

Philosophical Analysis of the Concept of Reality in Bertrand Russell's Philosophy

Raphael Olisa Maduabuchi, Innocent Anthony Uke
Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University, Uli, Nigeria

The quest to understand and explain the ultimate nature of reality is a recurring problem in the history of Philosophy. All attempts to give credible answers by philosophers have led to so many divergent metaphysical and epistemological theories, some of which are not only opposing but also conflicting. Like Wittgenstein, Bertrand Russell believes that mathematical logic could reveal the basic structure of reality, a structure that is hidden beneath the cloak of ordinary language. By his new logic, he showed that the world is made up of simple or "atomic" facts, which in turn are made up of particular objects. Atomic facts are complex, mind-independent features of reality. Both Russell and Wittgenstein held that the basic propositions of logic, which Wittgenstein called "elementary propositions" refer to atomic facts. There is thus an immediate connection between formal languages, such as the logical system of Russell's *Principia Mathematica* (written with Alfred North Whitehead and published between 1910 and 1913), and the structure of the real world. Elementary propositions represent atomic facts, which are constituted by particular objects, which are the meaning of logically proper names. Russell differed from Wittgenstein in that he held that the meanings of proper names are "sense data", or immediate perceptual experiences, rather than particular objects. Thus, this study is geared to x-rays Russell's theory of reality in order to ascertain the tenability of his philosophy and its contemporary relevance.

Keywords: ultimate, reality, mathematical, logic, structure, language, world, atomic and facts

Introduction

The quest to understand the ultimate nature of reality is a recurring decimal in the history of Western philosophy, especially from the perspective of metaphysics. Highlighting on this point, Nwala (1997) buttressed that

an important aspect of metaphysics is the attempt to answer the question: what is the nature or essence of being? Is it mind or matter? If it is matter or mind, does it exist at various levels or in a hierarchy or is it uniform and same at all levels? (p. 32)

In response to these questions, philosophers have invested much human and material resources and the result is a copious amount of literature. However, the answers which they have given are numerous, varied, opposing and, often, conflicting. Such disagreement, nay confusion, still persists and is also found, even, among scientists. But, Bertrand Russell views such controversies as unnecessary and avoidable, arising solely from

false principles.

In his philosophical work: *The Problem of Philosophy*, Bertrand Russell (1912) defended a representative view of reality, and the realist claims that there is a mind-independent reality. This work reflects on Bertrand Russell's claim about how this reality constitutes what we know and what constitutes reality itself, followed by an analysis of his claim as he concerns the problem of appearance and reality. Originally, the whole issue about the nature of reality in the philosophy of Bertrand Russell is widely associated with the general problem of appearance and reality in general philosophy. The problem revolves around the nature of things in themselves and how they choose to appear to us.

In the opening paragraph of the same work: *The Problem of Philosophy*, for instance, Bertrand Russell claims that philosophy is searching for certainty. We assume, uncritically, according to Russell (1976), the certainty of many things, "which on a closer scrutiny, are found to be so full of apparent contradictions that only a great amount of thought enables us to know what it is we really may believe" (p. 1). In his view, the more we learn about the world, this reality in which we find ourselves, the more we realize that we know very little for sure. The more we learn, the less we are certain about what we thought we knew. Thus, Russell (1976) expressed: "that we should begin, in our search for certainty ... with our present experiences, and in some sense, no doubt, knowledge is to be derived from them" (p. 2).

However, as Bertrand Russell goes on to claim, what we think that we are experiencing can easily be doubted. This doubt comes, primarily, as a result of the problem of change. The problem of appearance and reality is thus the problem of change. And to investigate the nature of things in themselves involves a metaphysical approach since it deals with their ontological nature. On the other hand, how things appear to our senses does not require such ontological approach. Mere sensory recognition is enough. But, the problem of appearance and reality is thus both epistemological as well as ontological. Whether we know things as they are in themselves (ontology) or as they wish to appear on our senses (empiricism) has a lot to do with our knowledge of the thing in question.

Again, in the first chapter of the same work: *The Problem of Philosophy*, for instance, Russell (1976) basically wanted to know the true meaning of "reality". He writes thus:

The truth is that "reality" can never be determined. I say this because there is a difference between believing and actually knowing. For example, I know the desk in the front of the classroom is real. I know this because all of my senses concur. Now when I try to determine the color, the texture or even the shape of the desk I will run into a problem. (p. 2)

What this means for Bertrand Russell is that our senses, left on their own, cannot lead us to reality. It is not a matter of whether they are in good form to apprehend them or not. What matters, instead, is that "they are by nature incapable to help us determine the nature of reality". That is to say that even if they are in good form, they are quite incapable of knowing the nature of things on the whole? It means further that the "beingness" of being and possibility of its knowledge vis-a-vis its appearance is put into serious question.

On this account, what we know of a thing and how we know it, therefore matters a lot. This is because these issues border on whether things "are", independent of our conceptions of them, and if they "are", what possible grounds do we have to establish the knowledge of them. The obvious fact of experience is that things are actually not what they appear to be. There seems to be something hidden under each appearance. We do not know things wholly as they are simply because a lot of the things in question are quite hidden from us. They do not appear to our senses, hence our senses are limited in their knowledge.

It is quite certain that Bertrand Russell is aware of this obvious fact that in the same work: *The Problem of Philosophy*, he referred to the distinction between appearance and reality as “one of the distinctions that cause most trouble in philosophy” (Russell, 1976, p. 4). There is, therefore, a potentially troublemaking ambiguity why the problem of appearance and reality should cause trouble in philosophy and little or no trouble outside of philosophy? Although, Russell did not answer, the fact remains that this distinction has played an important part in the thinking of many philosophers, and some of them, including Bertrand Russell, have employed it in curious ways to support odd and seemingly paradoxical claims. It may be this last fact that Bertrand Russell had in mind when he spoke of trouble.

The ambiguity that things appear to pose on us is not peculiar to English but is also to be found, for example, in Greek philosophy. Contrary to Bertrand Russell’s suggestion, the distinction between appearance and reality is not simply the distinction between what things seem to be and what they really are. This is because what things are and what they appear to be is not a simple distinction. There are at least two groups of appearance: idioms—what might be called “seeming idioms” and “looking idioms”. The first group typically includes such expressions as “appears to be”, “seems to be”, “gives the appearance of being”, while the second includes such expressions as “appears”, “looks”, “feels”, “taste”, “sounds”, and so on. On these perplexing issues, Russell (1976) further wrote:

Is there any knowledge in the world which is so certain that no reasonable man could doubt it? This question, which at first sight might not seem difficult, is really one of the most difficult that can be asked. When we have realized the obstacles in the way of a straightforward and confident answer, we shall be well launched on the study of philosophy—for philosophy is merely the attempt to answer such ultimate questions, not carelessly and dogmatically, as we do in ordinary life.... (p. 1)

The above quotation indicates that the problem of language has been there. And it is one that has been faced by different philosophers. This work therefore aims to examine philosophically the strength of Bertrand Russell’s critics on appearance and reality, especially as they concern Russell’s concept of reality. Since philosophy is the critique of the realities and ideals we live by, hence it is rational to probe this matter. Philosophy is a critical and coherent attempt to solve problems of existential realities. No doubt it begins with a moment of surprise, wonderment and close observations of the realities of life.

Conceptual Clarification of Basic Terms

In the history of philosophy, there has been serious confusion arising from the use of certain terms and the application of certain concepts. For clarification purpose, it is important to define the basic concept that is associated with this study such as: reality.

According to Vesey and Foulkes (1990), in the *Collins Dictionary of Philosophy*, reality is derived from the Latin word “res”, meaning “thing”. So, reality is defined as “whatever is regarded as having existence as an objective thing, and not merely in appearance, thought, or language”. The state of things as they actually exist, as opposed to an idealistic or notional idea of them. It could be substituted with some words like the real world, facts, real life, actuality, truth, physical existence, corporeality, substantiality and materiality, making it to have a distinction between fantasy and reality.

It is authenticity, realism, the state or quality of having existence or substance. It alludes that the natural world is the only world that exists objectively (Vesey & Foulkes, 1990). Again, in another definition, thus it is the name for all physical existence as an object, wherein the universe and all of things therein are real and all

things which do not exist are considered outside of reality and nonexistent (Russell, 1976).

Indeed, in philosophy, reality simply means things as they are in themselves, i.e., the state of things as they actually exist, as opposed to an idealistic or notional idea of them. Reality includes everything that is and has been, whether or not it is observable or comprehensible. It includes what has existed, exists, or will exist. Thus, the term is used to refer to the state of things as they actually exist, as opposed to an idealistic or notional idea of them.

Bertrand Russell's Concept of Reality

There are both historical and theoretical basis to Russell's theory of reality. The historical level involves his biographical experiences while the theoretical level includes his influence from philosophers, like George Berkeley and Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz. It is good to begin with biographical influence.

Bertrand Russell, a British philosopher, logician, and social reformer, one of the founders of analytic philosophy, was born in 1872 into an aristocratic family. He was influenced by Mill's liberalism and studied mathematics at Cambridge from 1890-1893, where he came under the influence of new-Hegelianism, especially the idealism of Mc Taggart, Ward and Bradley (Stumpf, 1988).

According to Audi (1999) edition of *Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, Russell, as an idealist, "still held that scientific knowledge was the best available and that philosophy should be built around it" (p. 802). He later abandoned idealism and adopted an extreme Platonic realism. According to Brown, Collinson, and Wilkinson (1998), *One Hundred Twentieth-Century Philosophers*, "Russell's important contributions to philosophy begin negatively, with his rejection of idealism he had read in Bradley and heard from McTaggart" (p. 173). He became a lecturer at Cambridge in 1910 and always divided his interests between politics and philosophy. In philosophy, he made much impact on epistemology, metaphysics, logic, mathematics, religion and ethics. He died in 1970 (Stumpf, 1988).

On the theoretical level, he conceives that some philosophers before him have brought forward the reasons for regarding the immediate objects of our senses as not existing independently of us. According to Stumpf (1988), the philosopher who first did this was Bishop George Berkeley (1685-1753). In his work: *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous, in Opposition to Sceptics and Atheists*, George Berkeley undertakes "to prove that there is no such thing as matter at all, and the world consist of nothing but minds and their ideas" (Stumpf, 1988). In that work also, Hylas had hitherto believed in matter but he was no match for Philonous, "who mercilessly drove him into contradiction and paradoxes", and made "his own denial of matter seem, in the end, as if it were almost common sense" (Stumpf, 1988, p. 12).

It is, no doubt, ironic that Locke's common sense approach to philosophy should have influenced George Berkeley to formulate a philosophical position that at first seems so much at variance with common sense. However, Berkeley became the object of severe criticism and ridicule for denying what seemed most obvious to anyone. George Berkeley had set out to deny the existence of matter. It is important to note further that Berkeley's starting and provocative formula was that "to be is to be perceived", esse est percipi (Stumpf, 1994). Clearly this would mean that if something were not perceived, it would not exist. George Berkeley was perfectly aware of the potential nonsense involved in this formula; for he says, "Let it not be said that I take away existence. I only declare the meaning of the word so far as I comprehend it" (Stumpf, 1994, p. 274).

Still, to say that the existence of something depends upon its being perceived, does it raise for us the question whether it exists when it is not being perceived? For George Berkeley, the whole problem turned on

how we interpret or understand the word “exist”. According to Stumpf (1994), Berkeley writes that

the table I write on I say exists; that is, I see and feel it: and if I were out of my study I should say it existed; meaning thereby that if I were in my study I might perceive it, or that some other spirit actually does perceive it. (p. 274)

What Berkeley is saying here is that the world exists has no other meaning than the one contained in his formula, for we can know no instance where the term exists is used without at the same time assuming that a mind is perceiving something. To those who argued that material things have some kind of absolute existence without any relation to their being perceived, Berkeley replied, “that is to me unintelligible”. To be sure, he said thus:

The horse is in the stable, the books in the study as before, even if I am not there. But since we know no instance of anything’s existence without being perceived, the table, horse, and books exist even when I do not perceive them because someone does perceive them. (Stumpf, 1994, p. 275)

It was this particular argument that was employed, Bertrand Russell insisted, was of very different values. Although some were important and sound, others were confused or quibbling. However, Berkeley, Bertrand Russell said “retained the merit of having shown that the existence of matter was capable of being denied without absurdity, and that if there were any thing that existed independently of us, they could not be the immediate objects of our sensation”.

But, how did Berkeley come to this conclusion? In his work: *New Theory of Vision*, he argued that all our knowledge depended upon actual vision and other sensory experiences. In particular, George Berkeley argued thus:

We never sense space or magnitude; we only have different visions or perceptions of things when we see them from different perspectives. Nor do we see distance; the distance of objects is suggested by our experience. All that we ever see are the qualities of an object that our faculty of vision is capable of sensing. We do not see the closeness of an object; we only have a different vision of it when we move towards or away from it. (Stumpf, 1994, p. 276)

This work conceives that “the more Berkeley considered the workings of his own mind and wondered how his ideas were related to objects outside of his mind, the more certain he was that he could never discover any object independent of his ideas” (p. 276).

The Problem of Appearance and Reality

Bertrand Russell tackles the problem of reality in his philosophical work: *The Problem of Philosophy*. The actual problem which Bertrand Russell seems to address is whether there is any knowledge which could be termed certain, that is, indubitable knowledge, which no one can reasonably doubt. For him, it is a difficult task, to just present an-instant response to this question “which at first sight might not seem difficult” (Russell, 1912, p. 2). Thus, he recommended that philosophers should not answer the question carelessly and dogmatically as it is done in everyday life and in the sciences.

Could what we know of anything be the actual reality? Indeed, Bertrand Russell has just presented an epistemological problem which is one of the major problems in philosophy. Thus, the major task is to make a clear distinction between “appearance” and “reality”; this means that the two words should be properly examined, known before any correct distinction can be made between them. According to Russell (1912), “appearance” can be defined as the way “things seem to be”, while “reality” is “the way things are” (White, 1989, p. 113).

The seeming difficulty that lingers here is this: can we actually know a thing the way it is, so as to make a clear distinction between the set of things and another thing which seems like that set of thing? This is one of the main issues that Bertrand Russell tries to proffer a solution. The necessity of the question is such that whatever position or response that is given, will go a long way to determine and influence the way people (especially philosophers) approach things. He did mention that people usually make many mistakes in that “they assume as certain many things which, on a closer scrutiny; are found to be so full of apparent contradictions” (White, 1989, p. 113). They can only escape these problems of knowledge only after they employ much thought.

To properly investigate this and make it simple, Bertrand Russell decided to make use of a table as a case study, and employ the senses (i.e., the sight, touch, hearing, smell and taste) as the major apparatus to be used under normal conditions of light to a normal person. He continued by saying that we are left with no option than to start our search for certainty with our present experiences and, of course, some knowledge is to be derived from them. Employing the senses, he made us understand that he has only little trust in the senses to furnish us with adequate knowledge when he said: “any statement as to what it is that our immediate experience makes us know, is very likely to be wrong” (Russell, 1940, p. 12). This is because what we get from the senses changes with time, people and the environment. Though the senses sometimes provide us with clear evidence so as to be hardly worth stating, yet all of it may still be reasonably doubted.

If we use the table as our guide, to the eye the table oblong, brown, shiny, to touch it is smooth, cool, and hard; when I tap, it gives a wooden sound. And anyone else who sees, feels and hears (the table will agree with this description, so that it might seem as if no difficulty would arise.

As soon as we try to be more precise our troubles begin. Although I believe that the table is really of the same colour all over, the parts that reflect the light look brighter than the other parts; and some parts look white because of reflected light. I know that if I move, the parts that reflect “the light will be different so that the apparent distribution of colours on the table will change. (Hamilton, 2003, p. 43)

Thus, if this is the case, then it follows that if several people are looking at the table at the same time, no two of them will see exactly the same distribution of colours, because no two of them can see it from exactly the same point of view, and any change in the various views makes some change in the way the light is reflected. Because of the various colours that appear as the colour of the table, and to avoid favouritism, Bertrand Russell said “we are compelled to deny that, in itself, the table has any one particular colour” (Hamilton, 2003, p. 3).

The colour like others is not something inherent in the table, but rather it is something depending upon the table, the spectator, and the way the light falls on the table. Hence, if the texture, colour, shape, taste and touch are always changing, then it becomes evident that the real table if there is one, is not the same as what we immediately experience by sight or touch or hearing. The real table according to Bertrand Russell, “is not immediately known to us at all, but must be an inference from what is immediately known” (Mandelbaum, Gramlich, Anderson, & Schneew, 1957, p. 7). If reality must be known only on the basis of inference, then it means that people will be faced a very big task of selecting the right premises, so as to arrive at a valid conclusion. When the premises presented are false, then the resultant conclusion will be false also. In another sense, what is immediately known may not even be enough to enable us to draw a proper inference?

Again, what may be immediately known may not be too much and may make the conclusion ambiguous.

If either of this is the case, then the reality we may finally arrive at, may not be the true reality, but rather a misleading facts/reality. Inference in this case may only yield a good result only with sufficient premises. In this light, Bertrand Russell goes on to call that which is known immediately “appearance”, and which for him is a sign of some “reality” behind. Thus, the only truth which the senses give us is the truth about certain sense-data, which depends upon the relation between us and the object. Concluding this aspect, it is important to point out the concept of appearance and reality raises many other issues which have to be properly tackled otherwise it will impede our effort for clarity. The said issues are: the introduction of sense-data, the argument against naïve realism, the notion of perception, the existence and nature of matter and their various implications.

Representative Perception-Sense Data

One crucial thing here is that in and around the question of appearance and reality are concerns about the nature of perception, that is, “about how it is that we see the world of material bodies” (Hamilton, 2003, p. 46). When philosophers discuss issues of perception, they could discuss all five senses- sight, touch, taste, smell and hearing, but they usually concentrate upon sight.

On tackling this problem, Bertrand Russell started by arguing naïve realism which he defined as “the belief that external objects are exactly as they seem” (Russell, 1912, pp. 3-4). That all the assumptions of naïve realism may be reasonably doubted since it does leave out the way things look or feel or sound. Sounds, colours, smells, hardness, roughness, and so on, which are immediately “known in sensation were all given the name “sense-data” (Burgess, 1950, p. 622).

Sensation, on the other hand, was given to the experience of being immediately aware of things. Thus, whenever we see a colour, we have a sensation of the colour which is a sense-datum. According to Bertrand Russell, “if we are to know anything about the table, it must be by means of the sense-data” (Oguejiofor, 1994, pp. 23-24). The physical object itself cannot be called a sense data and also the sense-data are not direct properties of the physical object.

As such, he joined the camp of representative realists who hold that we see the world by way of seeing sense-data (Oguejiofor, 1994). This means that we see sense-data directly but see the world or physical objects indirectly. The representative perception of Bertrand Russell states that the sense-data we see directly represent the world in some way. If sense-data are the things we can see directly and the physical object is only seen indirectly, then this implies that whenever we cannot see the physical object correctly, we are to lay blames on the sense-data. In this case, the sense-data only serve as a barrier to knowledge of the physical object.

Again, saying that sense-data only represent the world in some way, means that through sense-data, we cannot actually get to the true nature of things. What we only have access to is some aspects of reality. It would be interesting at this point to say what these sense-data are, and the properties they possess. They are non-physical; they are logical atoms, which are particulars, not general whole entities, but pluralities of things which are not necessarily physical but logical (Oguejiofor, 1994). They exist if and only if one is having an appropriate experience. According to Hamilton, “they last just as long as the experience and no longer” (Rachels, 2005, p. 221). There are no unsensed-data; they are private and have only those properties they appear to have.

On a different note, Oguejiofor (1994) envisaged that Bertrand Russell believes that though sense-data are private and last only as the experience last, yet there are also unsense-data, which exist when there is no

experience. These unsense-data are called sensibilia (Oguejiofor, 1994).

The most important consequence of the idea of sense-data is that it leads to the inference that there is the existence of something which is independent of us. This is because sense-data are only a sign of something existing independently of us, something differing, perhaps, completely from our sense-data, and yet causing those sense-data. The implication here is that without the sense-data, we cannot claim to have knowledge of anything directly. Thus, sense-data serve as the essential gate-way to reach the outside world to know what they are (Oguejiofor, 1994).

The Nature of Reality

What then is the nature of reality? What do we mean by reality? Indeed, when we talk of reality, we mean a thing as it is without any illusion or deception. It therefore refers to that which lies behind the different forms a particular sense-datum may have/assume. According to Russell (1912), reality, if there is one, cannot be known by the senses and as well cannot “immediately be known to us at all, but must be an inference from what is immediately known” (p. 11).

We have to recall that Bertrand Russell has been expressing doubts as to the existence of a real object, especially his continuous use of the words “reality if there is one”. Such a statement could imply that he has in his mind concluded that there is no reality before embarking on this philosophical exploration. Again, it could also mean that he was trying to be another Descartes, who through a methodic doubt, established an indubitable epistemic foundation.

Given the analogy of a table which he uses in this particular philosophical project, Bertrand Russell asks and wonders whether there is a real table at all? And if so, what sort of object can its reality be? Hence, Bertrand Russell holds that in sensation, we cannot know the reality but rather the sense-data or the appearances. However, if we are to know anything whatsoever, it will be by means of the sense-data which are associated with reality in its representative form, that not being the reality itself. For the reality in itself, an epitome of reality is the real table, which can be called a physical object or matter. Thus, the question will then be: is there a matter? If so, what is its nature? (Russell, 1912, p. 4).

For Bertrand Russell, reality may be of two kinds based on the classification of the philosophers, notably Kant. Reality may be noumenal or phenomenal. The noumenal or ultimate reality is the highest fundamental nature of a thing. This is not the object we are immediately in contact with. It is rather, “the object of pure thought or of rational intuition, free from all element of the sense” (Russell, 1912, p. 10). This is reality discussed in its highest degree of abstraction.

However, the reality, which we would want to know at this stage of the work, is the physical object or phenomenal reality. This is the object with which we directly come in contact through the senses, even though there may be cases of illusions. Indeed, some philosophers have doubted the existence of this kind of reality. These are skeptics who hold that only appearances exist and that we can know them alone. To George Berkeley, “the object of human knowledge are either ideas imprinted on the senses or else such as are perceived by attending to the passions and operations of the mind” (Russell, 1912, p. 10).

To and against such philosophers, Bertrand Russell holds that though they deny matter as opposed to mind, they inadvertently, in another sense, admit matter. Indeed, George Berkeley and Leibniz admitted that there is a real table, but George Berkeley says it is certain ideas in the mind of God, while Leibniz says it is a colony of souls. But, the most important thing is that they all agree that there is a real table, a physical object.

The Existence of Matter

The concept “matter” used here represents the physical object and hence a real thing. Could we say it is equivalent to the Latin “res”? Bertrand Russell had to pay much attention to the question of whether one can reasonably affirm the existence of anything outside sense-data, because of its central importance to philosophy. His main conclusion was “that there really are objects other than ourselves and our sense-data, which (such objects/things) have existence not dependent upon our perceiving them” (Oguejiofor, 1994, p. 40). The above conclusion was derived from the following premises:

The fact of relative consistency in perception is evident given that the existence of public neutral objects is necessary because in our everyday experience, different people perceive the same “object”. When a number of people are sitting round a dining table it would seem unreasonable to assume that they are not seeing the same table cloth, the same forks, spoons and glasses. Since sense-data are private to each person, it seems reasonable that if they see the same objects, these objects cannot be reduced to sense-data.

Indeed, the fact that there is a close similarity of sense-data makes it easy to arrive at a permanent object underlying them. Again, he notes that because there is still exist a logical gap between our public objects and private sense-data, he holds that “we must, therefore, if possible strive to find in our own purely private experiences, characteristics which show, or tend to show that there are in the world things other than ourselves and other than our private experiences” (M. C. Beardsley & E. L. Beardsley, 1965, p. 356).

Going forward, Bertrand Russell shows that the next argument was based on the behavior of an individual sense-data. A cat appears to me in one part of the room at one moment and in another part at another moment. It is not reasonable to suppose that the cat went out of existence and then sprang into being again. When the cat feels hungry between meals if the cat was merely a set of sense-data, it cannot have ever been in a place where I did not see it. Also, if the cat does not exist when I am not seeing it, “it seems odd that appetite should grow during non-existence as fast as during existence” (Oguejiofor, 1994, p. 42).

It is as such that Bertrand Russell opines that matter or public neutral objects are inferred from the behavior of sense-data and though he admitted the weakness of the argument, he recommended the argument for its simplicity as it leads to no difficulty and “leaves undiminished our instinctive belief that there are objects corresponding to our sense-data” (Russell, 1912, p. 18).

He remarkably holds that in the case of dreams, even if there are no marked differences between dreams and waking state, and even though it is impossible to suppose that the world is a long dream, he insists that it will be difficult to justify the distinction we make between dream and waking state if we do not infer physical objects from sense-data.

The Nature of Matter

We indeed see from the above, that Bertrand Russell affirms the existence of physical objects from weak premises. But it may seem that this is only limited to the inference of physical objects. Importantly, another necessary question that comes up is: what is the nature of the physical object or matter.

In this regard, M. C. Beardsley and E. L. Beardsley (1965), in their book: *Philosophical Thinking*, observe that “up to the nineteenth century, matter was conceived as made up of material objects and material objects were conceived in terms of three basic ideas: space, time and causality” (p. 356).

In the first note, space involves at least three aspects: location (plane), spatial boundaries, and has

impenetrability. On the second note, we understand material objects endure through time, though this view varies with philosophers. And finally, on the third note, material objects are things that have fixed causal capacities, that is, it can be counted on to act and react in certain regular ways.

In his own view, Bertrand Russell, responding to the question, holds that “our perception leaves us completely in the dark as to the real nature of physical objects that are inferable from sense-data” (Oguejiofor, 1994, p. 42). Thus, Oguejiofor (1994) further conceived that Russell arrived at this conclusion after resorting to scientific explanation of perception. In his view, science maintains that what we call colour, light, sound, are all wave-motions which come from the objects to the senses of the subject of sensation.

The idea of colour can never be learnt without the experience of perception, but we can easily explain to blind man what wave-motion means, if and only if there is a public space and time independent of our sensation.

On the issue of our sense-data, he explained further that we can learn that physical objects are higher, longer, side by side, nearer to a particular point and arranged in a circular form in real objective space and so on. Thus, when two objects have different colours, we can assume a “correspondence difference”, and when their colours are the same, we can in like manner safely assume a “correspondence similarity” (Russell, 1912, p. 2).

Thus, he concluded that there is no way we can know of the intrinsic nature of physical objects or matter. They cannot be more or less like sense-data, since science convinces us that sense-data do not belong to the physical world, it becomes “quite gratuitous to suppose that physical objects have colours, and therefore there is no justification for making such a supposition” (Griffin, 2003, p. 117).

What we can know of objects are the sense-data that they evoke in us and the correspondence of similarity and difference between the relation of these objects and that of sense-data. This part, concentrated basically on Bertrand Russell’s notion of appearance and reality. It should be noted that his own kind of realism was representative, with the introduction of sense-data as the only thing that can be perceived. As a way of summing up our take of Bertrand Russell’s theory of reality, we will say that for Russell, reality is dualistic: it has aspect open to sense-data, knowable through the senses. However, there is other aspect of the thing different from appearances, the thing in itself. A proof of this is gotten from the fact of experience of matter, which are the objects that host appearances, colour, shape, size and other qualities inherent on such objects (matter).

The existence of such matter is shown by sameness and consistency of perceptions from different people, indicating a neutral ground of inference open to the public and different from private interdependent of our seeing or perceiving them. As such, Bertrand Russell holds that “being is that which belongs to every conceivable term every possible thing could be conceived, in fact every possible object of thought (including propositions which are either true or false), a general attribute to everything” (Griffin, 2003, p. 117).

Implications of Bertrand Russell’s Concept of Reality

Bertrand Russell’s concept of reality has great relevant implications on ontology and epistemology. Ontology and epistemology are interlinked. No wonder Suman Gupta expresses thus:

In fact, ontology and epistemology are two sides of the same coin, because in any ontological doctrine the epistemological view point is implicit and likewise in any epistemological doctrine the ontological position is implicit. To assert that such and such exists certainly implies the method of knowing it. And likewise what we know or the object of our knowledge has an ontological status. (Gupta, 1983, p. 78)

Bertrand Russell's epistemology conceives that our direct experience has primacy in the acquisition of knowledge (Kevin, 2008). His influence is felt in the distinction between two ways in which we can be familiar with objects: "knowledge by acquaintance" and "knowledge by description". For a time, Bertrand Russell thought that we could only be acquainted with our own sense data – momentary perceptions of colours, sounds, and the like—and that everything else, including the physical objects that these were sense data of, could only be inferred, or reasoned to—i.e., known by description—and not known direct (Richard, 2008). The distinction has gained much wider application, though Bertrand Russell rejected the idea of an intermediate sense datum.

But later in his philosophy, Bertrand Russell subscribed to a kind of neutral monism maintaining between the material and mental worlds, in the final analysis, were arbitrary, and both can be reduced to neutral property—a view similar to one held by the American philosopher/psychologist, William James, and one that was first formulated by Baruch Spinoza, whom Bertrand Russell greatly admired (Leopold, 2005). Instead of James' "pure experience", however, Russell characterized the stuff of our initial states of perception as "event", a stance which is curiously akin to his old teacher Whitehead's process philosophy.

As a mathematician and logician, he feels that applying scientific methods to philosophy will cure philosophy of its traditional systems or methods and will assign philosophy with the new task of studying the logic of language. But, Gupta disagrees with Bertrand Russell's view that all philosophical problems are the problems of logic of language. Thus, Gupta writes: "language is, no doubt, an aspect of philosophy because all knowledge is assimilated, recorded and communicated through language. But, certainly... this is not the sole function of philosophy" (Russell, 1967, pp. 167-178).

Even though Bertrand Russell's logical analysis seems to be unsatisfactory as Gupta conceives, his logical atomism is a very important concept which deals with conception of logic that finds a close similarity between the structure of language and the structure of the world. He considers logical atomism as a species of realism, characterized by logic. Thus, he writes:

I hold that logic is what is fundamental in philosophy, and the schools should be characterized rather by their logic than by their metaphysics. My own logic is atomism, and it is this aspect upon which I should wish to lay stress. Therefore I prefer to describe my philosophy as 'logical atomism', rather than 'realism', whether with or without same prefixed adjective. (Slater, 1994, p. 62)

Hence, he elaborates on the nature of atoms which he considers as constituting the reality. His sense datum theory avers thus:

The reason that I call my doctrine logical atomism is because the atoms that I wish to arrive at as the sort of last residue in analysis are logical atoms and not physical atoms. Some of them will be what I call "particulars"—such things as little patches of colour or sounds, momentary things and some of them will be predicates or relations and so on. (Russell, 1975, pp. 154-155)

Here, he means to say that according to his philosophy of logical atomism, the ultimate constituents of the world are logical atoms and not physical atoms. Further, he tries to construct the world out of particulars and qualities and relations (which are simple). In this context, while analyzing Bertrand Russell's position, Quine writes:

Russell speaks in 'The *Philosophy of Logical Atomism*, of those ultimate simples, out of which the world is built ... that ... have a kind of reality not belonging to anything else. Simples are of an infinite number of various orders, a whole hierarchy. (Russell, 1975, p. 85)

Furthermore, Sambasiva Prasad also agrees with the view that Russell connects back to the causal theory of perception after indulging in constructionism, which is the second stage of his theory. Prasad conceives thus:

For the constructionist, the physical object is identical with a set of sense-data and nothing more. But this is not so. The physical object could exhibit causal properties even in the absence of its sense-data. (For instance, in complete darkness we may not get any sense-data of a wall, but its causal properties are observed while a ball is rebounded on throwing towards it). Therefore the constructionist's identification of the physical object, with a set of sense-data alone is not correct. Being alive to this fact, Russell left constructionism and subscribed again to causal theory in his later works.... (Prasad, 2000, pp. 181-186)

However, Russell's fascination to physics and his attempt to introduce scientific methods in philosophical inquiry, made him come back to the theory of perception (Russell, 1975). Bertrand Russell shares a certain similar view with his predecessors. Like Rene Descartes in his systematic doubt, Russell begins in his work: *The Problem of Philosophy* with the question "is there any knowledge in the world which is so certain that no reasonable man could doubt it?" He appreciates Descartes' methodic doubt which reveals that subjective things are the most necessary.

Critical Evaluation of Bertrand Russell's Theory of Reality

Bertrand Russell advances devastating criticisms against his predecessors and contemporaries. He hopes, therefore, to offer a demonstrable theory of the nature of reality that would stand firmly against the skeptics and atheists among others. But from the time his views were made known to the public to date, it has continued to be the target of the severest criticisms. This is because this work is limited comparatively to that small aspect of his philosophy, we shall proceed with the hope that all these limitations will have a minor influence on what we want to convey through this section.

It is good to remark that MacIntosh commented on the views expressed in Bertrand Russell's work: *Our Knowledge of the External World*. Prior before now, Bertrand Russell had argued in his earlier work: *The Problems of Philosophy* that we infer the existence of the physical world from our sense of experiences. That is to say, the existence of the physical world is accepted because it provides the best inferred explanation of our experiences. But, he argues in *Our Knowledge of the External World* that objects are not inferred from but are actually constituted of actual and possible sense-data. That is to say, he argued that physical objects are, in fact, no more than collections of actual and possible immediate sensory impressions. Now it is evident that Russell's earlier view was dualist, in that it acknowledged a fundamental difference between mental content and the physical world. His new view was monist, in that it acknowledged no such gap: the world is made of just one type of stuff. This tallied with Russell's view that all knowledge derives from experience, and it is also attractive because all else being equal, a simpler explanation is preferable to a more complicated explanation.

However, Russell argued that to infer the existence of the physical world independently of our collections of actual and possible sense-data is unnecessary. Thus, looking back to his earlier view, Russell became dismissive of common sense:

Physics started from the common-sense belief in fairly permanent and fairly rigid bodies ... This common-sense belief, it should be noticed, is a piece of audacious metaphysical theorizing ... We have thus here a first departure from the immediate data of sensation ... probably made by our savage ancestors in some very remote prehistoric epoch. (MacIntosh, 1915, p. 107)

Russell also believes that his new view avoids the problem of radical skepticism—the problem of not being

able to know whether the physical world actually exists or whether it is only created by the mind. He argued on his new view that there is no reason to believe that sense-data cannot exist when they are not perceived.

In response, MacIntosh made it clear that he much preferred Russell's earlier explanation of the physical world. In MacIntosh's opinion, this earlier explanation may have had problems, but it remains, after all, closer to common sense and so should not be so quickly rejected. He summarized Russell's metaphysical move from 1912 to 1914 as follows:

The common sense notion of fairly permanent things, recognized as being a conclusion, not a datum, is now rejected as "the metaphysics of savages". By the use, it is claimed, of "Occam's razor", the inferred entities of common sense are replaced by compounds, or classes, or series of sense-data ... The main criticism to be made against Russell's philosophy at this point is that he has swung from absolute dualism to an absolute monism in epistemology, because he saw no other way of escape from an almost total agnosticism with reference to the physical world. The desperateness of his former condition is reflected in the desperate remedy to which he has had recourse, cutting himself off absolutely from commonsense, for which offence he salves his conscience by applying to the common sense view the epithet, "metaphysics of savages". (MacIntosh, 1915, p. 243)

It is easy to see how the confusion over the quotation occurred, for a reader of MacIntosh might naturally assume that the phrase in inverted commas is Russell's. But, these are not inverted commas in the sense of quotation marks; they are actually "scare quotes". Admittedly, what Russell says in *Our Knowledge of the External World* does amount to the idea that concerning the nature of reality, in this instance, "common sense is the metaphysics of savages"—but he does not claim that all common sense beliefs should, by their very nature, be immediately ruled out of court as intellectually primitive. Common sense may at least supply a starting point. In his political campaigns, Russell was prepared to present himself as the spokesmen of common sense. And in his philosophical work, Russell may not have been quite as dismissive of common sense as the famous "quotation" would have us believe.

Conclusion

This work has exposed and analyzed Bertrand Russell's concept of reality which reveals a lot of issues about his theory. It is easy to view his work as an eccentric dream of a crazy metaphysician when judged without paying adequate attention to the background from which he writes. He believes in the smallest particles of a thing in his theory of logical atomism. Thus, one needs to state that Russell's atomism has been severally misrepresented by critics. But we also have to say that Russell's atomism is not so easy to understand. His argument at times is so rigorous that those who cannot understand him end up misrepresenting him.

References

- Audi, R. (1999). *The Cambridge dictionary of philosophy* (2nd ed.). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Beardsley, M. C., & Beardsley, E. L. (1965). *Philosophical thinking: An introduction*. New York: Harcourt Brace and World Inc.
- Berkeley, G. (1713). Three dialogues between Hylas and Philonous in opposition to Sceptics and Atheists (2017th ed.). Retrieved from <https://www.earlymoderntexts.com/assets/pdfs/berkeley1713.pdf>
- Brown, S., Collinson, D., & Wilkinson, R. (1998). *One hundred twentieth-century philosophers*. London: Routledge.
- Burgess, J. B. (1950). *Introduction to the history of philosophy*. New York: McGraw-Hill Book. Inc.
- Griffin, N. (2003). *The Cambridge companion to Bertrand Russell*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gupta, S. (1983). *The origin and theories of linguistic philosophy*. New Delhi: International Publishing House.
- Hamilton, C. (2003). *Understanding philosophy*. Cheltenham: Nelson Thomes Ltd.
- Kevin, K. (2008). Russell's logical atomism. Retrieved from <http://www.science.uva.nl/-seop/entries/logical-atomism>
- Leopold, S. (2005). Neutral monism. Retrieved from <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/neutral-monism>

- MacIntosh, D. C. (1915). *The problem of philosophy*. New York: Routledge.
- Mandelbaum, M., Gramlich, F. W., Anderson, A. R., & Schneew, J. B. (1957). *Philosophic problem: An introductory book of readings*. New York: The Macmillan Co.
- Nwala, T. U. (1997). *Introduction to philosophy and logic*. Nsukka: Niger Books and Publishing Co. Ltd.
- Oguejiolor, O. (1994). *Has Bertrand Russell solved the problem of perception?* Berlin: Peter Lang.
- Prasad, B. S. (2000). Shahjahan Miah on Russell's constructionism. *Indian Philosophical Quarterly*, 27, 1-2.
- Rachels, J. (2005). *The truth about the world*. New York: McGraw-Hill, Co. Inc.
- Richard, F. (2008). Knowledge by acquaintance vs. description. Retrieved from <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/knowledge-acquaindescrip/>
- Russell, B. (1912). *The problem of philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Russell, B. (1940). *An inquiry into meaning and truth*. London: Allen & Unwin.
- Russell, B. (1967). *Philosopher of the century*. Illinois: The Macmillan Co.
- Russell, B. (1975). *An outline of philosophy*. London: Unwin.
- Russell, B. (1976). *The problem of philosophy*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Slater, J. G. (1994). *Bertrand Russell*. Bristol: Thoemmes Press.
- Stumpf, S. (1988). *Philosophy: History & problems*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Stumpf, S. (1994). *Philosophy: History & problems* (5th ed.). New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Vesey, G., & Foulkes, P. (1990). *Collins dictionary of philosophy*. London: Collins. S. V. "Reality".
- White, J. E. (1989). *Introduction to philosophy*. New York: West Publishing Co.