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RUSSELL ON KNOWLEDGE BY ACQUAINTANCE AND KNOWLEDGE BY DESCRIPTION

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Abstract

The concept of acquaintance and description was introduced by Bertrand Russell in article “Knowledge by Acquaintance and Knowledge by Description” (1910) and in “chapter five of his book *The Problems of Philosophy* (1912). This classification is his critical reply to Berkeley's subjectivism that reduces everything to ideas of the mind. Knowledge by acquaintance is ‘what we derive from sense’, that does not imply knowledge of any proposition concerning the object with which we are acquainted. For Russell, all knowledge primarily depends upon the ‘knowledge by acquaintance of sensations’, but when this is organized by common sense and expressed in language, we have knowledge by description. It is a deep question how we learn to name objects of common experience (tables, stones and chairs, etc.) from our private experience i.e., ‘knowledge by acquaintance’. Thus, this article is an attempt to elucidating Russell’s view about knowledge of things as mentioned in chapter five of his book *The Problems of Philosophy* (1912). It is also focused to explain ‘how he proved that all our knowledge of truth or knowledge by description ultimately depends upon knowledge by acquaintance’, and finally, it seeks to conclude why he differentiates between knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge by description at all, what is the reason behind describing such theory.

Keywords: Acquaintance, Descriptions, Idealism, Sense Data, Universal, Particulars, Knowledge.

Introduction

Russell is known as a great philosopher in western philosophy. His field of thought has been very wide. He has not only studied philosophy but also sociology, pedagogy, political-code of law etc. and presented his ideas in other areas as well. G. E. Moore was his contemporary philosopher. Both Moore and Russell have strongly criticized idealism. They often appear to offer similar solutions to important questions, but still the two also have distinctive differences. In Moore's thinking tied to the traditional boundary of philosophy, while Russell's field of thought is wide.

In 1892, Russell wrote the solution of philosophical problems in the book “Problem of Philosophy”. In this book, Russell has tried to answer the main two questions:

1. Knowledge of what thing is possible and also what we commonly call knowledge, is really knowledge at all?
2. What is the right way to acquire knowledge?

Responding to these questions, Russell accepts that in general, there are two types of knowledge, knowledge of truth and knowledge of things. The first is the sense in which we know something to be true, knowledge of the truth (e.g., general principles) which concerns our judgements and beliefs. Knowledge of things concerns with the knowledge of physical objects.

After distinguishing two types of knowledge, Russell devotes fifth chapter of the book “Problem of Philosophy” to an elucidation of knowledge of things. According to Russell, knowledge of things is derived in two ways, one by acquaintance and the other by description. So, he further distinguishes two types of knowledge of things, knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge by description.



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I. Knowledge by acquaintance

Knowledge by acquaintance means direct awareness of a thing without inference or mediation. It is the knowledge that we derive from the senses, which does not imply knowledge of any proposition related to the object with which we are acquainted. We are immediately conscious and acquainted with our sense-data. For example, if we look at a table, we are acquainted with the sense-data that make up the appearance of the table -- its colour, shape, hardness, smoothness, etc., when we are seeing and touching the table.ⁱ

Thus, for Russell, sense datum refers to the things or mind dependent objects whose existence or properties are immediately known to us by sensation without any mediation in perception like color, sound, smell, softness or hardness etc. According to Russell, sense-data is not the sensation, but what the sensation is of. Whenever we see a color, we may have a sensation of color, but the color is sense datum and not the sensation. Many things can be said about the particular shade of color that we are seeing - we may say that it is brown, that it is rather dark, and so on. But such statements, although they make us to know the truths about color, don't make us to know the color itself any better than we did before. No further knowledge of it is even theoretically possible.ⁱⁱ

Since it is essentially simpler than knowledge of truth, and logically independent of it, we can have acquaintance with something without knowing any truth about it. For example, we may have knowledge of color of a table completely when we see it and not knowing any truth about the color itself. Thus, the direct sensation does not include the ability to see the table. In the direct appearance of the table, we only see what senses present to us.

Thus, the sense data that make up the appearance of the table are things that are immediately known to us in the same way as they are.

1.1 Sense data and physical object:

Russell distinguishes between sense-datum and the physical object. When we say we have knowledge of the table itself or a physical object, we refer to a kind of knowledge other than immediate or direct knowledge. A table which gives rise to different sense-data like color, shape, sound etc. is not directly known by us at all, because what is known directly is beyond doubt. It is possible, without absurdity, to doubt whether there is a table at all, whereas it is not possible to doubt the sense data which we derive immediately.

Knowledge of the table is of the kind which we shall call knowledge by description. "The physical object which causes such-and-such sense-data" is a phrase that describes the table by way of sense-data.ⁱⁱⁱ Knowledge by description is predicated on something with which we are acquainted i.e., sense-data, and some knowledge of truths, like knowing that "such- and-such sense-data are caused by the physical object." We only have a description of the table.^{iv} Thus, the real table is not immediately known to us but is just an inference from what is immediately known. Knowledge by description allows us to infer knowledge about the actual world via things with which we have direct acquaintance.

It is noticeable that Russell believes that Knowledge obtained by acquaintance is always self-evident. Sense-data, are always certain but in case of passing from perception to judgement, chances of error arise. The reason behind it is, we directly aware only of sense data in perception, not the table itself. For him, in case of deriving Knowledge of physical objects. mind interferes after perceiving all the sense data knowledge, and connects simple ideas to form the complex idea of table. As Locke said that when we form complex idea of table, we can commit mistake, Russell also believes that truth consists in some form of correspondence between belief and fact. An error arises in the case when one draws inferences from the sense-data having no correspondence.

Hence, according to Russell, there is no error in knowledge by acquaintance. When mind establishes relations, we can commit mistake. For an example if Carpenter has made Takhat (small bed), but we can misunderstand it as table due



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to the height of the small bed. It is why, according to Russell, we do not find certainty in knowledge by description. For clarity we have to reduce knowledge of a physical object that we perceive through knowledge by description into sense data.

1.2 Kinds of things with which we have acquaintance:

For Russell, sense-data are the starting-point of our knowledge, but we must be acquainted with more things in order to extend our knowledge through description. Thus, according to Russell, to understand the nature of knowledge by acquaintance completely and clearly, it is important to consider what kinds of things there are, with which we have acquaintance.

I. Sense data:

First of all, it can be said that the sense data is the most common example of such things whose knowledge is gained through acquaintance. This is also the clearest example of knowledge by acquaintance, as a result of which some thinkers consider this to be the only examples of it. However, Russell said if it were the sole example, our knowledge would be more restricted than it is.^v This restricts occurs because in that state the knowledge of acquaintance is limited only to what is now present to our senses. we could not be able to know anything about the past -- not even that there was a past. Not only this, if it is said that there is knowledge by acquaintance only of the senses data, then it will not be possible to know any truth about the sense data. Because, for the knowledge of truths, acquaintance with such things is required, which is completely different from what is given by the sense data, the things which are called 'abstract ideas', or 'universals'. Russell says knowledge of truths is depended on knowledge by acquaintance and to obtain any adequate analysis of knowledge, we have to consider acquaintance with other things besides sense data as well.

II. Acquaintance by Memory:

According to Russell, the first kind of knowledge beyond sense-data is the knowledge obtained by 'memory'. It is well known that we often remember the things which we have seen in past, such things which were experienced by the senses earlier. Sometimes they become alive in the present, which we call memory. We have direct knowledge of whatever is present in our memory because memory is also not based on any medium or any inference. This immediate knowledge by memory is the only way by which knowledge of the past is possible.

III. Acquaintance by Introspection:

Beyond sense data and memories, we possess "acquaintance by introspection". When we are aware of an awareness, like in the case of hunger, "When I desire food, I may be aware of my desire for food; "my desiring food" becomes an object of acquaintance.^{vi}

Similarly, we may have direct or immediate awareness of our feeling pleasure or pain and the events which happened in our mind. This kind of acquaintance with our own mind is called self-consciousness, that is considered as the way by which we obtain all our knowledge of mental things. According to Russell, this type of knowledge has a special importance. Through this, not only a person gets knowledge of his mental things, but also on the basis of this knowledge, we are able to infer that apart from our mind, there are other minds as well.

In this way, self-consciousness is also an immediate knowledge. So, a question arises for Russell that "Does it mean that we also have the acquaintance knowledge of the self? Is self-consciousness itself being the consciousness of the self? Russell says that it is not intellectual to give a definite answer. In Hume's thoughts, he sees the fact that whenever we look within ourselves and try to know it, we are only aware of a particular emotion or thought. Yet, Russell says that if we go deeper into this awareness, then we have to accept that in some form or the other there is a feeling of "I" or an "Ego". This



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"I" is not known as eternal self, but something like "I" seems to be known. It seems that without the knowledge of this "I" no immediate awareness is possible.

Russell tries to clarify this with the general example of knowledge by acquaintance. For example, we have the self-conscious of the knowledge that "I am seeing at the sun". From its analysis it becomes clear that here we are becoming aware of two related things, one is the sense data which informs about the sun and on the other hand, there is the other one who is seeing the sense data. Therefore, this type of self-conscious knowledge by acquaintance is the knowledge of the relationship between the two "what is seeing" and the sense-data. Hence, Russell defined knowledge of the self as probable but unclear dimension of acquaintance, which has awareness of things or desire towards things.

IV. Acquaintance of Universal:

All these objects of acquaintance are particulars or concrete, existing things. In addition to these, Russell accepts that Universals are also subject of acquaintance. Whatever is common in particulars is universal. Any white thing is particular, but the whiteness which exists in many particular things is universal. In other words, essence or common qualities which inheres in particulars are called universal. We also call them general ideas, such as honesty, diversity, brotherhood and so on. According to Russell, when we examine the words used in language, we come to know that in general, there is definitely a word that stands for universal in every complete sentence, since individual nouns indicate the particular while all the verbs, qualities etc. have a meaning, which is universal. He says that it is possible to know even such universal things by acquaintance. Direct Awareness of universals are called 'conceiving' and a universal of which we aware is called a 'concept'.^{vii} In this way Russell tries to point out that we have direct acquaintance not only of particular things, but also of Universals.

2. Knowledge by Description:

As described earlier, according to Russell, knowledge of physical objects and other minds etc. is not achieved through acquaintance. Through direct acquaintance, we only perceive the knowledge of what is given by the senses, not of the things informed by them. According to Russell, descriptive knowledge gives knowledge of physical objects and other minds etc.

According to Russell, 'Description' means a phrase which is in the form of either 'a so-and-so' or 'the so-and-so'. A phrase of the form 'a so-and-so' is called 'ambiguous' description; a phrase of the form 'the so-and-so' (in the singular) is called a 'definite' description. For example, if we say 'a person' or 'a book' then it will be called ambiguous or indefinite description and when we say and 'the man with the iron mask'. or 'the author of Meghdoot' etc. then it will be definite description. In the first example, we are talking about 'a person', here it is not certain who that person is. This description is uncertain with multiple meanings due to multiple references. But in the second type of example a definite person is being referred. Therefore, the details presented in that phrase are certain.

Generally, when we talk about the knowledge obtained through description, we keep in mind that there is a certain object or person according to this description. He said,

"There are various problems connected with ambiguous descriptions, but Russell passes them by, since they do not directly concern the matter, he is discussing in this chapter, which is the nature of our knowledge concerning objects in cases where we know that there is an object answering to a definite description, though we are not acquainted with any such object. This is a matter, which is concerned exclusively with definite descriptions."^{viii}

Russell therefore, in the outcome, speak simply of 'descriptions' when he means 'definite descriptions'.



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Moreover, Russell says that when we get knowledge of an object through description, we come to know that there is an object which has a certain quality or characteristic, which quality or characteristic is present only in it and not in anyone else. Generally, in such examples it is also implied that we do not have knowledge of that 'object' by acquaintance. This view can be clarified through examples. If we say 'the author of Geetanjali', any knowledge that is gained by saying this phrase, is that there is definitely 'one person' possessing this particular characteristic, of which we do not have acquaintance knowledge. On knowing this phrase, one gets to know many statements about that person, but there is no actual acquaintance knowledge of him. In some instances, there may be acquaintance, but still, it is not actual knowledge by acquaintance. Russell explains this with a simple example. Suppose someone says that "the candidate who gets the most votes will win", this statement gives descriptive knowledge. We come to know that there will be one person who will get the most votes and he will win. It is possible that we may be acquainted with the person who wins – who will ultimately win – but that acquaintance is not the actual acquaintance of the person who gets the most votes and wins. In that initial acquaintance, we do not know that 'This is the person who got the most votes.' Therefore, when we say 'the author of Geetanjali', or 'the person with the iron mask', we know that there is a person who is the author of Geetanjali or the person with the iron mask.

3. Relation of knowledge by acquaintance with knowledge by description

As we have already discussed that according to Russell there are two stages of knowledge.

1. Knowledge by acquaintance
2. knowledge by description

Knowledge by acquaintance is direct knowledge whereas knowledge by description is derived or inferential knowledge. It can be said that Russell probably gives importance to descriptive knowledge, since he feels that generally common nouns and proper names etc. are actually descriptions. Knowledge by acquaintance, being direct knowledge does not depend on any other knowledge, knowledge by description depends on knowledge by acquaintance as its foundation. He has given some examples to prove his point.

He says that if the thought that arises in someone's mind on saying a name or a proper noun like "Socrates" is expressed, then it will be a descriptive sentence or phrase. That name will produce different ideas in the minds of different listeners, resulting in different descriptions for different listeners—the only thing constant is the object to which the name applies. This can be made clear by some examples mentioned by Russell. He said that when we say something about a person, here two possibilities are obvious, either we are acquainted with the person or we are not. Look at the first option – We say something about a person with whom we are acquainted. But, our acquaintance knowledge - is not of that person, it is of some sense-data -given things which we associate with the 'body' of that person. What we say about that person is a description of that person on the basis of sense- data. This is contingent matter that means when we are saying something about that person, at that time what sense-data given characteristics of a man's appearance related to his 'body' is revealed in the mind. These descriptions may vary at different times, because each description is given by the sense-data available at that time. However, it is certain that we have also awareness that the various descriptions all apply to same person. Therefore, whatever we say about that person is not an expression of the acquaintance knowledge of that person, because we do not know the person personally, all these are description about that person, such description or descriptive knowledge we obtain through the sense-data of which we have acquaintance knowledge.

Now let us consider the second possibility. Suppose we hear or say something about a person, with whom we are not directly acquainted and do not know him. To clarify this, Russell said that suppose we say something about Bismarck. We are not acquainted with Bismarck, but we heard something about him through history, and in that regard, have made many assumptions. Suppose we say 'Bismarck was the first Chancellor of the German Empire'. This is a 'description' about Bismarck. Russell says that if this description is also analyzed, it will become clear that the descriptive knowledge that obtained in this description, at some point or the other, is based on a fact of which we have acquaintance knowledge. The



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words in this description are i.e., 'State', 'First', 'Chancellor' etc. are universals, except for the word 'German'. The question is what do we understand by this word 'German'. There are two things to be noted here. One thing is that different people will have different understanding of this word, there cannot be a uniform understanding. Some remember 'Germany' on the map, some heard something about that country, and some who have been to Germany remember some special thing about that country. But, the basis of every person's knowledge is ultimately the knowledge that he has received through acquaintance. This means that descriptive knowledge of a particular thing is ultimately obtained from knowledge by acquaintance.

For this reason, Russell says that the name of every place i.e., London, England's Europe the Earth the solar system, also indicates that when description which start from some one or more particulars with which we are acquainted. By saying the word 'Delhi', some knowledge appears in every person's mind with which we are acquainted. One person thinks, 'This is the city where the Red Fort is situated', another person thinks, 'This is the capital of India'. The way to understand 'Red Fort' or 'capital' is also based on one's own acquaintance. If he has seen the 'Red Fort', then he has had direct acquaintance with senses-data through which he has known the 'Red Fort'. If he did not see the 'Red Fort'; If he has heard something about it, then in the analysis of what he has heard, ultimately some such elements will be revealed about which he has acquainted knowledge, and through which he understands what he has heard about the 'Red Fort'. Thus, Russell has shown by above mentioned example that how knowledge gained by description is reducible to knowledge by acquaintance.

Hence Russell reaches a very important conclusion. The basic principle that come out on the analysis of descriptive sentences is that:

"Every proposition which we can understand must be composed wholly of constituents with which we are acquainted."
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Thus, knowledge by description allows us to perceive knowledge of "things which we have never experienced." Clearly, the description takes us beyond that with which we are acquainted. It allows us to go beyond the boundaries of our private, immediate experiences and engage with public knowledge. We are only acquainted, strictly speaking, with the private objects of our experience, but Knowledge by description allows us to have knowledge of the cause of sense-data, we can describe causes of the private objects of our experience and know the causes under the description. It is why he said the importance of knowledge by description is that it enables us to pass beyond the limits of our private experience.

Conclusion:

It is clear with the above discussion that Russell accepts two stages of knowledge.

1. Knowledge by acquaintance i.e., acquaintance with the sense data.
2. knowledge by description i.e., the knowledge of something with names, characters etc.

For Russell. knowledge of things always proceeds with knowledge by description but knowledge by acquaintance works as the foundation of all knowledge. Knowledge by acquaintance is the direct knowledge of sense data and knowledge by description being indirect, involves the element of inference in it. In that sense, knowledge by acquaintance is the direct and infallible apprehension of some sort of object that exists, whereas, the object of knowledge by description need not necessarily exist. It may fail to exist in some case. It is propositional knowledge that may express one's beliefs and convention etc. He refers to our private experience being experience of sense data and of acquaintance with certain universals that we employ in the statements or propositions, which we make about the world. In this sense, according to him, ultimately, all our knowledge of truth or knowledge by description depends upon knowledge by acquaintance.^x

It can also be said that this classification of knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge by description is his critical reply to Berkeley's subjectivism that reduces everything to ideas of the mind. The argument that Berkeley has given to prove



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idealism in his philosophy centres around the notion of acquaintance in which he claims that we do not acquire anything outside our sense-data (or their mental cause). The reason for this seems to be that, for him, we are not directly acquainted with any such thing. But it does not seem appropriate to say that if we are not directly acquainted with an object then it is of no relevance to us and we can assume that it does not exist.

Russell accepted that we do not know physical objects or matter through acquaintance. Because in the process of knowledge, we are acquainted only with our private sense-data. But matter or physical objects are equally relevant for us because it is what orders our sense-data, including our feelings of pleasure and pain. The question is whether we know things with which we are not acquainted? Russell's answer is yes. I am not acquainted with the first man who walked on the moon, but I know him through the description. If we differentiate between knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge by description, then it is at least possible for us to have knowledge of matter. Knowledge by description takes us beyond that with which we are acquainted. It also allows us to gain knowledge of the causes of sense data. We are only acquainted with the private objects of our experience, but we can describe their causes under the description. Thus, through this article he tries to prove realism by criticizing Berkeley's idealism.

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