DID RUSSELL SET OUT TO SOLVE THE PROBLEM OF PERCEPTION?

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J. Obi Oguejiofor. *Has Bertrand Russell Solved the Problem of Perception? A Critical Exposition of Bertrand Russell's Analysis of Sense Perception and Its Relation with the External World.* (European University Studies.) Frankfurt am Main and New York: Peter Lang, 1994. Pp. 141. US$29.95.

In 1994 a new philosophical essay was published by Peter Lang under the title, *Has Bertrand Russell Solved the Problem of Perception?* My examination of the essay shows that the author, J. Obi Oguejiofor, achieved these results:

(1) He makes a lively historical presentation of the relevance of the problem in question.
(2) He equally exposes Russell's views on and contributions to the problem under discussion.

(3) His evaluations of Russell's views are very critical. Such evaluations are found in the course of his expositions and at the conclusion of the entire essay. The critical character of the essay is portrayed in one of his concluding remarks thus: "Russell remains far away from the ideal of progress and clear cut solutions he wanted to offer to the problem of perception" (pp. 130–1). In the author's view, an ideal of this sort displays a lack of proper philosophical attitude. Hence, his conviction that "Russell failed to achieve his aim"—a failure that "points the way to a better understanding of the nature of philosophy".[1]

Against the background of these results, the present writer thinks that both the title of the essay and its contents contain strange misreadings and criticisms. It is therefore the aim of this critique to identify these inadequacies. They lie in the following areas: Oguejiofor's exposition of Russell's theories of perception; misreadings or new interpretations of Russell's views; confusing and contradictory presentations; and whether or not Russell set out to solve the problem of perception *in sé*.[2]

CONCLUSION

Our examination of Oguejiofor's essay does not undermine areas where he displays understanding of Russell's views. In different contexts, he shows some knowledge of Russell's central epistemological search, viz., the question of certainty (pp. 57f., 103, 111). Since this central vision of Russell's inquiry was not well focused, there emerged a number of misreadings and strange criticisms. Some could be explained against the background that Oguejiofor does not sufficiently recognize the import of Russell's discussions from various disciplines like psychology, linguistics, physiology, physics (theoretical physics in particular), etc.[3] It is true that every author has a right to limit the scope of his work. At the same time he should be prepared to face criticisms which may ensue from related issues that are neglected in his survey especially if such issues are not just *accidental references*, but are at the very heart of the discussion in question.

[1] Comment on the back cover of the essay.

[2] [At this point a very long examination ensues. For reasons of space, date of publication and the relative importance of the book only the conclusion follows.—Ed.]

[3] The said "insufficient recognition" is boldly acknowledged by Oguejiofor in his "Introduction": "In presenting Russell's theories, we are well aware that perception is an interdisciplinary problem, touching on physics, physiology and psychology. This essay is not intended to delve deeply into these disciplines except incidentally where Russell made references to them (especially physics)" (p. 14).

Equally important to note in this critique is this: our considerations so far do not mean that all of Russell's views on "perception" are valid. Russell himself would be shocked if any passionate Russellian should accord infallibility to his views. After all, he once said:

> ... we ought always to entertain our opinions with some measure of doubt. I shouldn't wish people dogmatically to believe any philosophy, not even mine. No, I think we should accept our philosophies with a measure of doubt.[4]

Russell's observation in this text receives considerable insistence in his talks, for in another context (i.e. speaking of the practical use of his type of philosophy), he gives this advice to people:

> I think nobody should be certain of anything. If you're certain, you're almost certainly wrong, because nothing deserves certainty, and so one should always hold one's beliefs with a certain element of doubt and one ought to be able to act vigorously in spite of the doubt.... But in practical life one has to act upon probabilities, and what I should look to philosophy to do is to encourage people to act with vigour without complete certainty.[5]

There is no doubt that this state of "uncertainty" (doubt or probability) about knowledge and in practical life should be uncomfortable to most people, especially because the human mind seeks after what is certain and what endures. Once, Russell was asked why he considers it important that we should act with such spirit of uncertainty or probability, since this attitude of uncertainty "is generally disturbing to people". He replied:

> Well, it [i.e. acting with uncertainty] does for a time of course disturb them. I think a certain amount of disturbance is an essential part of a mental training, but if they have any knowledge of science they get a ballast which enables them to avoid being completely upset by the doubts that they ought to feel. (*Ibid.*)

These concluding remarks are meant to demonstrate that Russell's views (whether on perception or another philosophical problem) are not sacrosanct. At the same time, they do imply that just any kind of treatise against Russell's views cannot be accepted as valid exposition or worthwhile criticism.

[4] "Bertrand Russell in Conversation with Romney Wheeler", *Wisdom: Selections from the NBC Television Network's Distinguished Series*, phono record directed by Donald B. Hyatt (New York: Decca Records, *c.* 1952). Also in James Nelson, ed., *Wisdom: Conversations with the Elder Wise Men of Our Day* (New York: Norton, 1958), p. 111.

[5] *Bertrand Russell Speaks His Mind* (Cleveland and New York: World Publishing, 1960), p. 17.