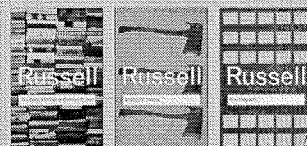


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BOOK REVIEW

RUSSELL AND THE EDWARDIANS

SAMUEL LEBENS

Review of Omar Nasim, *Bertrand Russell and the Edwardian Philosophers*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2008. Hardcover, 256 pp, \$80.00.

In his book, *Bertrand Russell and the Edwardian Philosophers*, Omar Nasim applies considerable scholarship and clarity of expression to an important yet neglected subject: Russell's place among his most immediate contemporaries between 1911 and 1915. Nasim concentrates on Russell's earliest attempts to construct the external world from sense-data – for example, in “The Relation of Sense-Data to Physics” and *Our Knowledge of the External World*, both published in 1914 – and challenges the orthodox view that Russell's epistemology was “simply a direct descendent and response to the Empiricists of old” (Nasim, 169).

In the period Nasim focuses on, Russell was a professional philosopher “participating in symposia, colloquia, writing for English academic and non-academic periodicals, [and] keeping in touch both in person and in letters with many of his colleagues” (14). The orthodox view of Russell's epistemology in this period, though it captures part of the picture, divorces Russell from his historical context by making him merely a descendent of the empiricists. Nasim attempts to right that wrong. In so doing, he hopes to arrive at a better understanding of Russell's early attempts to construct the external world. More radically, Nasim alludes to a future reconstruction of our historical account of the birth of analytic philosophy – a reconstruction in which G.F. Stout and the Edwardian philosophers take their rightful place.

I. RUSSELL, STOUT AND NUNN ON SENSE-DATA

Walking around a table, it seems to change shape and colour; and as you move nearer to and further from it, it seems to get larger and smaller. Because we assume that the real table, if there is one, does not frequently change its colour, shape, or size, we are seemingly

forced to conclude that if it exists, it is not what we directly experience. Russell was therefore forced to distinguish between sense-data that we immediately perceive and ordinary objects, for example, the table, in his 1912 *Problems of Philosophy*.

Russell's appeal there to sense-data was borrowed from G.E. Moore. Russell used Moore's lecture notes to prepare *Problems of Philosophy*, where he develops a broadly Moorean theory of perception. (Moore's lecture notes became *Some Main Problems of Philosophy*, published in 1953.) But Moore wasn't working in a vacuum, and Nasim pays little attention to him. Moore and Russell were both appealing to sense-data while a philosophical controversy was waged about sense-data between G.F. Stout on the one hand and Samuel Alexander and T.P. Nunn on the other. According to Nasim (3), the roots of this controversy are planted in Stout's 1904 article "Primary and Secondary Qualities," and the debate rumbled on for many years. Nunn was still actively engaged in his dispute with Stout in his 1916 paper "Sense-Data and Physical Objects."

The controversy centred on the nature of sense-data: both sides adapted a distinction between sense-data and ordinary objects, but were sense-data psychical or physical, did they persist when not being perceived, and how did they give rise to knowledge of the ordinary objects that they were said to represent, if indeed they do give rise to such knowledge? Nasim presents Russell's extraordinary attempts to construct ordinary objects out of sense-data in 1913-14 against the backdrop of two postulates fought over in the controversy: Stout's and Nunn's. This influence resulted in a reversal by Russell of his earlier position, inherited from Moore, that sense-data and ordinary objects are distinct.

In his 1909 article for the *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, "Are Presentations Mental or Physical?", Stout attacks Alexander's account of sense-data as physical entities that Alexander had argued for in his article "Mental Activity in Willing and in Ideas" published in the same issue of the *Proceedings*. Nasim sketches all of Stout's concerns, though only one will be focused on here.

Consider the following example: Adam puts his hand into a bucket of water and feels a cold sensation; simultaneously, Brenda puts her hand into the same bucket of water and feels a hot sensation. Could the very same thing have two contrary qualities inhering in it at the same time and place? "No," Stout answers "for this

'would involve a contradiction'" (Nasim, 55). Stout's reaction is based on what Nasim calls "Stout's postulate," which states that contrary qualities cannot inhere in the same thing at the same time and place. This line of reasoning leads Stout to conclude that sense-data are mental and subjective, "so that Adam's experience of a cold sensation is a distinct psychical existent from Brenda's hot sensation" (ibid.).

In a 1910 article, Nunn leapt to Alexander's defence. Nunn simply denies Stout's postulate. Nunn's postulate, its replacement, says that "a thing actually 'owns' all the qualities that may be offered to sense-experience under different circumstances and conditions" (Nasim, 75). Nasim quotes Nunn's explanation:

There is no difficulty in the case of the water which appears warm to A and cold to B. To me it seems true, not only that both the warmth and the coldness are really experienced, but also that, under the appropriate conditions, both are *there to be experienced*. (Ibid.)

Stout thinks it impossible for a thing to instantiate contrary qualities at the same place and time. Nunn thinks that contrary qualities *can* be located in the same place and time. Russell is able, in his construction of the external world, to adopt both postulates by distinguishing two senses of the phrase 'in the same place.'

In *Our Knowledge*, Russell begins his construction of the external world with the claim that no two percipients ever share an identical world of sense-experience. If we both look at the same table, however similar our experience will be, there will certainly be differences forced upon our experiences given our distinct points of view. Russell maintains that these "private worlds" or "perspectives" exist even when nobody perceives them. And there are, he claimed, an infinite number of existent perspectives.

Russell is now able to adopt both Stout's postulate and Nunn's postulate. The place *at which* an object appears is a single perspective. In such a place no object instantiates contrary properties. This accords with Stout's postulate. The place *from which* an object appears is charted in Russell's six dimensional space. Objects *do* instantiate contrary properties at the places *from which* they appear: this allows you to experience the water as cold while I experience it as hot. This accords with Nunn's postulate. However, Russell

forges this compromise, not to find a middle path between Stout and Nunn, but to refine Nunn's position and maintain, against Stout, that sense-data are not psychical. The mere fact that you experience something as cold while I experience it as hot is not enough to demonstrate that our sense-data are mind-dependent.

By this view, then, Russell's work on sense-data and the external world was intended to take its place within the Edwardian controversy. But perhaps Nasim is reading Russell's work into a debate that Russell cared little for or knew little about. How do we know that Russell was really responding to these features of a debate between the Edwardian philosophers? We know it because Russell said so to Nunn. This conversation was reported by Nunn to Alexander in a letter dated 10 July 1914 that Nasim reproduces (119).¹

In addition to clarifying the historical context of Russell's views on sense-data, Nasim provides his readers with the clearest exposition I have ever seen of Russell's somewhat baffling 1914 construction of the external world. Russell's six-dimensional space, in Nasim's hands, becomes relatively easy to comprehend; this, in turn, allows Russell's genius to shine. Once this six-dimensional space is in hand, and we have grasped the distinction between the place *at which* a thing appears and the place *from which* a thing appears, we can see how Stout's postulate and Nunn's postulate, mutually exclusive though they initially seem to be, can both be accommodated. Stout's postulate is true, when we consider the place *at which* an object appears, and Nunn's is false. Nunn's postulate is true, however, when we consider the place in six-dimensional space *from which* an object appears, and Stout's is false. The limited truth of Stout's postulate in no way entails that sense-data must be psychical.

II. OTHER ISSUES THAT INFLUENCED RUSSELL

Russell's accommodation of Stout's postulate with Nunn's postulate is not the only line of influence that Nasim sketches from the Edwardian philosophers to Russell. Russell's distinctive conception of a sense-datum is best understood, Nasim argues, in the light of the raging debate between Stout, Nunn and Alexander. We have al-

¹ The letter is housed at the John Rylands University Library, Samuel Alexander Papers, University of Manchester.

ready seen how Russell's conception of mind-independent and persisting sense-data arose from his engagement with these thinkers. Furthermore, contrasting Russell's 1914 logical construction of the external world with Stout's "ideal construction" (Stout, 1905) uncovers a hidden motive to Russell's whole epistemological project: Russell wanted to separate philosophy from psychology more distinctly than Stout had managed to – Russell's construction of the external world wasn't merely responding to scepticism, as it is often claimed, it was responding to Stout. Stout thought that psychology would help us bridge the gap between sense-data and the external world. Russell thought that this job should and could be done only by logic: the logical form of our statements about the external world can be analysed in terms of sense-data and logical constructions out of sense-data.

Nasim (ch. 6) also presents an analogy between Russell's earlier construction of irrational and imaginary numbers and his construction of the external world. Russell had considered many ways of constructing these peculiar species of number from less peculiar species of number. Nasim goes to great length to show that the various options open to Russell on this issue correspond to the various ways that the Edwardian philosophers sought to construct the external world from sense-data. It's no wonder, Nasim goes on to conclude, that Russell, who had already provided us with a logical construction of these controversial numbers, would address this Edwardian controversy with a logical construction of the external world.

Nasim's book begins the important and long overdue task of delineating the influence of figures such as Stout, and through him, Brentano, in the emergence and early development of analytic philosophy. Russell has no "philosophically simple and direct link ... with the British Empiricists of the Early Modern period" (169). A more fine-grained picture emerges when we place Russell in his proper historical context. For example, Russell's sense-data, unlike the *sensations* of the empiricists, are real and existent physical appearances. Furthermore, we are acquainted with sense-data, but we are also acquainted with relations. This is no simple empiricism.

Nasim's focus on Russell's philosophy between 1911-15 is appropriate – it is an important period in Russell's work, during which the influence of the Edwardian philosophers was most keenly felt.

But even within this narrow focus, key areas are left untouched. Nasim notes that before arriving at his logical construction of the external world, Russell had avowedly adopted Nunn's position – that sense-data are properties belonging to ordinary objects (114). This view, assimilated into Russell's philosophy, would have had major ramifications. If sense-data are properties, then Russell would not have had to distinguish between acquaintance with sense-data and acquaintance with universals. In fact, he would lose all acquaintance with particulars because, during the period Nasim deals with, Russell thought that sense-data are the only particulars with which we're acquainted. I'm not denying that Russell may have held this view during the rapid development of his epistemology – Nasim's arguments seem conclusive – but its ramifications for Russell's account of the particular-universal distinction deserve spelling out.

Similarly, towards the end of the book, Nasim contrasts Russell's view of philosophy in this period with Stout's. Russell's view, as presented by Nasim, is that all distinctively philosophical questions can be reduced to questions of philosophical logic, and can be answered by logic. This is an interesting view, but in order to assess it, we would need an account of what Russell thought logic to be. This account is missing, as is the role of Russell's theory of descriptions and the notion of an incomplete symbol in his logical constructions. A final criticism: the clarity with which Nasim explains Russell's construction of the external world is sometimes missing from his earlier exposition of the Edwardian philosophers. At times, long and difficult passages are left quoted at length, when they might have been better broken up and explained.

Putting these points to one side, Nasim's book is an important start on a much needed programme: locating Russell's work in its proper historical context. A great deal has been said about Russell's relation to his predecessors. It is time to concentrate more on his relation to his contemporaries. Nasim's book is well worthy of attention and will surely repay careful study.

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Bertrand Russell and the Edwardian Philosophers: Constructing the World

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authors who had a vast and pervasive influence on Nietzsche during this time of writing. As a result, Nietzsche may appear to the student or novice reader – who is, after all, the intended audience – as almost miraculously original and even prescient with respect to his observations on cognition and linguistics. If this volume is to provide readers with a backdrop for the developmental movements of his published writings, then the general omission of these influences wrongly presents Nietzsche as the icon of the inspired and isolated genius, an image long ago abandoned.

This volume, in sum, will serve students as a handsome and ably translated update of the Breazeale edition and will widen the avenue of inquiry into Nietzsche's early work. If it stands as their only impression of Nietzsche's early writing, it will have inculcated a skewed image of the philosopher in the ways outlined above. If, however, it inspires the novice to dig more deeply into the wealth of available materials and to examine the recent scholarship on the early Nietzsche, then it will have done a significant service to the field.

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Omar W. Nasim: *Bertrand Russell and the Edwardian Philosophers: Constructing the World*. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, pp. 208. £50.00 (hb.). ISBN 978-0-230-20579-6

Although it is true that Russell changed his philosophical position more than once, Paul Hager has shown that there is an important continuity in Russell's philosophy, because Russell used his method of logical analysis and construction not only in his early writings, but also in later work. We are all familiar with the method, because Russell applied it to the problem of how definite descriptions can be given meaning. The method is developed within the context of the logicism project: one should not postulate that there are natural numbers; these numbers are to be constructed by logical means as classes of equinumerous classes.

Omar Nasim has meticulously shown that Russell's application of this method to the problem of the external world is provoked by what he calls the 'Edwardian controversy'. During the Edwardian era (the period from 1901 until 1910 generally extended until the start of the First World War), philosophers in Britain discussed the nature of sensible objects, and how these objects relate to physical things and the perceiving subject. G. F. Stout, G. Dawes Hicks, T. P. Nunn, Samuel Alexander, Russell and, to some extent, G. E. Moore all took part in the discussion. It is especially Stout's position that has stimulated Russell to apply his method of logical construction in this context.

G. F. Stout, who had been Russell's teacher in 1893/4, was strongly influenced by Brentano in his writings. Brentano's thesis that all mental acts are directed to an object internal to the mind, provoked a reaction in his pupils. Meinong and Twardowski defended the thesis that a distinction between act, content and object is needed. A similar thesis can be found in G. F. Stout's *Analytic Psychology*, which was published in 1896, and which was read by Russell as soon as it came out. Russell was familiar with the threefold distinction, but opposed it. For Russell, there is not a content of sensation besides the sensation as act and the sense datum, the object of sensation. How can we know the world of physical objects if all objects of perception are sense data?

Some of the philosophers involved in the controversy claimed that we directly perceive and know objects in the external world. This thesis is rebutted by Stout and Russell: we are not entitled simply to assert that we have such direct epistemic access to physical objects; rather, we have to construct these objects from our experience. Stout opposed the atomistic answer that such objects are constituted by relations of association; besides association, one is in need of ideal construction, which consists in the discovery of possibilities relative to a general condition or universal. For Stout, a presented content is essentially part of a more complex whole (the object known), which is the result of an ideal construction. The construction of physical objects and space is explained partly in psychological, partly in epistemic, and partly in metaphysical terms.

From Russell's point of view, Stout's account of the construction of physical objects by psychological, epistemic and metaphysical means does not give a philosophical answer to the problem of the external world. According to Russell, we need a method that is strict and non-psychological: the method of logical construction can be used to construct physical objects and space. Psychology is important, but it merely provides the philosopher with the data from which physical objects are to be constructed. The method of logical construction makes it possible to derive propositions about physical objects from propositions about (possible and actual) sense data, and physical objects may thus be understood as logical constructions from sense data.

Nasim shows that the way Russell gives a construction of physical space changed, because Russell wanted to account for the intuitions behind two incompatible postulates: one being put forward by Stout ('one and the same thing cannot have more than one sensible quality at one and the same place'); the other by Nunn ('one and the same thing may have many different and even contrary sensible qualities all in the same place'). Stout argued that sensible appearances must be mental, because there may be contrary sensible appearances of the same thing: the water may feel hot for me, while warm for another. Nunn postulated, though, that the same thing may have contrary sensible qualities at one and the same place (and time), and that the objects of sensation can be understood as physical. In *The*

Problems of Philosophy, Russell had constructed public, physical space simply from sense data and their relations to one another in psychological space. In *Our Knowledge of the External World*, Russell wanted to account for the intuitions behind the two postulates. All aspects of a thing must be in two places: the place where the thing is, and the place where the private world is, that is, the perspective from which the aspect appears. Because there is only hotness *in* that place *from* this place or perspective, the thing may be hot for me, while cold for you, and sense data, though private, need not be mental. We can construct a private space for which Stout's postulate holds (space as it was constructed in *The Problems of Philosophy*), and then give an account of physical space as a logical construction from different perspectives or private spaces for which Nunn's postulate holds.

Nasim makes it clear that Russell is not defending a variant of phenomenalism. Russell's logic of relations, especially that of asymmetrical relations, plays an important role in the construction of physical objects. Without such relations, one can only obtain the class of sense data at an instant given to a single observer. A fuller account of the construction of physical objects and space has to include the notion of a series, as Paul Hager has shown, and such a series is constituted by its members and an ordering relation. Such relations are, according to Russell, independent of the mind, and the world is thus logically constructed out of more than sense data alone.

Russell's theory of sense data has been neglected by philosophers since the attack on the notion of sense datum in the 1950s. Nasim makes it clear, though, that the value of Russell's theory is to be found more in the logical method that is used to construct physical objects from sense data, than in the account of sense data themselves.

Nasim's book is an excellent first in the series *History of Analytic Philosophy*, edited for Palgrave by Michael Beaney. The book may also be of importance to those who take an interest in today's revival of the notion of sense datum. José Luis Bermúdez' thesis that the immediate objects of perception are parts of the facing surfaces of physical objects seems to come close to the position of Samuel Alexander as described by Nasim: the sensible object is not mental, but a part of the independent quality of the physical thing, and can therefore be perceived by more than one person.

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