book I. He should analyze the full implication of 'knowing the subject' at all, even as mere 'referent.' He should explain the difference, on which, in his argument against neutral monism, he so strongly insists, between A's experience and B's experience. Finally, he should endeavor in concrete cases to reduce to mere 'referent' the 'I' which he so constantly invokes, as, for example, in the statement: "Memory makes us call past experiences ours. When we can remember experiencing something we include the remembered experiencing with our present experience as part of one person's experience." By this statement, Russell certainly is assuming that 'I am the same at one time and at another' and thus no mere referent; and he makes the same tacit implication of a really experienced 'I' in the attempt to explain "a certain unity important to realize but hard to analyze in 'my present experience'" by defining 'I' and 'now' in terms of '*my* present experience'<sup>1</sup> (pp. 5-6). The truth is that Mr. Russell, though an expert logician and often a good (if amateur) psychologist, does not always distinguish between logical validity and actual experience. No formal difficulty is involved in treating the subject as a referent and in regarding consciousness as a relation distinct from the subject. But, inconvenient as the fact may be from the standpoint of the logical formula, consciousness as actually experienced and as normally described is a self being conscious.

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<sup>1</sup> *Italics mine.*

Since the foregoing paragraphs were written Mr. Russell has published, in *The Monist* of July, 1915, a paper on "The Ultimate Constituents of Matter" which supplements his conception of extra-mental reality and adds to his arguments against the idealistic account of physical reality. But for an obstinate error of 'common sense' Russell would assent, he declares, to its theory of extra-mental reality. Common sense is clearly correct in believing that what we see is physical and is as clearly at fault in believing that what is physical must be persistent (p. 401).<sup>1</sup> Russell holds first, that sense-data—what we see, hear, and touch—are "extra-mental . . . and among the ultimate constituents of matter"<sup>2</sup> and second in opposition to common sense that "the persistent particles of mathematical physics" are "logical constructions" (p. 402). Space, so far from being 'all-embracing,' is a largely individual affair. Each man's extra-mental object occupies a place (and time) of its own.

The theory of a multitude of three-dimensional spaces—not to name the "crude space of six dimensions" (p. 416)—might be argued for, Russell suggests, by the aid of symbolic logic, but the argument would be too difficult and too technical to be embarked upon in this article (p. 415.) The extra-mental reality of sense-data, so far as he argues it at all, he bases on two distinctions: on the fact that 'what I see,' and 'what I hear' are to be distinguished from 'seeing' and 'hearing' (p. 404), and on the fact that "colors and noises are not mental in the sense of having that . . . peculiarity which belongs to beliefs and wishes and volitions" (p. 405). But it is clear that the first of these arguments tells against solipsism only and that the second does not necessarily prove more than the fact that there is a difference between perceptual experience and other types of consciousness. Accordingly, the reader comes with great surprise upon the concluding sentences in which Mr. Russell, while disclaiming the conviction that his theory "is certainly true," adds that it "may be true" and that this is "more than can be said for any other theory" (p. 417), except that of Leibniz which he regards as "closely analogous" to his own. The idealist, as the earlier paragraphs of this discussion have indicated, concurs in Russell's criticism of other realistic systems and may well agree that, given Russell's constant, unjustified assumption of existent extra-mental reality, his account of it "may be true." But the idealistic reader will also insist that Mr. Russell's consideration

<sup>1</sup> References, in what follows, are to *The Monist*, volume XXV, 1915.

<sup>2</sup> Russell notes the approximation to the view of Nunn and to that of S. Alexander.

of the non-realistic position is, in an extreme degree, superficial; that he has not so much as touched upon the fundamental argument against the existence of non-mental realities and that he has argued against only the solipsistic form of idealism.

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