

# Metaphysics // Fall 2024

## Handout 12

### RSDP: Russell-2

**OBSERVATION AND MATTER.** What do we learn from experience? *Only* immediate data of sense: patches of colour, sounds, tastes etc. 5:5

*Question 1.* What does ‘immediate’ mean here?

But physical objects are different from these. If we can assert their existence, it is only by ‘correlating’ them with sense-data. Yet this correlation seems impossible, because we are only presented with sense-data. 5:10

*Remark 2.* Moreover, even if we were presented with objects, how can correlation be a proof of any real (causal or other) connection between them? And further, why would there be any problem then of the existence of material objects?

Unless, therefore, we ‘correlate’ sense-data and physical objects, physics remains ‘forever unverifiable’. There are two ways to avoid this: 5:20

- (1) Adopt an a priori principle connecting objects to sense-data—for example, the principle that objects cause sense-data. But this move would undermine our empiricism. 5:23
- (2) Reinterpret objects in terms of sense-data—that is, reinterpret sentences whose terms refer to objects as sentences whose terms refer to sense-data. Such is the strategy of logical construction. This strategy is to be preferred, so far as possible.

But the problem with (2) is that physics in its actual practice adopts realism about physical objects. It gives the relation between sense-data and objects in reverse: it is sense-data that are represented as combinations of physical objects. Namely, sense-data are causal effects of interactions between physical objects and the senses (another type of physical objects). So the epistemological/metaphysical task is to set this straight: to represent objects as combinations of sense-data. 5:38

**SENSE-DATA AND SENSIBILIA.** There are simple and complex sense-data. The former ones are the object of acquaintance. They can be named, but they can’t be object of a judgement. So there is a gulf between what can be grasped in acquaintance and what can be the object of ‘perception’ and judgement. There *are* perceptual judgements, but there are also ‘immediate’ elements apprehended, but not judged. Nevertheless, in the rest of this paper, as Russell says, these complex sense-data (=objects of perception and judgement) are grouped together with simple sense-data. 6:5

*Remark 3* (Simple sense-data). Compare Ramsey’s quip in another context: ‘What we can’t say, we can’t say, and we can’t whistle it either.’ If simple sense-data can’t be judged, how can Russell pass a (wholly general) judgement on them saying they can’t be judged etc. etc.?  
6:15

A different issue is whether sense-data are restricted to the actually observed ones. If there is hope for ‘impersonal’ metaphysics, we should answer in the negative. The reason we can say so is that sense-data are not in the mind. They are characterised by their simplicity or complexity, or by their logical role as constituents of the world. They are not intrinsically characterised by the relation to a mind, like beliefs or sensations (in short, Berkeleyan ideas). 6:40

Therefore, we may speak of sensibilia, sense-data of which no mind is aware, but which may be an object of awareness of some mind. This still doesn’t specify more concretely what sense-data and sensibilia *are*, or *where* they are. 9:9

Now in one dense passage Russell comes precariously close to saying (I think) that they are physiological entities residing somewhere in the nervous system. When the mind (brain?) is aware of some of these denizens of the nervous system, they are to be called ‘sense-data’, otherwise they are ‘sensibilia’. Hmmm. If this indeed is so, then sense-data/sensibilia are not distinguishable from physical objects, while Russell’s project becomes just a chapter in the psychological and neuroscientific research of the interaction between the brain and its environment. But perhaps that’s the (not fully articulated) intent! 9:19

Also note that, when Russell declares in section IV that ‘sense-data are physical’, he only means to say that they are not mental. This also is a strange statement in its own right, since the predicate ‘physical’ is defined, rather strikingly, as ‘dealt with by physics’. But haven’t we assumed that physics deals with ‘things’ and ‘physical objects’ whose relation to sense-data is to be understood? 7:9

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**CONSTRUCTION AND INFERENCE.** The unique element of Russell's philosophy in this period is the commitment to a radical logical construction. We aim to construct statements about physical objects in terms of (or: reduce them to) statements about sense-data. Not, indeed, sense-data of other people, nor even my own sensibilia. Ideally, the construction will terminate in the my sense-data. But this solipsistic ideal is too remote, so we might rest content with sense-data of different subjects. Sensibilia, however, are to be allowed only fictionally and illustratively.

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**SPACES AND PERSPECTIVES.** No one observer has the same sense-data as another. But 'sufficient similarity' enables them to group their sense-data into one 'thing'. This basic thought is elaborated into the theory of perspectives.

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**MATTER, DISTANCE, PERSISTENCE.** Compare the following definitions, two Russell's own and another being what he could/should have defended:

- (A) The matter of a given thing is the limit of its appearances as their distance from the thing diminishes.
- (B) The matter of a given thing is the limit of its appearances as the epistemic disturbances are removed.
- (C) Physical things are those series of appearances whose matter obeys the laws of physics.

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