

BERKELEY AND RUSSELL

Ted Sider
Intro Philosophy

1. Berkeley

Berkeley solves the problem of building back from Cartesian foundations by “downsizing”. He says that the “external world” is really just ideas.

But does this really solve the problem? How do we know that there are any ideas other than our own? We still haven’t gotten beyond Descartes’s foundation.

2. Russell on sense data

Experiences are a function of perspective:

- Color: depends on lighting
- Shape: depends on angle
- Touch: depends on how hard you press on the thing

Thus it becomes evident that the real table, if there is one, is not the same as what we immediately experience by sight or touch or hearing. The real table, if there is one, is not *immediately* known to us at all, but must be an inference from what is immediately known.

Let us give the name of ‘sense-data’ to the things that are immediately known in sensation: such things as colours, sounds, smells, hardnesses, roughnesses, and so on...It is plain that if we are to know anything about the table, it must be by means of the sense-data — brown colour, oblong shape, smoothness, etc. — which we associate with the table; but, for the reasons which have been given, we cannot say that the table *is* the sense data, or even that the sense-data are directly properties of the table. Thus a problem arises as to the relation of the sense-data to the real table, supposing there is such a thing. (Russell, p. 234)

3. Russell on simplicity

There is no logical impossibility in the supposition that the whole of life is a dream, in which we ourselves create all the objects that come before us. But although this is not logically impossible, there is no reason whatever to suppose that it is true; and it is, in fact, a less simple hypothesis, viewed as a means of accounting for the facts of our own life, than the common-sense hypothesis that there really are objects independent of us, whose action on us causes our sensations. (Russell, p. 238)

Russell's view:

- i) We can be certain of our sense data
- ii) Although we cannot be certain of what causes our sense data, it is reasonable to adopt the simplest explanation of our sense data
- iv) Belief in the external world is the simplest explanation of our sense data
- iii) Simplicity is determined, at least in part, by the extent to which a small number of hypotheses can explain a large number of sense data

Arriving at beliefs in science:

- curve-fitting
- Newton on terrestrial and planetary motion
- physicists seek “simple”, “elegant” laws

Impact on our debate:

- answer to Descartes: give up on certainty
- answer to Berkeley: material objects are inferred, not perceived