

Bertrand Russell on Sensations and Images

Abdul Latif Mondal
Aligarh Muslim University

SUMMARY

In his Theory of Mind, Russell tries to explain the mind in positive terms of sensations and images. All the mental phenomena like imagination, belief, memory, emotion, desire, will, even consciousness etc. are attempted to be established as entities, subjects, or acts by Russell. In his works *The Analysis of Mind* and *An Outline of Philosophy*, Russell offers the explanations of each mental phenomena with reference to neutrality of sensations and images, Russell does not treat them as neutral in his book *The Analysis of Mind*. However, in his later work, he treats them to be neutral. Russell relates especially the images to “mnemic” causation. Firstly, he declares them as concerned with action in time. Subsequently, he explains them as permanent modification of the structure of the brain. He also explains sensations and images as stuff of our brain.

In his book *The Analysis of Mind*, Russell tries to explain various mental phenomena. Firstly, he contends that all types of mental phenomena is a mix up of sensations and images and does not imply a special entity designated as ‘consciousness.’ Secondly, Russell considers how combinations of sensations and images do, in a sense, imply consciousness in the sense of awareness. For Russell, a single sensation and image cannot in itself be deemed to be cognitive. When we try to explain a conscious mental occurrence, we do analyse it into non-cognitive constituents. We also need to show what constitutes consciousness or awareness in it. In this paper, our contention is that Russell’s explanation of mental phenomena is especially related to these two claims.

INTRODUCTION

Bertrand Russell’s account of images and sensations as neutral entities play a critical role in the larger discussion of his theory of neutral monism. Russell’s account of neutral monism was an attempt to advance a metaphysical theory in which mind and body in their togetherness or separately give place to a substance which is ontologically neutral. He wants to underline that neither materialism nor idealism nor any intermediate reductionism is acceptable as a metaphysical theory on methodological grounds. The methodology Russell used in thinking about the mind-body problem was his principle of Occam’s razor,

according to which inferred entities must give place, wherever possible, to directly observed entities.

SENSATIONS AND IMAGES

Russell said:

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...which is a certain physical object. Images, though they *usually* have certain characteristics, especially lack of vividness, that distinguish them from sensations, are not *invariably* so distinguished, and cannot therefore be defined by these characteristics. (Russell, 1921, p.88)

He holds that images can only be conceived in contrast to sensations. They are caused by connection through a feeling, not from an artificial stimulation of nervous system. The presence of a sensation or image of itself does not entail awareness. When a sensation — such as experiencing a clap of thunder — is usually associated with similarly identical sensations in our surroundings, we see it as giving knowledge of the outer world. It is also because we find the entire collection of similar sensations to be attributable to a specific external source. But there is not so much correlation between images and bodily sensations. We have a direct link with real things, away from their theoretical origins in the brain, since they are representations of previous sensations; yet the actual artifacts in which they are associated remain in the past, not in the present. Such images stay secret in a way that sensations do not. A sensation appears to give us information about a current physical entity, while an image does not, even where it is a hallucination, and in this situation, their presence is deceptive.

Russell said:

...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. I shall deal with the three questions successively. (Russell, 1921, p.95)

Contrary to the opinion that introspection shows a mental world fundamentally different from sensations, he suggests claiming that ideas, values, aspirations, rewards, pains and feelings are all made up from stimuli and images alone, and that there is justification to believe that images in their inherent nature do not vary from sensations.

Sensations as Neutral Entities

Russell asserted the duality between mind and body can not be accepted as being ontologically relevant. Even so, as we analyse it, we have seemed to find a certain, maybe not absolute, dualism within the world. Consequently, Russell concludes that the test of liveliness, even though, relevant in ordinary instances, can not be used to define differences between sensations and images. Russell holds we may be trying to distinguish images from sensations by our lack of belief in the images as “physical reality.” When we understand that what we are seeing is an image, we don’t give it the sort of confidence we would offer to a sensation: we don’t believe it has the same capacity to generate “external world” awareness. Images are “imaginary;” in some way they are “unreal.” (Russell, 1921, p. 103) But the disparity is difficult to accurately interpret. What we consider the “unreality” of images needs explanation. It can not be dismissed by just stating “that there’s no such thing.” Images are as truly part of the physical universe as sensations are. All that we actually say by finding an image “unreal” is that if it were a sensation, it doesn't have the corresponding that it should have. He said:

When we call up a visual image of a chair, we do not attempt to sit in it, because we know that, like Macbeth’s dagger, it is not “sensible to feeling as to sight”— i.e. it

does not have the correlations with tactile sensations which it would have if it were a visual sensation and not merely a visual image. But this means that the so-called “unreality” of images consists merely in their not obeying the laws of physics, and thus brings us back to the causal distinction between images and sensations. (Russell, 1921, p. 119)

Russell started his neutral monism by ending his hitherto held belief in the duality of sensation and sense-datum. And he did it by giving up his view of subject and object of sensation being separate from each other. In this process, he also abandoned ‘consciousness’ as being part of the stuff of the world.

Sensation, as ordinarily explained, is the process by which our sensory organs and nervous system receive data from our environment. Conventionally, these sensations are considered as mental, which supposedly comes into direct contact with the objects like table and chair. But in philosophy there are so many controversies regarding the nature of the contact of mind with its object that causes the so called sensation. If we start from Berkeley’s point of view, all ideas are imprinted in our mind helped by the faculties of memory and imagination. This theory considered as mental not only the ‘act’ of sensation like hearing, seeing, feeling and so forth, but also the objects of sensation like colour, sound, taste etc. Now the things such as colour, sound, smell, taste etc. which are the direct objects of sensation are in Russell’s philosophy called sense-data. Moreover, while idealist tradition called them to be mental, Russell said they are totally physical. For Russell, the term ‘physical’ here is to be understood as “What is dealt with in physics.” He said, “I regard sense-data as not mental, and as being, in fact, part of the actual subject-matter of physics.” (Russell, 1917, p. 116)

When, say, I see a person I know coming towards me in the street, it *seems* as though the mere seeing were knowledge. It is of course undeniable that knowledge comes

through the seeing, but I think it is a mistake to regard the mere seeing itself as knowledge. If we are so to regard it, we must distinguish the seeing from what is seen: we must say that, when we see a patch of colour of certain shape, the patch of colour is one thing and seeing of it is another. This view, however, demands the admission of the subject, or act,... If there is a subject, it can have a relation to the patch of colour, namely the sort of relation which we might call awareness. In that case sensation, as a mental event, will consist of awareness of the colour, while the colour itself will remain wholly physical, and may be called the sense-datum to distinguish from sensation. (Russell, 1921, p. 117)

Russell thus claims an absolute differentiation of seeing from what is seen i.e. of the subject or mental event and the object or physical events or sense-datum and called the relation of subject to object 'awareness.' But though earlier he said that sensation is not cognitive, when he came to uphold his theory of neutral monism he said that the relation of the subject and object and of sensation and sense-datum are both totally untenable. While still denying the cognitive essence of sensation he comes to disregard the distinction between sensation and sense-datum. He now states that the cognitive and relational attributes of sensations are only two aspects of the same reality. This means if we refute the one we also refute the other. The refutation of cognition means the refutation of consciousness or 'awareness.' If consciousness is not there then sensation cannot incorporate in it the mental or subjective act, and therefore, no dualism will remain.

The rejection of the cognitive and the relational essence of sensation implies the elimination of both the subject and the mental act of sensation. The sensation is not a subjective act but a neutral reality of which the other aspect is the sense-datum which is accordingly included in both the physics and psychology.

All knowledge for sure comes from sensation, it comes through its psychological effects. The cognition happens by virtue of its connection with other objects and by giving rise to images and memories, but is not itself cognitive. Moreover, he said, although the colour is physical that does not mean that it is not also psychological, unless we believe that physical and mental cannot intersect. He said:

I have set them forth before, and I see no reason to modify them. But it does not follow that the patch of colour is not also psychical, unless we assume that the physical and the psychical cannot overlap, which I no longer consider a valid assumption. If we admit - as I think we should - that the patch of colour may be both physical and psychical, the reason for distinguishing the sense-datum from the sensation disappears, and we may say that the patch of colour and our sensation in seeing it are identical. (Russell, 1921, p. 118)

Explaining further, he said:

Sensations are what is common to the mental and physical worlds; they may be defined as the intersection of mind and matter... The essence of sensation, according to the view I am advocating, is its independence of past experience. It is a core in our actual experiences, never existing in isolation except possibly in very young infants. It is not itself knowledge, but it supplies the data for our knowledge of the physical world, including our own bodies. (Russell, 1921, p. 119)

Sensations are thus the neutral elements and the ultimate entities of the world. They are momentary elements happening at the place of the perceiving organism, in our brain, where they stay for a very short time. In Russell's terms, they are "aspects" and "appearances"; they are neither physical nor mental but they form the mental and physical series of events which ultimately make up our whole world. There is always a series of sensations one end of

which serves the purpose of being the object of perception and the other of perceiver and the cognitive event that happens as a result of this interconnected series is called perception.

Sensation is a part of perception, it is non-inferred stuff in experience. In Russell's words, "we can define a sensations as the non-mnemic elements in a perception." (Russell, 1921, p. 115)

Clearly, in the above, Russell put a very peculiar and unique meaning to the term 'sensation.' It was quite different from conventional meaning of 'sensation' according to which it is something which is linked to consciousness. Now it is given a form which is neither physical nor mental but neutral between them.

Images as Neutral Entities

From the start, Russell emphasised that images are part of the ultimate stuff of the world. He describes image in its relation with the sensations. He said that basically images are similar to sensations; an image can even be called a 'copy' of sensation.

It is this fact, that images resemble antecedent sensations, which enables us to call them images of this or that. For the understanding of memory, and of knowledge generally, the recognizable resemblance of images and sensations is of fundamental importance. (Russell, 1921, p. 129)

For Russell, the distinction between images and sensations lies in their being causally different. Images are causally related to past experiences. One image causes another image or sensation through postulation. He states that "the causation of an image always proceeds according to mnemic laws, i.e. that it is governed by habit and past experience." (Russell, 1921, p. 124) But past experience and mnemic laws do not play any role in the causation of sensations. But though different in this sense they are still essentially same. "However this may be, the practically effective distinction between sensations and images, is that in the

causation of sensations, but not of images, the stimulation of nerves carrying an effect into the brain, usually from the surface of the body, plays an essential part. And this accounts for the fact that images and sensations cannot always be distinguished by their intrinsic nature.” (Russell, 1921, p. 125)

According to Russell, images have mental effect and sensations have both the physical and mental effects. He said: “Images also differ from sensations as regards their effects. Sensations, as a rule, have both physical and mental effects. As you watch the train you meant to catch leaving the station, there are both the successive positions of the train (physical effects) and the successive waves of fury and disappointment (mental effects). Images, on the contrary, though they may produce bodily movements, do so according to mnemonic laws, not according to the laws of physics. All their effects, of whatever nature, follow mnemonic laws. But this difference is less suitable for definition than the differences as to causes.” (Russell, 1921, p. 125)

An event may thus be called an ‘image’ “when it is recognisably of the same kind as a ‘percept’, but does not have the stimulus which it would have if it were a percept.” (Russell, 1927b, p. 202) Furthermore, “an ‘image’ is an occurrence recognizably visual (or auditory or etc., as the case may be), but not caused by a stimulus which is of the nature of light (or sound or etc., as the case may be), or at any rate only indirectly so caused as a result of association.” (Russell, 1927b, p. 148)

In his earlier stage of neutral monism, the images were considered by Russell as purely mental. But in his later stage of neutral monism he states that they are neutral. In his partial neutral monism he holds images are subject to psychological laws the mnemonic laws being part of psychological laws. Latterly, however, he said that images can be described as the functions of the brain states. They are subject to physical causation as much as psychological causation. The images are therefore neutral entities.

For Russell, images are subject to mnemic causation. Although his notion of mnemic phenomena and mnemic causation changed in various stages, a simpler definition is given here below.

We will give the name of “mnemic phenomena” to those responses of an organism which, so far as hitherto observed facts are concerned, can only be brought under causal laws by including past occurrences in the history of the organism as part of the causes of the present response. I do not mean merely—what would always be the case—that past occurrences are part of the causes of a chain of causes leading to the present events. Accordingly your recollection is an instance of what we are calling “mnemic phenomena. (Russell, 1921, p. 62)

While dispensing with his earlier conception of ‘action at a distance’ he replaces it with his new notion of mnemic causation. He holds that “if we are to avoid ‘mnemic’ causation, which involves action at a distance in time, we must say that mnemic phenomena in mental events are due to the modification of the body by past events.” (Russell, 1927b, p. 303) Further, he wants to underline that mnemic causation is a state of brain. He holds that the links with past experience and images are clearly known and “this connection works through an effect of the past experience on the brain.” (Russell, 1927b, p. 189) He also holds that “The state of the brain which causes us to hear the word ‘Napoleon’ may become associated with the state of the brain which causes us to see a picture of Napoleon and thus the word and the picture will call each other up.” (Russell, 1927b, p. 196)

While in his *An Outline of Philosophy* Russell speaks of events happening in brain as part of the body, he later adopted the phrase “modifications of brain structure” to carry the sense of the same idea.

Clarifying the difference between the “modification of the body” and the “modification of the brain state,” Russell said that there is no permanent brain or body. Body or brain is the

physical series only. He means to say that a percept or sensation is an event in the brain and it is preceded by an event which is its copy or image and this is preceded by other events, and so forth. So there exists a series of events as a part of the group of the events that is the brain. But brain is not mind, nor is it even consciousness.

CONCLUSION

It is because images imitate previous sensations, that encourage us to label them images “of” this or that. The recognized similarity between images and sensations is of vital significance for an epistemology of percepts and events. It is impossible to doubt that in the main simple images are copies of similar simple sensations which have occurred earlier, and that the same is true of complex images in all cases of memory as opposed to mere imagination. Our power of acting with reference to what is sensibly absent is largely due to this characteristic of images, although, as education advances, images tend to be more and more replaced by words. (Russell, 1921, p. 156) Russell is by no way sure that essentially the differentiation between images and sensations is true, so he would be able to be convinced that images can be reduced to sensations of a peculiar kind. Russell thinks it is obvious, though, that they vary at some point from ordinary auditory and visual sensations. In the case of auditory and visual images we create identifiable class of events, even though it would show that they can be called a group of sensations. This is all that’s needed to justify the usage of images in the sequel to be made.

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