

Last week

- The Referential Theory of Meaning (RTM) and its implausibility wrt indefinite noun phrases
- Russell's appeal to propositional functions in analysing the logical form of sentences featuring indefinite noun phrases
- Two puzzles involving RTM wrt definite descriptions
- The Meinongian response to one of these puzzles and its suggested shortcomings
- Russell's solution to the puzzles: applying the concept of propositional functions to analyse the logical form of sentences featuring definite descriptions
- The implication of RTM wrt proper names in related puzzles and Russell's view of proper names as disguised definite descriptions

OBJECTS AND SENSE DATA: THE CLAIM

Today

- Another application of Russell's strategy of claiming that sentences of a certain type turn out to be properly analysable in terms of sentences of another type
- I will follow Soames' presentation, which reads more like a presentation of a similar proposal found in Ch. 3 of Ayer's *Language, Truth and Logic*, justified by cherry-picked quotes from Russell's *Our Knowledge of the External World*

The general idea

- In his *Our Knowledge of the External World*, Russell can be seen as endorsing the following provocative suggestion:
 - Sentences about material objects are merely convenient ways of expressing more complex sentences that are purely about actually and potentially perceived sense data ('sensibilia')
- This is sometimes loosely put as: 'material objects are **logical constructions** out of sense data'
- The idea of something being a mere logical construct is not entirely outlandish. Consider:
 - 'The average child aged between 6 and 18 has had 4.7 cavities.'
- This sentence appears to commit us to the existence of an object that is an average child aged between 6 and 18...

The general idea (ctd)

- But of course, what we *really* mean is:
 - ‘The number of children between the ages of 6 and 18 multiplied by 4.7 equals the number of cavities that these children have collectively had.’
- Sentences seemingly about average children are convenient expressions of more complex sentences about individual children
- This equivalence is obvious to any competent speaker of English
- But how could one possibly cash out sentences regarding material objects in terms of actual and potential sense data?

Some further details (ctd)

- From the above passage we can surmise, for instance, that Russell thinks that
 - What is known on the basis of sensory experience when it is known that a certain material object exists in a certain location amounts to
 - a set of hypothetical statements regarding the sense data that one should expect to perceive (e.g. via our tactile or visual senses) were one to perceive other sense data (e.g. via our proprioceptive or vestibular senses)
- Russell’s more radical proposal:
 - What is known on the basis of sensory experience here is *all there is to know* regarding the existence of the material object

Some further details

- Soames provides an accessible interpretation of Russell’s proposal taking the following quote as a starting point:
 - ‘A table viewed from one place presents a different appearance from that which it presents from another place... [B]ut this language already assumes that there is a real table of which we see the appearances. Let us try to state what is known in terms of sensible objects alone... We find that as we walk round the table, we perceive a series of gradually changing visible objects. But in speaking of “walking round the table,” we have still retained the hypothesis that there is a single table connected with all the appearances. What we ought to say is that, while we have those muscular and other sensations which make us say we are walking, our visual sensations change in a continuous way... This is what we really know by experience... What is really known is a correlation of muscular and other bodily sensations with changes in visual sensations.’

Some further details (ctd)

- Note 1: this general kind of view (‘phenomenalism’) had a number of well known earlier proponents (e.g Mill and his objects as ‘permanent possibilities of sensation’)
- Note 2: the presentation given here, which follows Soames, is more faithful to Ayer’s later version than it is to Russell’s
 - What Russell appears to take himself to be doing seems closer to Moore’s *real analysis* (analysing the nature of material objects) than the kind of linguistic analysis suggested here
 - As Soames notes, Russell’s analysis involves his identifying objects with *sets of similar sense data across ‘perspectives’* (maximal sets of sense data that one could perceive at any time)
- Note 3: Unlike others, Russell does *not* take sense-data to be mind-dependent. He writes: ‘I regard sense-data as not mental, and as being, in fact, part of the actual subject-matter of physics.’

Russell's epistemological motivation

OBJECTS AND SENSE DATA: MOTIVATING THE CLAIM

- Soames suggests that Russell's motivation is primarily *epistemological*
- He quotes the following:

'Verification consists always in the occurrence of an expected sense datum . . . Now if an expected sense datum constitutes a verification, what was asserted must have been about sense-data'
- Note: 'verification' \approx 'provision of a reason to believe to be true'

Russell's epistemological motivation (ctd)

- Soames finds in Russell's quote something like the following argument:
 - (1) For any sentence H about material objects, there is some sentence O about sense data such that the truth of O would verify H
 - (2) For any sentences O and H , if the truth of O would verify H , and O is about sense data, then there exists a sentence H' that is about sense data and is such that H is equivalent to H'

 - (3) For any sentence H about material objects, there exists a sentence H' that is about sense data, such that H is equivalent to H' (from (1) and (2))

Soames' rejoinder

- Soames takes issue with premise (2) of the previous argument
- He argues that the following generalisation of (2) is false
 - (2') For any sentences O and H , if the truth of O would verify H , then there exists a sentence H' that is about the same kind of thing that O is about and is such that H is equivalent to H'
- One of his counterexamples:

Statements about *historical events* can be verified by the truth of certain sentences that are about *historical records* but cannot be translated into sentences that are solely about historical records
- He then argues that, to the extent that (2') is false, (2) requires special justification

Soames' rejoinder (ctd)

- Soames then consider some ways in which a the truth of a sentence could be taken to verify another and conclude that even if these were the only possible ways, premise (2) would follow *only if* one endorsed too restrictive a conception of implication
- One option considered:
 - Implication:** The truth of *O* would verify *H* if *O* would imply *H* (assuming that *H* isn't a tautology and *O* isn't a contradiction)
- But implication cannot be the only route to verification, since if it was, it would rule out many intuitive cases of verification
- Furthermore, if it were the only route, Russell would be in trouble: our past and present sense data fails to imply anything as strong as what he takes sentences regarding material objects to be equivalent to

THE ISSUE OF OTHER MINDS

Soames' rejoinder (ctd)

- Another option considered
 - Hypothetico-Deductive Verification:** The truth of *O* would verify *H* if *O* is the conjunction of a large number of consequences of *H* (assuming that *O* isn't a tautology and *H* isn't a contradiction)
- Adding this option certainly allows for a far more liberal concept of verification
- If we take verification to be exhausted by our two options *and* we take implication to amount to logical or analytic implication (see week 2), then we are indeed committed to (2)
- At this point, Soames complains (as in week 2) that this conception of implication is too strict

Other minds: other strategy

- After discussing the issue of material objects, Russell ponders about establishing the existence of other inhabitants of the external world: **other minds**
- He seems to take his logical constructivist strategy to be implausible in this case
 - 'When we see our friend drop a weight upon his toe, and hear him say—what we should say in similar circumstances, the phenomena can no doubt be explained without assuming that he is anything but a series of shapes and noises seen and heard by us, but practically no man is so infected with philosophy as not to be quite certain that his friend has felt the same kind of pain as he himself would feel.'

The argument from analogy

- Russell briefly considers but rejects (as does Soames):
 - (1) Other bodies share many properties with my body
 - (2) Under condition of type *C*, my body has the property of causing a mind to experience a sensation of type *S* (e.g. when I prick my finger, my body causes my mind to experience pain)

 - (3) Under condition of type *C*, other bodies have the property of causing a mind to experience a sensation of type *S* (from (1) and (2), reasoning by analogy)
 - (4) My mind is not the mind experiencing these sensations referred to in (3)

 - (5) There exist other minds (from (3) and (4))
- Russell admits to not having a good line of argument to offer

Next week: Logical Positivism

- Required:
 - Soames, S. *DoA*, Chs 12 & 13
- Recommended:
 - Ayer, A.J. (1946): *Language, Truth, and Logic (Second Edition)*. New York: Dover Publications. Ch 1 'The Elimination of Metaphysics' and Ch 4 'The A Priori' + corresponding sections in the introduction: 'The Principle of Verification' and 'The A Priori'.
 - Lycan, W. 2000: *The Philosophy of Language: A Contemporary Introduction (First Edition)*. London & New York: Routledge. Ch 8.

Soames' parting shot

- OK, so Russell can't account for our knowledge of other minds...so what?
- Well, in the final section of ch. 7 of *DoA*, Soames argues that Russell's inability to do so *undermines* his claim that his proposed logical construction of material objects out of sense data accounts for our knowledge of the existence of material objects
 - '[I]f Russell can't explain how we know that other people exist, then he can't explain how we are supposed to know what everyone else's sense data would be like under every imaginable contingency.'
- What do you make of this? Is it a fair criticism?

References

- Russell, B. 1914: *Our Knowledge of the External World as a Field for Scientific Method in Philosophy*. London: Allen and Unwin.