

REPLY TO PINCOCK

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I write to correct errors in Christopher Pincock's review of my discussion¹ of Russell. First, according to Pincock,² I attempt to "undermine Moore's views on ethics in Part One, [and] Russell's conception of analysis in Part Two" by charging them with a pre-Kripkean conflation of necessity with apriority and analyticity. Not so. Although I do show that such conflation had negative consequences for the views of several philosophers, Moore and Russell are not among them. Moore's error—which marred the defence of his thesis that conclusions about goodness are never consequences of purely descriptive premises—was in tacitly assuming that all necessary/a priori relations among concepts arise from definitions (see my 1: 48–75). A similar problem occurs in Russell, but only tangentially in connection with one possible route to his problematic principle (1) in *Our Knowledge of the External World*,³ the critique of which was *not* a part of any attack on his general conception of analysis (1: 173–6).

- (1) If the occurrence of sense-data constitutes verification of *S*, then *S* must be (at least partly) about sense-data.

¹ *Philosophical Analysis in the Twentieth Century*, Vol. 1: *The Dawn of Analysis* (Princeton: Princeton U. P., 2003), pp. 93–194.

² *Russell*, n.s. 25 (winter 2005–06): 167–71 (at 168).

³ Except when otherwise indicated, all references to *OKEW* will be to the revised, 1926 Allen and Unwin edition. Although this was the edition I used in writing my chapter on *OKEW*, my bibliographical citation was a confused amalgam of different editions. The work was originally published in 1914 by Open Court; there was a second printing in 1915; and in 1922 Allen and Unwin re-issued it by purchasing extra sheets of the 1915 printing, and binding them. In 1926, Russell revised the work, which Allen and Unwin then published as a revised edition. That edition is identical to the Routledge paperback edition now in print and used by students. (Russell revised the 1914 edition again for Norton's 1929 edition, which was reset for the Mentor paperback.) Except at one point, which I will identify later, the difference between the 1926 and the 1914 editions doesn't affect my dispute with Pincock. Thanks to the editor, Kenneth Blackwell, for kindly sharing his extensive knowledge of the bibliographical history with me, and to Ross Scimeca, the head librarian at the incomparable Hoose Philosophy Library at USC, for furnishing me with copies of the editions I needed to sort this out.

Evidently, Pincock has confused the error about definition, which I expose, with a pre-Kripkean conflation of necessity with apriority and analyticity, which is not mentioned in Parts One and Two. This is a blunder. The advances in our understanding of crucial logical, semantic, epistemological, and modal notions which I identify as paramount achievements of the analytic tradition are *not* limited to those made by Kripke. To suggest otherwise is a distortion.

Second, Pincock errs when he objects that in citing (1) as a source for the view that sense-data statements give the content of material-object statements, I ascribe “some form of latent verificationism” to Russell. If the objection is that Russell was no verificationist—since he didn’t hold that *S* is meaningful only if *S* is verifiable—the reply is that I never suggested otherwise. What I said is that (1) together with

(2) Verification always consists in the occurrence of sense-data

constituted a *historical precursor* to verificationism (1: 172).⁴ Perhaps, then, Pincock objects to my reconstruction of Russell’s argument: since (i) truths of physics and common sense are known by being verified, (ii) it follows from (1) and (2) that our knowledge of them is knowledge of sense-data. Perhaps, Pincock thinks that Russell would reject (i). Citing Russell

... if there is any knowledge of general truths at all, there must be *some* knowledge of general truths which is independent of empirical evidence, i.e. does not depend upon the data of sense.
(*OKEW*₂, pp. 65–6; *OKEW*, p. 56)

Pincock concludes that scientific knowledge, for Russell, is justified *partly* by sense-data, and *partly* by associated logical principles about relations among sense-data. But this is compatible with Russell’s *acceptance* of (i). Russell is *not* claiming that some of the truths of physics—apart from purely conceptual truths—are known independent of verification. His point is the familiar one that general truths—*All A’s are B’s*—are not known by purely deductive inference from any set of their instances. This has no effect on my reconstruction of his argument that material objects are logical constructions out of sense-data.

One of my criticisms of Russell’s overall argumentative strategy is that, instead of making it easier to explain our knowledge of material objects, the strategy makes it harder by resting this knowledge, in part, on knowledge of the private sense experiences of others—for “if material objects are to be logical

⁴ See Russell’s comment about his sense-data analysis giving “the whole of our meaning when we say that the blue spectacles are in a certain place” (“[i]f we are to avoid non-sensible objects”) (*OKEW*₂, p. 88; *OKEW*, p. 81).

constructions out of sense data, then they must be logical constructions [not simply out of my sense data, but] out of everyone's sense data" (1: 180). This makes my knowledge of material objects as insecure and questionable as my knowledge of the sense-data of arbitrary agents in arbitrary conditions. Pincock responds to this critique by accusing me of misinterpreting the text. He says:

From his initial rejection of idealism in 1898 onwards, Russell *insisted* that sense-data did *not* depend on a subject for their existence. His epistemology *constantly* invokes principles about sense-data, and later percepts, which outstrip the experiences of all conscious agents. (P. 171, my emphases)

This is Pincock's third serious error. In *Our Knowledge*, Russell says it is "probable" that "the immediate objects of sense [sense-data] depend for their existence upon physiological conditions in ourselves, and that, for example, the coloured surfaces which we see cease to exist when we shut our eyes."⁵ Although he adds that it would be a mistake to *infer from this*, "that they are dependent upon mind, not real while we see them, or not the sole basis for our knowledge of the external world", a few pages later he makes it clear that he *is* prepared to characterize them as mental.

According to some authors—among whom I was *formerly* included—it is necessary to distinguish between a sensation, *which is a mental event*, and its object, which is a patch of colour or a noise or what not. If this distinction is made, the object of the sensation is called a "sense-datum".... *Nothing in the problems to be discussed in this book depends upon the question whether this distinction is valid or not.*... For reasons explained ... [elsewhere] ... I have come to regard the distinction as *not valid*, and to consider the sense-datum *identical* with the sensation. (OKEW₂, p. 83, my emphases)

The distinction here—between a perceived appearance (sense-datum) and the experience of perceiving it (sensation)—dates to the rejection of idealism. But, by the time of *Our Knowledge* Russell no longer insists on, or even endorses, it.⁶ Although unperceived sense-data are initially introduced to simplify the

⁵ OKEW₂, p. 71; OKEW, p. 64.

⁶ More accurately, by the time he produced the revised edition of *OKEW* in 1926, when he introduced the quoted passage into the text, he does not endorse it. In the 1914 edition, he continued to distinguish the sensible object, or sense-datum, from the sensation, characterizing only the latter as a mental event (p. 76). However, even in the early edition he did *not* maintain that sensible objects can exist unperceived (p. 64), and he did *not* include unperceived sensibilia in his final logical construction of material objects (pp. 111–12). Two things changed between the earlier and later editions: (i) he gave up the distinction between sensation and sense-datum, and (ii) he saw that this made *no difference* to his overall argument. This assessment is confirmed by Russell's remark in the preface to the 1929 Norton edition that "the only philosophical change in the present edition [as compared with the original 1914 edition] is the abandonment of the distinction between sensations

presentation of his system of perceptual perspectives, they are *eliminated* from its final formulation.⁷ The end result is a reconstruction of all knowledge of material objects in terms of the actual sense experiences of arbitrary agents, plus experiences they would have in various conditions. *None of this presupposes unperceived sense-data.* As Russell also recognizes, however, nothing he says would be *falsified* if, unknown to us, there were such sense-data. Their existence is simply *irrelevant* to his positive theses, and my criticism of them.

Pincock may have been misled here by another critic, Nicholas Griffin, who takes my “most egregious error” to be failing to recognize that sensibilia are *sensed and unsensed, physical* (rather than mental) constituents of the world.⁸ Griffin is mistaken; there is no error. In *Our Knowledge* sensible objects—indifferently designated as *sense-data, sensible objects, appearances, and sensations*—are spoken of as mental events or experiences (p. 83), as immediate objects of perception (pp. 71, 77), as (probably) existing only when perceived (p. 71), as never perceived by more than one mind (pp. 94–5), as being known, with essentially Cartesian certainty, to have the properties they appear to have (pp. 78, 80, 95), and as existing only in the separate visual, tactile, and other *private* spaces of the particular perceptual perspectives in which they occur—out of which the *public* space of physical objects is constructed (pp. 88, 94–5, 118–19).⁹ For these reasons, it is, I think, misleading to apply the word “physical” to Russellian sensibilia, or to insist on withholding the word “mental”.¹⁰ Whichever of these designations apply, however, the key point, as I emphasized, is that the properties Russell assigns to sensibilia are the familiar ones that allow them to play their standard epistemological role.

As for the Griffin–Pincock error of taking Russell’s construction to rely on *unsensed* sensibilia, Russell remarks, “*in so far as physics or common sense is verifiable, it must be capable of interpretation in terms of actual [perceived]*

and sense-data, which I now agree with the American realists in regarding as illusory” (*OKEW*, p. xi).

⁷ *OKEW*, pp. 94, 116–17; *OKEW*, pp. 87, 111–12.

⁸ Griffin, *Philosophy in Review*, 25 (April 2005): 140–3 (at 143).

⁹ All of this is true for both editions of *OKEW*, *except* that in the earlier edition Russell distinguishes the objects of sense from the experience of perceiving them, and labels only the latter as *mental* (p. 76). Other page references for the 1914 edition: immediate objects of perception (pp. 64, 70), existing only when perceived (p. 64), never perceived by more than one mind (pp. 87–8), Cartesian certainty about their properties (pp. 70–1, 72–3, 87), existing only in private spaces out of which public, physical space is constructed (pp. 80–1, 87–8, 113).

¹⁰ This is a point on which Russell himself vacillated—adopting an accommodating response in 1914 to the characterization of sense-data as “subjective” and “belonging to psychology” (*OKEW*, p. 110), insisting in 1915 that they nevertheless be characterized as “physical” rather than “mental” (*Journal of Philosophy*, 12 [8 July 1915]: 391–2 [*Papers* 8: 88]), and characterizing them as “mental” in 1926, while recognizing that the issue was irrelevant to his overall construction (*OKEW*, p. 83).

sense-data alone.”¹¹ Although this leaves open the possibility of unverifiable truths, not interpretable in terms of actual sense-data, in the end Russell discounts this. His aim is give a philosophical reconstruction which explains how our *knowledge* of the world is possible. Throughout, he repeatedly links this knowledge with verifiability; what cannot be verified cannot be known. Hence, his account of physical science—which he describes as a systemization of our *knowledge* of the world¹²—can’t include claims we don’t or can’t know. Since, on his own account, we can’t know truths about “ideal elements”—including unperceived sensibilia—he says:

If physics is to consist wholly of propositions known to be true, or at least capable of being proved or disproved, the three kinds of hypothetical entities [including unperceived sensibilia] ... must all be capable of being exhibited as logical functions of [actual] sense-data.
(*OKEW*₂, p. 116; *OKEW*, p. 111)

He sums up,

Thus, it is unnecessary, for the enunciation of the laws of physics, to assign any reality to ideal elements: it is enough to accept them as logical constructions, provided we have means of knowing how to determine when they become actual [perceived].
(*OKEW*₂, p. 117; *OKEW*, p. 112)

Contrary to Griffin and Pincock, then, Russell’s construction *excludes* unsensed sensibilia as basic elements. This doesn’t mean that he categorically denies their existence—any more than his refusal to countenance material “things in themselves” shows that he denies the possibility that they exist. The point of his construction is to show that our common-sense and scientific knowledge doesn’t require them. Believe in them if you like, but *knowledge* of them is impossible.¹³

I will be brief with Pincock’s remaining errors.

- (i) He objects to my claim that Russell’s theory of descriptions “was central to his rejection” of the principle that every object of thought must have being, on the grounds that something else caused Russell to abandon his earlier treatment of denoting phrases. My response, plus a lengthy discussion of negative existentials, is given in “What Is History For?”.¹⁴

¹¹ *OKEW*₂, pp. 88–9; *OKEW*, p. 81.

¹² *OKEW*₂, p. 73; *OKEW*, p. 66.

¹³ *OKEW*₂, p. 117; *OKEW*, p. 112.

¹⁴ Forthcoming in *Philosophical Studies*. Available at http://rcf.usc.edu/~soames/replies/What_Hist_for.pdf.

Here, I make a related point. My central concern was not with the personal history that led Russell to his theory of descriptions, but with what made the theory a genuine advance. One such factor—emphasized by Russell himself—was its role in demystifying negative existentials.

- (ii) He objects to my characterization of Russellian propositions as complexes of properties and objects whose structure mirrors the logical forms of sentences that express them. Since Pincock himself construes these propositions as complexes of the same properties and objects that I do, his objection is (a) to *calling* propositions information that sentences encode, and (b) to using set-theoretic constructions to illustrate their structure. The objection to (a) is frivolous; (a) doesn't make propositions dependent on sentences. Regarding (b), I use set-theoretic constructions *only* to fill out formal details of a truth theory that is explicitly indicated to contain technical extensions of Russell. No philosophical use is made of these constructions.
 - (iii) He objects to my not discussing Russell's "no-classes/sets view". It wasn't discussed because it didn't constitute a philosophical advance. My stated goal was not to give complete portraits of each philosopher, but to chronicle the lasting lessons of the tradition.
 - (iv) He objects to my first-order treatment of logicism. This is defended in "What Is History For?". Although Pincock foolishly speculates that I may have been unaware of the differences between Russell's formulations and mine, the comment about Gödel he highlights does require more explanation—which it will receive in the second edition.
 - (v) Finally, he expresses misplaced resentment on behalf of professional historians. There is no need for this. My volumes *are* too light on references to secondary literature. As indicated in "What Is History For?" steps will be taken to correct this. However, historians in the Pincock mould should not be so quick to take offence. They don't own the subject, and there are types of historical projects with goals different from theirs which they should learn to approach with an open mind.
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