# Russell on acquaintance, names, and the possibility of thought

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## 1 Two ways of thinking about things

So far, we have examined Russell's theory of descriptions as a view about a particular class of expressions in English. We now turn our attention to the importance of that theory for the philosophy of mind and epistemology.

Russell distinguishes between two ways of thinking about things. One occurs in cases in which "we know propositions about 'the so-and-so' without knowing who or what the so-and-so is." (209) To think about an object as the so-and-so is to think about that object 'under a description'; knowledge about an object, when expressible in this way, is knowledge by description.

When we know that

> The $F$ is $G$.

what we know, according to Russell's theory of descriptions, is that

> There is exactly one thing which is $F$, and that thing is $G$.
> $\exists x(Fx \ \& \ \forall y(Fy \rightarrow x = y) \ \& \ Gx)$

Suppose that some object $o$ is in fact uniquely $F$. In this case, our thought is indirectly about $o$, even though $o$ is not itself a part of the content of our thought. By contrast, the property $F$ is directly part of the content of our thought. So there is some sense in which, if Russell's theory of descriptions is correct, we have thoughts about $o$ *by* having thoughts involving $F$.

This suggests a general distinction between those things we think about directly — by making judgements involving them — and those things we think about indirectly. This is Russell's contrast between knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge by description.

Russell gives the following list of things that we can think about directly:

1. Sense data. (We'll return to what these are later.)
2. Universals. "... we have also ... what may be called awareness of *universals*. ... Not only are we aware of particular yellows, but if we have seen a sufficient number of yellows and have sufficient intelligence, we are aware of the universal *yellow*." (212)
3. Relations. Sentences like 'if one thing is before another, and that is before a third, then the first thing is before the third' as showing that awareness of relations cannot be analyzed as awareness of relata.
4. Oneself.

This means that whenever we think about anything else — for example, a material thing, or another person, or another person's mental states — we must be thinking about that thing indirectly, by description.

What we want to understand is: why did Russell have this restrictive view of the possible objects of thought? There are two reasons. One is based in the philosophy of perception, and the other is based in the philosophy of language.

## 2 Acquaintance and the argument from illusion

One prominent question in the philosophy of mind, which has been around at least since Kant, is: How are certain kinds of thoughts possible?

One plausible kind of answer to this question might be called *empiricism about the contents of thoughts*. This holds that, for every constituent of thought, an agent is able to have thoughts involving that thing just in case it was presented to him in experience. (This should be distinguished from empiricism in epistemology, thought of as a view about justification.)

Russell holds a version of this view. He begins by explaining the key notion in his philosophy of mind, *acquaintance*:

> "I say that I am *acquainted* with an object when I have a direct cognitive relation to that object, i.e. when I am directly aware of the object itself." (209)

We explain our capacity for having thoughts involving a certain object or property in terms of this sort of direct awareness of that object of property. As Russell puts it,

> "The fundamental epistemological principle in the analysis of propositions containing descriptions is this: *Every proposition which we can*

> *understand must be composed wholly of constituents with which we are acquainted.*
>
> ...The chief reason for supposing the principle true is that it seems scarcely possible to believe that we can make a judgement or entertain a supposition without knowing what it is that we are judging or supposing about." (219)

Given this principle, our question — What things can we think about directly? — comes down to the question — What things can we be directly aware of?

Russell's answer to this question was guided by the argument from illusion, which is an argument for the conclusion that the immediate objects of sensory awareness are sense data, rather than ordinary external objects. Here is what Russell says about perception in *The Problems of Philosophy*:

> "It is evident from what we have found, that there is no colour which preeminently appears to be the colour of the table, or even of any one particular part of the table – it appears to be of different colours from different points of view, and there is no reason for regarding some of these as more really its colour than others. And we know that even from a given point of view the colour will seem different by artificial light, or to a colour-blind man, or to a man wearing blue spectacles ... This colour is not something which is inherent in the table, but something depending upon the table and the spectator and the way the light falls on the table. When, in ordinary life, we speak of the colour of the table, we only mean the sort of colour which it will seem to have to a normal spectator from an ordinary point of view under usual conditions of light. But the other colours which appear under other conditions have just as good a right to be considered real; and therefore, to avoid favouritism, we are compelled to deny that, in itself, the table has any one particular colour.
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> ...The shape of the table is no better. We are all in the habit of judging as to the 'real' shapes of things, and we do this so unreflectingly that we come to think we actually see the real shapes. But, in fact, as we all have to learn if we try to draw, a given thing looks different in shape from every different point of view. If our table is 'really' rectangular, it will look, from almost all points of view, as if it had two acute angles and two obtuse angles. If opposite sides are parallel, they will look as if they converged to a point away from the spectator; if they are of equal length, they will look as if the nearer side were longer. All these things are not commonly noticed in looking at a table, because experience has taught us to construct the 'real' shape from the apparent shape, and the 'real' shape is what interests us as practical men. But the 'real' shape is not what we see; it is something inferred from what we see. And what we see is constantly changing in shape as we, move about the room; so that here again the senses seem not to give us the truth about the table itself, but only about the appearance of the table."

Russell took for granted that perceptual experience is an awareness of something or other — as he says, “this dualism [of subject and object] seems to me a fundamental fact concerning cognition” — so the question is what sense experience is an awareness *of*. Initially, one might think that when I look at the table, I am aware of the shape of the table — the shape of a certain object which is independent of my sensory experience. But, Russell points out, the shape we are aware of changes based on our perspective. But the ‘real’ shapes of external objects do not change with our perspective. So, whatever shapes we are aware of in experience, they must not be the shapes of external objects, which exist independently of us. Instead, Russell though, we are aware of things he called *sense data*.

A similar argument based on hallucination.

One question you might have at this point is: what kinds of things are sense data? This is an important question. Many philosophers who use the term think of sense data as mental objects, so that we see physical things only by awareness of mental images. This is not quite how Russell thought about them, as we’ll see in our next reading. But for now we can think of sense data as particular things which are distinct from physical objects and are the immediate objects of sensory awareness.

If the objects of perceptual awareness are always sense data and their properties, rather than physical things and their properties, then it follows from the above principle about acquaintance that our thoughts can only directly be about sense data, universals, and relations, and only indirectly about physical things.

## 3 Restrictions on what can be named

In his theory of descriptions, Russell distinguished between names, which directly designate objects in the world, and definite descriptions, which do so indirectly. This gives us two ways in which the thought expressed by a sentence may concern an object: the object may itself be a part of the thought (as would happen if the sentence contained a Russellian name), or the object may be singled out indirectly by properties which are themselves a part of the thought (as would happen if the sentence contained a description satisfied uniquely by the object in question).

This distinction corresponds to an intuitive distinction between two ways of referring to, or thinking about an object. (Consider, on the one hand, demonstratives, and on the other hand, descriptions like ‘the point midway between my left foot and the surface of the sun’.)

This gives rise to the same question discussed above: what kinds of objects can we think about directly, as opposed to merely indirectly, via some properties which they happen to have?

Given Russell’s view of names, we can raise this question in a linguistic form by asking, ‘What sorts of objects can we name?’ The purpose of this section is to show that, using Russell’s distinction between descriptions and names and some plausible theses from the philosophy of language, we can reach the same result as in the previous

section: that the constituents of our thoughts include only sense data, universals, relations, and possible oneself, but never other external objects. The interesting point is that the present argument seems to show this without relying on the sense datum theory of perception; so it seems to provide a kind of independent confirmation of the restrictive view of the contents of thoughts outlined above.

The first principle is about our access to our own thoughts:

> [1] We can never be mistaken about whether or not we are thinking a thought.

This is closely linked to another principle:

> [2] One can never be mistaken about whether a sentence of one's own language expresses a thought.

These principles are linked because, you might think, if [2] were false then [1] would be as well. For if one could be mistaken about whether a sentence of one's own language was meaningful, then one might say that sentence to oneself, thereby taking oneself to be thinking a thought. But if the sentence was meaningless, one would not be thinking a thought, and so one would, contra [1], be mistaken about whether one was thinking a thought. This is some reason to think that [1] entails [2].

Consider now the following plausible principle about the meaningfulness of words and sentences of which they are a part:

> [3] If one expression in a sentence is meaningless, the sentence as a whole fails to express a thought.

Consider, e.g., 'They're serving flibbertyflam in the cafeteria today.' It's plausible that this sentence fails to express a thought because 'flibbertyflam' lacks a meaning.

> [4] The meaning of a genuine name is its reference.

From [4], it is natural (though it does not strictly follow) to infer the following principle:

> [5] If a name lacks a reference, it also lacks a meaning.

But it follows from [3] and [5] together that

> [6] Any sentence involving a name which lacks a reference fails to express a thought.

But from [2] and [6] together it follows that

> [7] One can never be mistaken about whether a name of one's own language has a reference.

From which it is natural to infer

> [8] We can only understand names for objects about whose existence we cannot be mistaken.

So what things can we understand names for? Plausibly, properties and relations — which exist necessarily — and sense data, since we can never be confused about whether or not we are having a perceptual experience. Perhaps also we can understand names for ourselves, since plausibly we cannot be mistaken about our own existence.

And this seems to show that we can only think directly about these things. For consider anything about which we can think directly. Surely we can understand a name for that thing; we could, after all, think the thought expressed by sentences involving the name. So there is a link between thought and what can be named, which suggests the following parallel between thought, acquaintance, and language:

> $\forall x$ (one can think directly about $x$ iff one is acquainted with $x$ iff one can understand a name for $x$)

If this is right, this means that we can derive from thesis [8] a claim about the sorts of objects with which we can be acquainted, or think directly about: those objects about whose existence we cannot be mistaken.

And from this it seems to follow that we cannot name, or be acquainted with, physical objects, since we can always be mistaken about their existence. And, from Russell's 'fundamental epistemological principle', it then follows that physical objects can never be constituents of our thoughts.

These two arguments both purport to show that the contents of our thoughts are limited to sense data and universals and relations. But this gives rise to an obvious problem. There are many sentences which we seem to understand, but which appear to contain names for material objects. Russell's theory of descriptions as the solution to this problem: "Common words, even proper names, are usually really descriptions." (216) This means that the meaning of an ordinary proper name of, for example, a person must be given by some description 'the $F$' where we fill in '$F$' in some way which makes reference only to sense data, properties, relations, and ourselves.