

PHIL 2606: Knowledge, Reason and Action
Lecture 15: Representative realism

Reading:

Russell, B (1912), *The Problems of Philosophy*, chapters 1-4.

1. Russell argues for a version of *representative realism*.
2. He argues for four major claims (one per chapter):
 - a. When we perceive, we are immediately aware of sense data, not physical objects.
 - b. Nevertheless, there are such things as physical objects.
 - c. Physical objects correspond to our sense data.
 - d. Although sense data are mind-dependent, physical objects are not.
3. When we perceive, we are immediately aware of sense data, not physical objects.
 - a. Different people see different colour in a table – there is no *one* colour that appears to be the colour of the table.
 - b. So, the colour that we see is not in the table. Rather, it is something that depends on us (and other factors) – a ‘sense datum’.
 - c. The ‘real’ colour is not what we see – it is something inferred from what we see. By ‘the colour of the table’ we mean: ‘the colour it will seem to have to a normal spectator from an ordinary point of view under usual conditions of light’. In itself, the table does not have any one particular colour.
 - d. The same goes for smoothness, shape, etc.
 - e. Our senses do not give us truth about the table itself, but only about the appearance of the table.
 - f. The *real* table, if there is one, is *not* what we immediately experience by sight or touch or hearing. It is not immediately known to us at all, but must be an inference from what is known.
 - g. If we know anything about the table, it must be by means of sense data. But the table is not the sense data, and they are not properties of the table.
4. Nevertheless, there are such things as physical objects.
 - a. If we are only immediately aware of our sense data, then do we have any reason to think that there *are* physical objects – things that persist when we stop sensing?
 - b. It is *possible* that there are not.
 - c. But the *most simple* hypothesis is that there *are*. It is the most simple way of explaining why, for example, our current ‘table’ sense data are similar to each other’s, and to the ‘table’ sense data we had last week.
5. Physical objects correspond to our sense data.
 - a. What is the nature of the real table?

- b. It cannot be exactly like our sense data. Its real shape, for example, must be in real space, not anybody's apparent space. Real space is public, our apparent spaces are private. So the real space, in which it has its real shape, must be different from any private space.
 - c. Nevertheless, it might *correspond* to our sense data. (Like library books correspond to their catalog.)
 - d. But all we can know about the table is whatever is required to secure the correspondence – we can know nothing of what the table is like in itself. We can know, for example, that the Earth, Moon and Sun are in a straight line during eclipse, but we cannot know what a straight line is in itself.
 - e. It is gratuitous to suppose that physical objects have colours, and therefore there is no justification for making such a supposition. The same goes for other sense data.
6. Although sense data are mind-dependent, physical objects are not.
- a. Russell argues against Berkeley's idealism, that whatever exists, or at any rate whatever can be known to exist, must be in some sense mental.
 - b. He puts Berkeley's argument this way: to be known is to be in a mind, and therefore to be mental. Hence nothing can be known but what is in some mind.
 - c. Russell claims that this is fallacious – it trades on an act/object ambiguity. When something is known, the *act* of the knowing is in a mind, but it does not follow that the *object* of the knowing is in a mind, because the act and the object are distinct.