

On “Appearance and Reality” in Russell’s the Problems of Philosophy

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Abstract: In the first chapter of the Problems of Philosophy, Russell starts with a common object in daily life—a table, which triggers the discussion of the problems of appearance and reality. He concluded through analysis that what we see about the color, shape, and other aspects of the table is actually a “sense-data”. Through it, we perceive the surface of the table, but behind the surface, there is still a real table, which is a physical object. What Russell wants to explore is the relationship between sense-data and physical object, that is, the relationship between appearance and reality.

Keywords: Appearance; Existence; Russell; the Problems of Philosophy; Sense-data

Introduction

The issue of epistemology about representation and reality has been debated endlessly in the history of philosophy, and philosophers hold different views on it. There are two disagreements in the philosophical community regarding this. One is the viewpoint of supporters who are based on illusory arguments, such as Ayer, who believes that what we directly perceive is not the reality of things, but a “sense-data” similar to intermediaries. This intermediary serves as a bridge, through which we understand the reality of things, and it serves as a representation of things. Another viewpoint holds that when we perceive objects, what we directly perceive is actually a belief or judgment. This viewpoint denies the existence of intermediaries and believes that we can directly perceive the reality of matter. Russell’s epistemology is different from the above two points of view. He does admit the existence of sense-data, and believes that the attributes of color, size and so on that we directly perceive about objects are “sense-data”. However, the sense-data are changing due to the influence of people’s observation angle or light. So Russell believes that we cannot say that the sense-data we directly perceive are material reality, nor can we say that the superposition of multiple sense-data constitutes matter. Sense-data exists independently of our perception, and we do recognize things through the appearance of sense-data, but there is still a true “reality” behind this appearance. Russell made an important distinction between appearance and reality in the Problems of Philosophy, thus forming his unique epistemology thought, which provides a clear clue and guidance to the philosophical community.

1. On Appearance

1.1 Definition of sensation

Russell believed that sensation is the experiential content formed when we directly perceive the object. For example, when we see the color “red” through vision, we form a special feeling about “red”. It can also be said that the experience of directly perceiving “red” is sensation. Most of us rely on experience and knowledge to understand the external world, and no one doubts our own perception. But Russell goes on to argue that sensation is not always true and reliable, and the attributes such as color and size of objects we perceive are constantly changing. It is precisely based on this that Russell’s subsequent in-depth thinking and exploration of appearance and reality were triggered.

1.2 Definition of sense-data

Russell carefully analyzed the texture and shape of the table. When we look at a table with the naked eye, we perceive that it is smooth; If observed under a microscope, it will be found that the surface of the table is uneven. So, should we believe that

the table we see with our eyes is real, or should the table under a microscope be real? As a result, one has to doubt the reliability of the senses. Regarding the shape of a table, we are accustomed to judging it to be rectangular based on experience, but when we move around the table, either close or far, the table will take on different shapes. In this way, it seems that experience has not provided us with a real table, but only a superficial representation of the table. Through a series of analyses and discussions, Russell came to the conclusion that the table we directly experience in our daily lives is only a superficial representation; The table we directly experience through our senses is only the surface or appearance of the table, not the objective object itself. If a real table exists, it must not be the table we directly perceive. So Russell asked: Does such a real table exist? The answer is yes, there is such a real table.

In this series of discussions, Russell introduced the concept of “sense-data”. The size, color, texture, etc. of the table mentioned earlier, which we perceive directly through our senses, are all referred to as sense-data. It has the following characteristics: firstly, it feels that the material is direct and reliable. When it comes to sense-data, we always associate them with the concept of “direct”, that is, they do not require reasoning and are the source and foundation of all our experiences. They are the most certain and reliable, and no one doubts their existence and reliability. Secondly, sense-data exist objectively. Although it relies on our senses, which means it is impossible to obtain these experiential knowledge without the presence of sensory organs, it does not rely on the existence of the perceiver, which means that it objectively exists regardless of whether the perceiver exists or not. It also does not belong to the part of the soul, and whether we engage in perceptual activities or not, it will not have any impact on its existence. Thirdly, sense-data is changing and varies from person to person. As mentioned earlier, it is impossible for two people to perceive the same object appearance due to the influence of light intensity, observer angle, and position. There are still many objective conditions, such as being in the dark and not being able to see the color of the table; For example, for people who are color blind or wear blue glasses, they see different colors. Even for the same observer, the perception of the same object is constantly changing, and the attributes perceived in the previous second may change in the next second.

2. On Reality—Matter and Physical Objects

Russell explains matter by comparing it with sense-data. He does not provide clear definition of matter, but he provides us with the method to distinguish sense-data from matter. He believes that there must be a real object behind the appearance, and refers to it as “physical object”. Our senses are the foundation for obtaining direct experience, but this experiential knowledge is only about the appearance of things, and the essence of things, that is, “reality” does not come from direct experience, but exists outside of our senses. In daily life, we draw conclusions about matter solely through the appearance of things. Taking a table as an example, we believe that the red, wooden, and smooth table we perceive is the real table itself, but the real table is not like that. We cannot draw conclusions directly through our senses, and direct experience is sometimes unreliable. For example, when we see the color and shape of the chopsticks in front of us, when we touch them with our hands, we can feel that they are hard and smooth. Therefore, we develop an experiential knowledge of chopsticks, thinking that this is what they are. But this is only the surface impression presented by chopsticks, and we have every reason to suspect that there is a real object behind its appearance, that is, the essence of chopsticks, rather than just the appearance presented to us. If objective objects truly exist, we cannot recognize them through our senses and can only analyze and reason through empirical knowledge. Russell believes that sense-data appear to be closely related to the table, and their essence is a symbol of objective object that exist independently of our perception. We cannot conclude that the sense-data we directly perceive is the essence of the table. Behind the sense-data, there must still be a material object that we have not yet recognized, and our perception cannot directly perceive it. It exists objectively and does not depend on our perception and existence.

3. The Relationship Between Sense-data and Physical Object

Russell has already explained the concepts of sensation and sense-data in Chapter 1, as sense-data is only superficial representation of a thing. Russell believes that if there is such a real table, one has to consider the relationship between sense-data and physical object. He calls this real table “physical object” and calls the sum of physical objects “matter”. Therefore, he raises two questions in Chapter 1: (1) Is there a real table at all? (2) If so, what sort of object can it be? ^[1]These two questions can also be expressed as: (1) Is there any such thing as matter? (2) If so, What is its nature? ^[2]Russell critically analyzes the views of Berkeley and other idealism. Although they have deviations in their understanding of the nature of the table, they all recognized the existence of a real table, that is, there was a real world behind the appearance.

Sense-data are the source of knowledge, through which we acquire knowledge about things. Faced with the same perception object, due to the influence of subjective and objective conditions, the perceived content may also differ, that is, the sense-data may

not be the same. Sense-data is the symbol of the existence of material object, and through sense-data, we obtain the most intuitive impression of material object. For example, through our senses, we can directly perceive that this table is red and smooth. The experiential knowledge about the table comes from our direct perception of matter. However, through careful analysis, it can be found that our senses are sometimes unreliable, and the sense-data is constantly changing without a fixed knowledge or standard. So, it cannot be said that the collection of sense-data is material, nor can it be said that sense-data is the essence of matter. Therefore, the cognition of things formed by sense-data will inevitably not be a fundamental understanding. Russell believes that there must be essential property of material object behind sense-data. That is to say, there must be a material “reality” behind the material “appearance”.

Conclusion

Russell focused on the distinction between appearance and reality in the first chapter of the Problems of Philosophy. Here, Russell also expressed his views clearly. He believes that the sense-data (such as the color, size, shape, etc. of objects) that people perceive directly through their senses are only the “appearance” of matter, and there is still a material nature behind the sense-data, that is, “reality”. Through a series of analysis and argumentation, Russell concluded that sense-data is not “reality”, but rather a sign of a certain “reality” behind the appearance. Philosophy is not a panacea, it may not answer all of our questions, but using philosophical thinking to explore these questions can stimulate our imagination and inspire our wisdom. As Russell said, the value of philosophy may not lie in providing standard answers to all problems, but in the problems themselves. Thinking about philosophical issues can make our minds great.

References:

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- [2]Russell, Bertrand, the Problems of Philosophy. US: Oxford University Press, Foreign Language Education Press, 1998.4.

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