

EXISTENCE, APPEARANCE, AND ACQUAINTANCE

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When A. J. Ayer commented on Russell's theory of acquaintance, he claimed that the person who is acquainted with an object knows that the object exists and also that the object in question has the properties which it appears to have. This essay employs Russell's theory of knowledge by acquaintance from the period between 1910 and 1918 and critically analyzes both the existential and the descriptive statements as they are related to the object of acquaintance. In particular, Ayer's views on the relationship between appearance and reality are treated as unacceptable from any sound epistemological point of view. I believe that the logical analysis of these epistemological problems reveals intricate issues involved in such discussions, which transcend their limited historical context.

I

In his comments on Russell's theory of acquaintance, A. J. Ayer claims that the fact that one is acquainted with a particular object has as its consequence "both that the object really existed and that it had the properties which it appeared to have."¹ If one employs Russell's original notation in his theory of acquaintance² and tentatively admits existence as a predicate, this claim can be clumsily rendered as follows:

$$(1) \quad A(S, O) \rightarrow \{K(S, EX(O) \ \& \ (\varphi) \ \{AP(O, S, \varphi) \rightarrow \varphi(O)\})\}.$$

The antecedent reads "subject S is acquainted with an object O"; the first conjunct in the consequent means "subject S knows that O exists", and the second conjunct is a universal conditional statement which means that, if an object O appears to the subject as having a property φ , then the object O possesses that property φ .

Besides the intolerable admission of existence as a predicate, formula (1) has an additional drawback in requiring quantification over predicates (properties). At the same time, the consequent of (1) might be true even if its antecedent is false. This would be a case of S's indirect knowledge of the existence of O (perhaps based on a reliable testimony of another person) and also of S's indirect acceptance of the property φ as be-

¹ See A. J. Ayer (1972), 14. A qualified rejection of this claim is offered, for example, by H. L. A. Hart (1949), 87.

² See B. Russell (1971a), 127 - 174.

longing to O in question. In such case that what appears to S must be reinterpreted as a result of S's inferences concerning the "nature" of O. Yet the formula (1) seems to adequately express Ayer's characterization of the acquaintance relation, viewed as the subject's immediate, direct experience (perception) of a particular object. It is therefore assumed that if the subject were asked to report on his acquaintance with an object O, he would normally offer two statements: one *existential* and one *descriptive*.³

II

The existential statement is obviously very troublesome. Rarely would one subscribe today to statements such as "O exists" (where "O" is a singular, non-descriptive term, a proper name of a particular object), i.e. to the idea of existence as a predicate. However, if one wants to keep the existential statements apart from the appearance-statements,⁴ there must be a way out from this difficulty. Suppose that the following "trick" with the existential quantifier is used:

$$(2) \quad (\exists x)(x = O),$$

where "x" is an individual variable and "O", as before, a singular, non-descriptive term. From the formal point of view, there is no objection against this use of identity-sign which helps to circumvent the troubles with the existential statements. The apparent variable "x" plays here the role of the ambiguous demonstrative pronoun "this" – Russell's favorite candidate for a logically proper name.⁵ The existential statement (2) may eventually be supported by an *ostensive* statement (to use another Quin- ton's term)

$$(3) \quad \text{"This is O", or, more specifically, "This-here-now is O".}$$

Since the proper name "O" is not predicated of *this-here-now*, the copula "is" functions as an identity-sign, and so the bridge between (3) and (2) is quite obvious. Nonetheless, the statements (2) and (3) do not have the same sense: (3) represents the subject's act of ostensively naming the object of acquaintance, while (2) is his existential declaration as to this presented object. Combined together, (2) and (3) may produce a statement:

³ This is highly questionable in Russell's treatment of knowledge by acquaintance.

⁴ Here I am following the terminology of A. Quin- ton, employed in (1973), 161.

⁵ See Russell (1971b), 109; also Russell (1971a), 167f., and many other places.

(4) "There is something here-and-now, and that something is O".

If one tries to render (4) in a standard symbolic form, the following might be suggested::

(4') $(\exists x)((Px \ \& \ (x = O))$

(where "P" stands for a positional property *here-and-now*, ostensibly defined by the subject). The existential statement (4') seems to come close to Ayer's existential desideratum. If the subject gives us a report such as (4'), we might probably interpret it in the sense that he knows the existence of the object O (he knows that the object O exists). Of course, two additional problems arise: (i) a severe restriction put on the positional property P, which is relativized to the space-time position of S; (ii) the publicity (intersubjectivity) of the objects O. Both these problems affect the truth conditions of (4'). For example, if the objects of acquaintance are interpreted as actual or possible sense-data,⁶ and, in addition, the positional properties as properties of the subject's perceptual space and time, then the intersubjective criteria for the verifiability of (4') will be hard to meet. Even if the subject can operate in this solipsistic captivity (i.e., if the publicity of O is not required), he will still remain a victim of his fleeting momentary experiences, for he can verify the existential statement (4') only while O is presented to him. Obviously, all these problems will be less severe if S encounters public, enduring material things and persons. It is remarkable that whenever Russell gave illustrations and exemplifications of his theory of acquaintance, he liked to use such public objects.⁷ In any event, positional properties need not be limited to ostensibly defined *here-and-now* as relativized to the subject. A person I have been acquainted with for many years will not cease to be an object of my acquaintance if he now lives 3000 miles away. Of course, I may not be aware of him as my present object of acquaintance, unless something presently reminds me of him. Now I am directly acquainted only with my reminders of him (especially with my *memory* of him, i.e. with a special mental state of myself),⁸ but presumably there were positional properties available to me in the past, which enabled me to directly verify an instance of (4'), say

⁶ This was Russell position in the period in which he elaborated his theory of knowledge by acquaintance (roughly 1910 - 1918).

⁷ See his examples of Bismarck, Julius Caesar, etc. On this also Pears, D. F. (1972), 23 - 51, where a very penetrating analysis of these problems is being offered.

⁸ See Urmson, J. O. (1969), 510 - 515; also Russell (1913), part II, chapter 7.

(Ex) (Px & (x = John Doe)),

where “P” stands for such space-time characteristics suitable for applying my ostensive definitions. Naturally, my memory may deceive me, even to the point that I am *imagining* objects of acquaintance which never really existed outside my imagination.

On the other hand, Ayer’s existential clause, say, in the form (4’), does not guarantee the existence of external objects from the standpoint of S. It does not exclude, for instance, optical illusions either. If S is a thirsty wanderer in a desert, he may swear that an oasis as a “component” of a mirage really exists. His fatal mistake is due to a hasty existential judgment, which goes beyond what he actually saw, thus neglecting, for example, the corrective force of tactile experiences. In other words, instead of identifying the object of his acquaintance with mirage, he was mistaken in regarding it as an oasis. And, it may be added, the wanderer misapprehended the positional properties of the object in question as well.

III

Let us now suppose that in (2) “O” is a singular descriptive term, i.e. Russell’s definite description, and not a proper name. A special instance of such a term may be an ostensive definite description like “that to which I am presently pointing”. Although one may qualify such phrase as highly indeterminate with regard to its content, it does have a form required of a definite description. John Wisdom, who used to be very concerned about these issues, employed with hesitation a similar phrase, in order to elucidate the meaning of the demonstrative word “this”.⁹ It is to be noted that the ostensive descriptive phrase does not characterize the object of acquaintance, but my (the subject’s) ostensive relation to it: the object is left completely unspecified, with the exception of its position. This can be written down in Russell’s symbolism as:

(5) (ιy) R(S, y)

(where “ι” is the standard descriptor-operator, “R” stands for the pointing relation, “y” for the unspecified object of acquaintance). The Russellian transcription of (5) by means of the existential quantifier gives us automatically an existential statement:

⁹ See Wisdom, J. (1931 - 1933).

(5') (Ex) [R(S, x) & (z) (R(S, z) ↔ (x = z))].

In addition, if {O} is the unspecified set of objects of acquaintance which are symbolized by "O", one can use the identity $x = O$ and expand (5') into:

(5'') (Ex) [R(S, x) & (z) (R(S, z) ↔ (x = z)) & (x = O)].

(5'') is a rough paraphrase of my statement "The object of acquaintance is that to which I am presently pointing". This statement is similar to Russell's paradigm "Walter Scott is the author of *Waverly*", though the phrase "the object of acquaintance" is again descriptive, whereas "Walter Scott" functions as a proper name. To avoid such complications, let us regard "O" as an unspecified proper name (whether the name was actually given to O or not), so that the statement to be paraphrased by (5'') is:

"O is that to which I am presently pointing."

The comparison of the existential statements (2) and (5'') reveals that (5'') is but an expanded version of (2), with two conjuncts added for the sake of eliminating the descriptive phrase. It seems that (5'') helps to determine the object of acquaintance better than (2), which only states the existence of the "bare" particular O. However, (5'') does not specify the O at all; it provides only an external relation with regard to O that aims at localizing the object of acquaintance by the subject. In this respect (5'') is weaker than any instance of (4'), for (4') assigns positional properties directly to the object of acquaintance. Evidently, the familiar problems of ostensive definitions and ostension in general will come to the fore in either case, unless the positional properties of O are stated indirectly, by means of descriptions, points of reference, coordinates, etc., which will remove the ambiguity as much as it is feasible.

Since pointing is so closely tied to the visual and tactile perceptions, it is important to consider a more general "ostensive" procedure that is within the realm of human capacities, namely object-oriented *attention*. This concept is analyzed by Russell in his work from 1913, as well as in his article *On the Nature of Acquaintance*.¹⁰ According to him, we can attend at any moment to a relatively small number of objects, while at the same time we may be acquainted with many more. The particular object to which the subject is presently paying attention may be called plainly "this" and is simply *given*, primarily without any definition or description. It is due to the selectiveness of the subject's mind that *this* is

¹⁰ See Russell (1913), part II, especially 125f.; and Russell (1971a), 168f.

what is being attended to now, at the very moment, and not something else (*that*). More on this topic can be found in Russell (1913), where “complex perception” is defined as consisting of “acquaintance with a whole combined with attention to its parts”, and “simple perception” as consisting in “attention to the whole combined with acquaintance with its parts...”.¹¹ The kernel of Russell’s story has been summarized in the following statement:

“...throughout the process of analysis, we are acquainted with the complex and with its constituents, and that what changes during the process is only the direction of our attention ...”.¹²

In addition, he claims that it is easier to attend to particulars than to universals, and to universals than to logical forms,¹³ although attention itself remains fairly constant. Within the realm of particulars Russell distinguished sense-data (sensations), memories and imaginations, and, reluctantly, the subject’s Self or Ego, which was later abolished and “desubstantivized”.¹⁴

This broad characterization of attention as a relation between S and O, which is a necessary condition for the acquaintance-relation, enables us to “point” toward our own mental states, as well to various abstract entities. If so, then Ayer’s comments with which our discussion commenced, could be extended to all kinds of other objects of acquaintance besides particulars. Yet Russell would dismiss the entire Ayer’s claim, as witnessed by the following.

IV

At a certain point of Russell’s analysis of acquaintance and attention, one can find this laconic statement of his:

“Of an actually given *this*, an object of acquaintance, it is meaningless to say that it ‘exists’ ...”¹⁵

This statement should not come as a surprise to anybody who had followed Russell’s campaign against the Meinongian underworld and

¹¹ Russell, B. (1913), 125 (italicizes; the illustration used is the letter “T”).

¹² Russell, B. (1913), 127.

¹³ Russell, B. (1913), 129.

¹⁴ See the history of this problem, which stems from D. Hume.

¹⁵ Russell, B. (1913), 138.

his distinctions between definite descriptions and proper names. For only descriptions are tied up with the problem of existence, as Russell's symbolic paraphrasing which eliminates descriptive phrases clearly shows (see our statements (5) and (5')). Then, apparently, the objects of acquaintance (*qua* acquaintance) can only be *named*, and not *described*. This has been Russell's position in the 1910s, while he was preoccupied with all these problems.¹⁶

Does this therefore mean the end of any existential claim related to acquaintance with a particular (or other) object in Russell's sense? I do not think that such a devastating conclusion follows from the theory of acquaintance, if the connection between an acquaintance with O and an existential claim related to the same O is reasonably relaxed. The existential claim cannot hold as a necessary condition for acquaintance and thus our ambiguous formula (1) may be false, while its antecedent "A(S, O)" may very well be true. This means that the acquaintance with O might not require an explicit existential emphasis. Actually, such an emphasis could be regarded by an external observer as a sign of S's uncertainty as to the object of his acquaintance, especially if O is publicly observable and the existential doubt doesn't even occur. Yet, our statements (2), (4'), (5') and (5'') were not put down in vain, for the existential impact of the subject's acquaintance with an O *is* a legitimate problem, even if in a much looser way than Ayer had expected.

V

Now comes the time, however, to scrutinize the second part of Ayer's claim, which is expressed in the form of a conditional appearance-statement:

$$(6) \quad (\varphi) [AP(O, S, \varphi) \rightarrow \varphi(O)].$$

First thing to do here is to reasonably restrict the range of properties φ , perhaps in line with Russell's type theory, so that paradoxical situations could be eliminated. It is also advisable to classify predicates (properties) in accordance with various channels through which they "reach" the subject; for instance, into visual, tactile, kinesthetic, auditory, etc. In a fine-grained sorting of possible predicates, we may get families of colors, shapes, sounds, odors, and the like. For the sake of simplicity, we

¹⁶ Expressed in various works, starting with Russell (1910 - 11).

shall regard only monadic predicates, leaving relations aside. The general pattern of inference, which the subject would use in conformity with (6), can be formulated as follows:

- (i) "This *appears* to me as φ ", therefore "This *is* φ ",
 (for "Anything which appears to me as φ is φ ").

The statement "This is φ " is no more an *ostensive* statement, but a *descriptive* one. Unlike "This is O", a descriptive statement is not used for naming the object of acquaintance, but for describing it (qualifying it).

The above inference pattern seems unacceptable in any sound epistemological position. In particular, it obliterates any distinction between veridical and illusory sensations, or, in more traditional terms, the demarcation line between reality and appearance.¹⁷ On the other hand, if the particular objects of acquaintance are sense-data and public physical objects, for instance, are only logical constructions out of sense-data, the problem of "real," "veridical," etc. will apply only to the relation between sense-data and the corresponding logical constructs, and not to the sense-data themselves. The privacy of my sense-data (memories, images, etc.) paralyzes intersubjective communication, at any rate, and makes me the only judge of what appears to me. If I have no reason to doubt that whatever appears to me belongs to the objects of my acquaintance, the inference pattern (i) is always applied automatically, as a tautological nuisance. Only if I occasionally burn myself, shall I cautiously test whether φ that appears to me "really" belongs to O. If (6) holds *a priori*, the appearance-statements cannot even be falsified, unless one expands them into statements correlating appearances and linguistic expressions employed for their descriptions, for then the possibility of an incorrect usage of an expression becomes obvious.

Evidently, the problem of reality and appearance is as old as philosophy itself and our formula (6) and the inference pattern (i) may appear as another misconception besides the traditional ones, which span the period between the Eleatic philosophers and, say, F. H. Bradley. If one takes seriously J. L. Austin's criticism of Ayer's (and H. H. Price's) epistemological theories of sense-data, illusions, etc.,¹⁸ there might be almost no reason to discuss most of these issues raised in this essay, unless the problems of acquaintance, appearance and existence are applied to Os as

¹⁷ See the penetrating criticism of J. L. Austin (1962).

¹⁸ Austin, J. L. (1962); these critical arguments permeate the entire book.

particular concrete objects. In other words, phenomenism is to be replaced by a sort of *physicalism*, and the sense-data of the early Russell, Ayer and others will then give place to common physical objects, including human bodies. In this framework, our tentative formula (1) would be dismissed immediately, for the introductory assertion of Ayer is plainly false.

VI

It may be interesting to note that similar statements of Ayer pervade his epistemological writings since 1940.¹⁹ The quotation from *The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge* may serve as an example:

“ ... what is seen or otherwise sensibly experienced must really exist and must really have the properties that it appears to have ... ”.²⁰

The analogy with our previous discussions is quite clear, if one substitutes “direct acquaintance” for “sensible experience”. In such case, there would not be any “existentially delusive perceptions.” On the other hand, he soon realized that if a material thing appears to someone, this does not necessarily lead toward the acceptance of the thing’s existence.²¹

In *The Problem of Knowledge* Ayer expresses a more cautious attitude, tied up with his claim that there is “no class of descriptive statements which are incorrigible.”²² If it is so, then what appears to me as ϕ may actually not be ϕ , and the pattern (i) does not have universal validity. Ayer makes these remarks in criticizing the phenomenistic position, as well as the naïve realism of H. H. Price. Yet the pattern (i) will not be universally false either, as witnessed by Ayer’s additional statement:

“the way that things appear supplies both the cause of our *tendency to judge* that they really are whatever it may be ... ”²³

Thus, under a relevant circumstantial evidence, there is a great chance that a thing really is what it appears to me, and our inferential pattern (i) acquires a respectable probabilistic status.

¹⁹ Notably Ayer, A. J. (1940) and (1956).

²⁰ Ayer, A. J. (1940), 24; likewise 235.

²¹ Ayer, A. J. (1940), 54 (while analyzing the arguments of H. H. Price).

²² Ayer, A. J. (1956), 70 – 71.

²³ Ayer, A. J. (1956), 112 (italics mine).

This is, however, not the end of all problems. If physical objects are, for instance, “logical constructions out of sense-data” (a typical early Russell’s position), then we need more complex inference patterns, which would capture the projections of appearances into factual descriptions of things. Suppose one suggests the following schema:

$$(x)[AP(x, S, \varphi) \rightarrow (E y) (CE(x, y) \& \varphi y)],$$

where “AP” stands for the ternary relation *appears* and “CE” for the binary, technical relation to be read as “*x* is a *construction element* of (for) *y*.” Everything here depends upon the interpretation of this technical relation. In addition, the universe of discourse must be made homogeneous, i.e. “*x*” and “*y*” must range over individual objects or entities of any kind (one might say, over *discernibles* of any kind). The relation expressed by “CE(*x*, *y*)” may be interpreted either (i) purely phenomenally, as being satisfied only by substituting names of sense-data for “*x*” and “*y*”; or (ii) in a mixed fashion, by substituting names of sense-data for “*x*” and names of physical objects for “*y*”; or (iii) purely physically, say, as a specific part-whole relation pertaining to physical objects of all kinds.

Whatever interpretation one accepts, there seems to be a serious difficulty in drawing an inference from the presence of the property of what is apprehended to the same property of the constructed (inferred) entity. To safeguard this inference, one would need something like correspondence (correlation) rules and a well-tested theory. Of course, the entire historically charged package of primary and secondary qualities might also come into the fore and this might open the famous Pandora’s box. All these difficulties aside, Ayer nevertheless used to set as a goal the definition of “the real qualities of a material thing in terms of the qualities of certain privileged appearances.”²⁴

However, to go deeper into these troubled issues would expand the present essay far beyond its expected limits.

VII

What conclusion is one to draw from the foregoing discussion, which focused mainly on the views of Ayer and Russell? Perhaps we might say that despite certain naiveté, which lurks especially behind some Ayer’s

²⁴ Ayer, A. J. (1940), 31.

claims, it is remarkable how many problems have been raised and elucidated. It is trivial to claim, of course, that what we perceive (see, encounter, etc.) is exactly the way we say we perceive it (see, encounter, etc.). Such object of our direct acquaintance does exist *for us* and does have the property we notice on it (again, *for us*). It is however not at all clear whether the same object (or an object “behind” it) “objectively” exists and displays the property in question. Evidently, the history of modern philosophy, say, from Kant on, is very instructive in this respect.

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