



Critique of Russell's THE ANALYSIS OF MIND

Abstract: This essay examines a few of the theories of Bertrand Russell about our mind. His comprehensive psychological study tries to reconcile materialistic and anti-materialistic tendencies in science. He postulates a fundamental reality ("neutral stuff") out of which both mind and matter consists.

Bertrand Russell:

You may be conscious of a friend either by seeing him or by "thinking" of him; and by "thought" you can be conscious of objects which cannot be seen, such as the human race, or physiology. "Thought" in the narrower sense is that form of consciousness which consists in "ideas" as opposed to impressions or mere memories.

*(The Analysis of Mind, Routledge, London 1995 *** Lecture I, p. 13)*

Critique:

Russell tries to give a first rough definition of what he considers thinking essentially is. In the first sentence he only enumerates instances of thinking, especially the two primary functions of perception and imagination. Then, in the second sentence, he boils thinking down to ideas as opposed to impressions or memories. This is the Humean or empiricistic view. It is also the common-sense view or what I call the *primitive view of mind*.

Russell starts from the common experience we have of thinking. As science and philosophy have proven many times, the common view is more often than not mistaken. The common empirical view of thinking does not imply by necessity that the true essence and nature of thinking is just the way it appears to us in our daily use of thought. To gain more insight into the nature of thinking, a deeper contemplation is necessary. "Ideas" are the copies of impressions, as Russell states several lines further above, and not ideas in the Platonic sense. Russell determines the structure of thought completely on empirical grounds, disposing of the a priori transcendental structure postulated by Kant.

Bertrand Russell:

According to him [Meinong] there are three elements involved in the thought of an object. These three he calls the act, the content and the object. ... The content, Meinong argues, must not be confounded with the object, since the content must exist in my mind at the moment when I have the thought, whereas the object need not do so. The object may be something past or future; it may be physical, not mental; it may be something abstract...; it may be something imaginary.... But in all these cases ... the content exists when the thought exists... The first criticism I have to make is that the act seems unnecessary and fictitious. The occurrence of the content of a thought

constitutes the occurrence of the thought.

(*The Analysis of Mind*, Routledge, London 1995 *** Lecture I, p. 16f.)

Critique:

In the first part of the quotation, Russell describes Meinong's view of thinking as consisting of three components, that is, the act, the content, and the object. Russell agrees with the distinction between content and object, but argues that the act is superfluous and can be dispensed with. Meinong considers the content of our thinking to be that which occurs in our mind while we are actively thinking of something. The object can be, for example, something material, such as a tree, which is regarded as independent of the mind. So, whether I am thinking of a tree or not, the tree does exist somehow in an independent material world outside of my mind. This rigorous duality implicit in Meinong's view is rejected by Russell in the further development of his ideas in this book. Russell sticks to a differentiation between content and object. I wonder if this may not be a purely conceptual distinction. If mind and matter are really two aspects of the same "neutral stuff", as Russell believes, then there must be some fundamental identity between mind and the material object perceived. The object that I call a "tree" is identical with the actual content of my consciousness or my thinking. There is no independent world outside of our mind, since we only know the content of our mind. Therefore we cannot argue for an independent object, such as a tree. What about mental objects, such as an imagination or an abstract object, such as truth? Here a differentiation between object and content would be even more questionable. What is in my mind at the moment when I think of something is just the object, the thing, that what it is. That means that eternal truths or Platonic ideas or any other a priori proposition cannot exist independently of our ever-changing flow of thought. For example, the truth, that the three angles of a triangle always sum up to 180 degrees is not something that only occurs temporally in our thinking when we think of a triangle, but is thought of as eternally true, even if there would be no human mind to think of it (the last claim may be questionable, too). I resolved this dilemma with my theory of the potentiality of all thoughts and ideas in Hyponoesis (Universal Mind).

Bertrand Russell:

I think the person is not an ingredient in the single thought: he is rather constituted by relations of the thoughts to each other and to the body...It would be better to say "it thinks in me", like "it rains here"; or better still, "there is a thought in me."

(*The Analysis of Mind*, Routledge, London 1995 *** Lecture I, p. 18)

Critique:

This is a very interesting view that Russell postulates here in relation to the "I" in "I think". He believes that there is no separate self or ego that constitutes the person or the subject of thinking. The totality of our thoughts constitute the person, the subject of thinking, but not as a necessary or independent subject, but as a contingent emergent product of thought-relations. There is first the criticism that I have to bring forth: if not an ego or person is volitionally expressing his thoughts or decisions, what is it then that thinks or wills or decides in us? If thinking is a random or accidental process, then will and decisions are not free but fully predetermined. But Russell accedes freedom of will and of thought. His argument here is flawed because he does not define his "it" in "it thinks in me". What is this "it"? Only the product of relationships? Then it must be a contingent "it", since the product of relationships does not imply a necessary structure such as that of a personality. Contingency in thinking does also not imply freedom of will, but randomness, which is actually contradictory to any true intentional freedom of will.

Also the second phrase, "there is a thought in me", is no better as standing alone, as a vague and undefined notion. How does a thought occur in me? By accident? Then we are again at the level of contingency. By will? Then we need an intentional subject that wills or desires or decides.

Russell does not convince in his attempt to get rid of the subject or person in thinking, especially also by using an unfortunate analogy with raining. Raining is a process that happens contingently without any intention or purpose involved. But thinking involves **naturaliter** intention and purpose. Thinking is a teleological process, nature is not (at least no longer in the eyes of modern science). Although the idea uttered here by Russell is interesting, we are left unconvinced with a very vague notion. He does not succeed in disposing of the person or the self as the central core of thought. The view expressed here is mainly in response to Meinong's notion of an act of thinking, which Russell rejects as the "ghost of the subject". I do not understand, however, why Russell thinks that Meinong's act of thinking is the same as the person or the self of thinking. This assumption underlies this text. Meinong believes that thinking is the act of a person or soul. Russell, without logical evidence, claims that this is unnecessary, since the person is nothing else or above the relationships of thoughts. Even if we concede this notion, there still remains the problem of intentionality in our thoughts. Who directs or causes the occurrences of thoughts. Certainly thoughts do not occur in my mind only randomly, without my willing them. So long as we cannot account for intentionality and volition in a different way, we have to stick with some kind of self or person or subject. Russell thinks that a "bundle of thoughts" that interrelates and constitutes an inherent unity can as such be assigned to a certain person or body. The assignment of thoughts to a certain person is not the problem, which Russell seems somehow unaware of, although he concedes that "this is a large question".

Bertrand Russell:

I do not myself believe that there is any value in this threefold division of the contents of mind [i.e. knowledge, desire, feeling]. I believe that sensations (including images) supply all the "stuff" of the mind, and that everything else can be analyzed into groups of sensations related in various ways, or characteristics of sensations or of groups of sensations.

([The Analysis of Mind, Routledge, London 1995 *** Lecture III, p. 69](#))

Critique:

Like the English Empiricists, Russell regards sensations as the "stuff" of the mind, that means, all content of the mind is basically sensational. Every thought is nothing else than a special kind of sensation or a special kind of relation to a sensation or to a group of sensations. I believe that this notion is, first, highly simplistic and is indicative of an underlying naive realism and, second, is based on common-sense concepts, which are derived from common experience. It is a known fact, that ordinary men do not use the large potential of their minds at all, but only a tiny fraction of it. So, to infer from our narrow-minded common experience to the totality of our mind is not only a logical fallacy but also a presumptive and arrogant way of science and modern philosophy to deal with more complex structures such as the mind. Russell is guilty of such a superficial way of thinking by sticking stubbornly to an empiricist notion that has long been considered mendacious and questionable.

Moreover, Russell, although proposing a bi-aspectual notion ("neutral stuff"), falls back irremediably into a positivistic if not materialistic attitude. Making sensations the stuff of our mind is tantamount to making our mind dependent on physical properties and structures. Without sensations there is no mind, that must be the inevitable conclusion from Russell's thesis. Sensations are always connected to bodily or physical functions and processes. That means, however, that we could not think something independent of any sensational input. A priori synthetic propositions would not be possible or any metaphysical principle. Just take the concept or idea of "God" or "Soul". How can we think of it, although there has never been a sensation such as "God", at least not for ordinary people. Do we have to regard these notions, like Kant, as transcendental ideas that only serve the purpose of religion or ethics but cannot be scientifically verified? Even if that is true, Russell's thesis is still wrong, since we can nevertheless think of some entity called "God". Also, all formal logical propositions and laws would not be valid if we take sensations to be the only stuff of our mind. Logical laws are a priori, as demonstrated clearly

by Husserl. They are valid independent of empirical verification and they are not derived from sensations, at all, as Hume believed it (actually he relegated logical laws to habits).

Bertrand Russell:

*I believe that the stuff of our mental life, as opposed to its relations and structure, consists wholly of sensations and images. Sensations are connected with matter in the way I tried to explain in Lecture V, i.e. each is a member of a system which is a certain physical object. ... They [Images] are caused by association with a sensation, not by a stimulus external to the nervous system. (The Analysis of Mind, Routledge, London 1995 *** Lecture VI, p. 109)*

Critique:

Images are produced entirely in the mind although they are associated with sensations, but not caused by them. Russell thinks that sensations are only the psychological aspect of a physical object or system that also has material properties. There is only one "neutral" stuff. If there are images, as Russell believes, how can images exist without belonging to the fundamental sensomaterial system, that is reality? Images are only associated to sensations, but not caused by them. That means images can exist independently of sensations and are therefore substantially different from sensations. This would again evoke the ghost of Cartesian duality. Although Russell says that images are only distinguished from sensations by their different causation, they nevertheless lack the connection to matter, which is characteristic of sensations, as assumed by Russell. Images are not caused by a stimulus outside of the brain but only by association with a sensation. How and why is this association produced?

If I think of my friend who is not actually present, I recall his image in my mind. Russell now thinks that the images of our mind are always connected to some actual or past sensation. That means, that at the moment of imagining or thinking, the sensation has to be present in order to produce the image. I think that my thought of my friend can be without an image or if there is an image, the thought is before the image. In either case I have a thought that is neither sensation nor image, but something else, pure thought. I believe that thoughts are the stuff of our mind and sensations or images only the contingent in- or output. There can even be pure thoughts, like in the mind of a philosopher. The sensation can be present in my mind in a different way: as a recollection of my memory. In this case too, there is still the problem that there is first a thought and this thought is somehow connected to an image or sensation. Sensations are not produced by the mind but by external stimuli. Images are produced by sensations. That means, that images are indirectly produced by external stimuli, and that's exactly what Russell in his definition of image denies.

The clear distinction between images and sensations are blurred in Russell's notion, since he reduces mind to a bundle of sensations, as Hume already did before him. (see also p. 117: "I think that images, in the actual condition of science, cannot be brought under the causal laws of physics, *though perhaps ultimately they may be.*")

Also, according to Russell, images are dependent on corresponding sensations, otherwise there would be no association. I can think of a squared circle, but never can I associate this thought with a sensation, only with some parts of it, such as a square, or a circle, but not both together. I can think of abstract objects, such as truth, freedom, equality, God, etc. that can never be associated with sensations. And what about inner experience or introspection, which Russell also rejects? Self-reflection of the mind, such as Russell applied for writing his lectures, is something that must not necessarily be based on sensations at all.

In the same lecture, on page 117, Russell claims:

I think that observation shows us nothing that is not composed of sensations and images, and that images differ from sensations in their causal laws, not intrinsically.

Russell assumes as an apriori axiom or principle his thesis of sensations as the only stuff of the mind. He needs to uphold this monoistic thesis in order to prevent falling back into dualism.

I do not agree with Russell. Observation, especially contemplation and self-reflection, clearly falsifies his principle. The problem is, that his way of rational and analytic thinking does not reveal anything else. There are different modes of thought that great thinkers in all ages have applied. And reading the texts of these great philosophers proves unmistakably, that there are other aspects of the reality that are not composed of sensations or images. Since Russell does not explain what this "neutral stuff" is, but only postulates it, and since he actually proposes a psychology of the mind and not a philosophy, we can condone his materialistic or sensationalistic views.

To falsify the above thesis, just think of thoughts. Every thought we have in our mind is not a sensation. It may be an image, but most of the time our thoughts are not associated with images. We do not think in terms of images, but in terms of concepts. And concepts are abstractions of sensations and images. Therefore, my mind is not composed of sensations and images. Also Russell's thesis would imply that our mind has the same or similar characteristics as sensations, since it is composed of them. That is not true at all. Sensations are bound to matter and have physical properties, whereas our perception and experience of the world is different from the material objects themselves. Furthermore, his thesis does not account for concepts and universals, the very essence of our mind.

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