

RUSSELL LETTERS

RUSSELL'S JULY 1915 LETTER ON SENSE-DATA

I. INTRODUCTION, by OMAR W. NASIM

The following letter by Bertrand Russell was written to the *Journal of Philosophy* (then called the *Journal of Philosophy, Psychology, and Scientific Methods*) to correct a misrepresentation of his views on the nature of sense-data that were first reported anonymously in the *Athenaeum* and then repeated in the *Journal of Philosophy*. The *Athenaeum* report, published April 24, 1915, is a summary of a session of the Aristotelian Society, held twelve days earlier, at which C.D. Broad read a paper on "Phenomenalism," later published in vol. 15 (n.s.) of the *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*. Russell was present at the session and opened the discussion to which others, such as H. Wildon Carr and R.M. McIver, contributed. Russell's letter to the *Journal of Philosophy* was written on June 7, 1915 and published just over a month later.

In this letter, Russell is at pains to emphasize that his view, in opposition to what is stated in the *Athenaeum* and *Journal of Philosophy* reports, is that sense-data are not mental, but physical. In fact, Russell asserts, "my whole philosophy of physics rests upon the view that the sense-datum is purely physical." But this was not always so clearly the case for Russell. In his 1912 *Problems of Philosophy (PP)*, Russell argued that sense-data are non-mental and private – this is his doctrine of "physiological subjectivity." But as in G.E. Moore's lectures of 1910-11 on sense-data, perception, and the external world (published in 1953) from which Russell borrowed some of his views on sense-data for *PP*, nowhere does Russell say in *PP* that sense-data are physical, and this is for at least two reasons. First, he took for granted that whatever is physical may persist unchanged even when not perceived – a key assumption to his distinction between physical objects and sensible objects at that time (*PP*, 20-1). And second, it was by way of an important paper he wrote in 1912 soon after *PP*, but never published, called "On ter" that he was led to seriously engage with the writings of T.P. Nunn and Samuel Alexander. Both of their works not only revealed to Russell the problems associated with taking the persistence of

physical objects to the extreme – partly demonstrated in their own insistence on the non-mental nature of sensible objects – but who also provided the very vocabulary and notion of sensible objects as being physical. It is only in his 1913 manuscript *Theory of Knowledge* (TK), written after this first engagement with Nunn and Alexander, that Russell expresses the claim that sense-data are physical (TK, 22), later so essential to his work of 1914. And it was only two months before Broad's presentation, in an address to the Philosophical Society of Manchester on February 15, 1915, and later published as "The Ultimate Constituents of Matter" (UCM) that Russell clearly points out two common errors prevalent in relevant discussions at the time: "the first of these is the error that what we see, or perceive through any of our other senses, is subjective: the second is the belief that what is physical must be persistent." (UCM, 128). A sense-datum may therefore be physical without thereby implying that it persists when unperceived – something that would otherwise already assume too much about an external world, as Nunn, Alexander, and Russell of *PP* did assume.

Finally, it is significant to note that when Russell comes to characterize in the letter what it might mean for something to be mental he directly borrows a characterization advanced by G.F. Stout against Alexander (Stout 1909). Stout was a philosopher who struggled to make sense of the connection between the mental act, or relation, of perceiving, sensing, enjoying, etc, a *mental* sensible object, and an *extra-mental* object. On the one hand, the removal of mind for Stout would involve not only the "annihilation" of mental relations, but would also thereby necessitate the loss of its relata, the sensible object, thus demonstrating, due to this dependence, the latter's mental nature. Russell, on the other hand, suggests that what is lost in such a removal is only the relation of perceiving, believing, remembering, etc, and not any particular object which may be a relatum in such a fact. What is fundamental therefore for Russell's philosophy of physics, matter, and the external world, is that a mental relation of sensing, perceiving, etc, has for its object something physical – we are thus directly connected, as subjects with minds and bodies to the domain of physics. There is a lot going on in Russell's letter, and thus much I have left out, but considering the context and all those implicated, it is no wonder that he wished to publically correct the report's misconstrual of his position on the nature of sense-data.

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II. THE LETTER

To the Editors of the *Journal of Philosophy, Psychology, and Scientific Methods*:

In a quotation from the *Athenaeum* printed in this JOURNAL,¹ I am represented as having said, "there may be perspectives where there are no minds; but we can not know anything of what sort of perspectives they may be, for the sense-datum is mental." I did not see the *Athenaeum*, and do not remember what I said, but it can not have been what I am reported as having said, for I hold strongly that the sense-datum is *not* mental – indeed my whole philosophy of physics

¹ Volume XII., page 308.

rests upon the view that the sense-datum is purely physical. The fact of being a datum is mental, but a particular which is a datum is not logically dependent upon being a datum. A particular which is a datum does, however, appear to be casually dependent upon sense-organs and nerves and brain. Since we carry those about with us, we can not discover what sensibilia, if any, belong to perspectives from places where there is no brain. And since a particular of which we are aware is a sense-datum, we can not be aware of particulars which are not sense-data, and can, therefore, have no empirical evidence as to their nature. This is merely the "egocentric predicament"; it is a tautology, not a "great truth." It is for this reason, and not because "sense-data are mental," that we can not know the nature of those perspectives (if any) which belong to places where there are no minds.

I do not know what is the definition of "mental." In order to obtain a definition, I should first inquire what would necessarily be removed from the world if it were what one would naturally call a world without mind. I see no reason why colors or noises should be removed, but facts which involve such relations as perceiving, remembering, desiring, enjoying, believing would necessarily be removed. This suggests that no *particulars* of which we have experience are to be called "mental," but that certain *facts*, involving certain *relations*, constitute what is essentially mental in the world of our experience. (I use the word "fact" to designate that which makes a proposition true or false; it includes, I think, everything in the world except what is simple.) The term "mental," therefore, will be applicable to all facts involving such relations as those enumerated above. This is not yet a definition, since obviously these relations all have some common characteristic, and it must be this characteristic which will yield the proper definition of the term "mental." But I do not know what this characteristic is.

Very truly yours,

B. RUSSELL
TRINITY COLLEGE, CAMBRIDGE,
June 7, 1915

Journal of Philosophy, Psychology, and Scientific Method vol. 12,
no 14 (July 8, 1915), 391-2

APRIL 17, 1967 *NEWSWEEK* REPORT and
RUSSELL LETTER OF APRIL 24, 1967 IN REPLY

I. INTRODUCTION

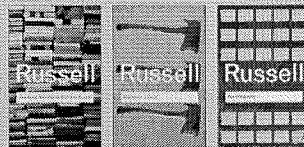
In 1967, Bertrand Russell was in the process of selling his papers to pay for the Vietnam War Crimes Tribunal and to generally fund the Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation, which had gone into debt to help finance the Tribunal. The story continues, as related in this issue's interview, as well as in the Blackwell and Ruja *Bibliography of Bertrand Russell*, Griffin *Selected Papers of Bertrand Russell*, and Perkins *Yours Faithfully, Bertrand Russell*, that the April 17, 1967 *Newsweek* reported that the proceeds of the sale were to go to "Communist forces in Vietnam."¹ Russell then replied in an April 24, 1967 letter to *Newsweek*, saying that it was false that he was giving the proceeds of the sale to the Communist forces in Vietnam. But by that time the damage was done and Russell could not sell the papers in the United States, nor get the price for them that he otherwise would have gotten.

This version of the story, however, though told in three standard reference works on Russell, is not entirely accurate as it stands. For what *Newsweek* reported was that the proceeds would go to *aid* Communist forces in Vietnam, not that they would go to the forces themselves, though it is true that Russell wrote back saying that it was false that the proceeds would go to the "Communist forces in Vietnam." But going to aid the communist forces is not the same as going to those forces directly, a possibility Russell ignored in his letter. And it is likely that many viewed, and would view today, the Vietnam Tribunal as indeed aiding North Vietnam's forces. The *Newsweek* report and Russell's reply are on the following page. JO

¹ *A Bibliography of Bertrand Russell*, vol. 2 (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 299. "Letter ... denying *Newsweek's* story ... that Russell would give the proceeds of the sale of his archives to the 'Communist forces in Vietnam.'" *The Selected Letters of Bertrand Russell: The Public Years* (Routledge, 2001), pp. 617-8. "Word got out that the university [of Texas] intended to buy the collection [of Russell's papers] and *Newsweek* carried a story saying that Russell intended to send the proceeds to North Vietnam." *Yours Faithfully, Bertrand Russell* (Chicago: Open Court, 2002), pp. 393-4. "In 1967 Russell sold his papers.... Russell denies a *Newsweek* report that proceeds from the sale will go to 'Communist forces in Vietnam.'"

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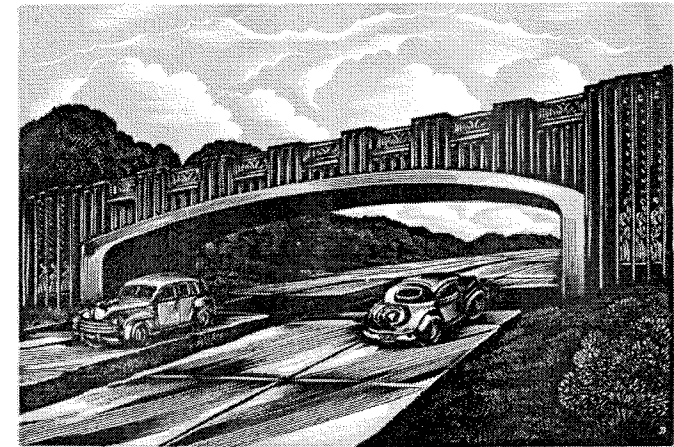
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THE BERTRAND RUSSELL SOCIETY QUARTERLY

Fall 2009 Issue

Numbers 142 - 144 / May - November 2009



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Lehman College - City University of New York