

RUSSELL'S ROBUST SENSE OF REALITY: A REPLY TO BUTCHVAROV

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This paper is a reply to Professor Panayot Butchvarov's recent article entitled "Our Robust Sense of Reality".¹ Critical of Russell from a Meinongian viewpoint, Butchvarov raises a deep ontological question concerning the Russellian critique of Meinong: Just what *is* the "robust sense of reality" Russell accuses Meinong of lacking when Meinong claims that "There are objects of which it is true to say that there are no such objects?"² It is more fundamental than the standard semantic question: What is the meaning or proper use of Russell's existential quantifier? For meanings and uses themselves must be real.³ Butchvarov claims that: (i) Russell's existential quantifier needs a more fundamental conception of existence to determine its applicability in specific cases. (ii) For Russell this conception is that: CON. All objects exist. (iii) But CON begs the question against Meinong's theory of objects.⁴ (iv) And CON unravels because all genuine concepts (including existence) are classificatory. (v) A determining conception of existence as identifiability is a preferable (i.e. genuinely classificatory) alternative to Russell's CON.

I shall accept claim (i) but shall reject claims (ii)-(v). My rejection is largely based on three points: (1) Russell does not use the word "real" and its synonyms ("exists," "is actual," "has being") univocally, but in three senses. These senses are not rival theories or given at different times by Russell. They are related parts of one theory given in one broad period, 1905-1919. They are perhaps best seen working together in the single work, "The Philosophy of Logical Atomism". (2) In one of these three senses

1. Panayot Butchvarov, "Our Robust Sense of Reality", *Grazer Philosophische Studien* 25/26 (1985/1986), pp. 403-404.

2. Alexius Meinong, "Theory of Objects", trans. Isaac Levi, D.B. Terrell, and Roderick M. Chisholm, in Roderick M. Chisholm, ed., *Realism and the Background of Phenomenology* (Atascadero: Ridgeview Publishing Company, 1960), p. 83.

3. Compare "Our Robust Sense of Reality", p. 421.

4. Compare Roderick M. Chisholm, "Meinong", in Paul Edwards, Editor in Chief, *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., and The Free Press, 1967), Vol. 5, p. 261.

Russell is a neglected major early proponent of the “No entity without identity” sort of theory advocated by Quine, the later Wittgenstein, and Butchvarov himself. (3) It is this sense, and not CON, which is Russell’s conception of existence that governs the applicability of his existential quantifier. So that claim (v)’s conception of existence as identifiability, far from being an alternative to Russell, is very close to Russell’s own view.

It is easily understandable why Butchvarov does not notice the three points I just mentioned: they seem to be unnoticed in the whole literature on existence and identity. This is probably because identifiability has been associated at most with Russell’s theories of sense-data and of logical fictions, and not with his theory of denoting. This has led to a neglect of how these three theories fit together. Indeed, admitting only what I call Russell’s primary and tertiary senses of the word “real” may be called the standard interpretation of Russell’s theory of denoting. Butchvarov is just giving a version of this standard interpretation. That is the real problem.

What, then, is Russell’s robust sense of reality, from 1905 to 1919? Russell says that “[the word ‘real’] ... is a vague word, and most of its uses are improper”.⁵ He is best known for writing of a “sense of,”⁶ “feeling of,”⁷ or “vivid instinct”⁸ for reality which we have or ought to have. However, other passages indicate that Russell admits no fewer than three fairly clear, quite distinct, and theoretically interrelated senses of the word “real”.

The primary (Parmenidean) sense is minimal. It is that to be real is not to be nothing. Russell says, “... there is no such thing as the unreal”.⁹ He says, “... the unreal is simply nothing”.¹⁰ This sense is more or less a negative survival of Russell’s notion of being in his 1903 *Principles of Mathematics*. As everything has being in this sense, it is anti-Meinongian, even though Russell considered it Meinongian in *Principles of Mathematics*.¹¹

The secondary (Berkeleyan and Humean) sense is correlative. In the primary sense of “real,” hallucinated or phantom particulars “... have the

5. Bertrand Russell, “The Philosophy of Logical Atomism”, in Robert C. Marsh, ed., *Logic and Knowledge* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1971), p. 224.

6. Russell, *Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1919), p. 170.

7. *Ibid.*

8. “The Philosophy of Logical Atomism”, p. 223.

9. Russell, “On the Nature of Acquaintance”, in *Logic and Knowledge*, p. 149.

10. *op. cit.*, p. 150. See also “On Denoting”, in *Logic and Knowledge*, p. 55.

11. Russell, *Principles of Mathematics*, Second Edition (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, reprint of 1938), pp. 449-453. See: Russell, “Meinong’s Theory of Complexes and Assumptions”, *Mind* 29 (1904), p. 204, on the being of objects; J.N. Findlay, *Meinong’s Theory of Objects and Values*, Second Edition (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1963), pp. xi-xii, 46ff. on Russell.

same reality as ordinary sense-data. They have the most complete and perfect and absolute reality that anything can have".¹² Russell says that "... they differ from ordinary sense-data only in the fact that they do not have the usual correlations with other things".¹³ Thus the secondary sense is that to be real is to be correlated with (other) particulars (by which Russell means sense-data) in certain ordinary ways. I shall show later that to exist in this sense is also to be informatively identifiable. Real individuals in the secondary sense include other minds, bodies, and electrons. Particulars (sense-data) are not real in the secondary sense. Particulars are not themselves correlations.

The tertiary (Fregean) sense is formal. It concerns the logical structure of general and singular existence assertions. Russell's general conception of the tertiary sense is that "Existence is essentially a property of a propositional function".¹⁴

Russell not only describes these three senses of the word "real," but he describes their interrelationships as well. There are exactly three relations to describe: the primary sense's relation to the secondary sense, the primary sense's relation to the tertiary sense, and the secondary sense's relation to the tertiary sense. I shall describe these in order. This will show the unity of Russell's theories of sense-data, logical fictions, and denoting.

First, the relationship between the primary sense and the secondary sense is this. Hallucinations and phantoms are not nothing. Thus they have reality in the primary sense. So that if they are to be said to be unreal, it must be in another sense. And their being unreal in this second sense must be logically compatible with their being real in the primary sense. Being unreal in the sense of not being correlated in certain ways with other particulars meets this requirement.

Second, the fundamental relation between the primary sense and the tertiary sense is simply this. Russell makes conformity to the primary sense a fundamental requirement of the adequacy of any analysis of the tertiary sense. Russell says, "In obedience to the feeling of reality, we shall insist that, in the analysis of propositions, nothing 'unreal' is to be admitted."¹⁵

Third and last, what is the relationship between the secondary and the tertiary senses? Surely for Russell a propositional function is satisfied if and only if the definite description we ordinarily use in effect indicates what correlations among particulars (sense-data) we should expect, and these

12. "The Philosophy of Logical Atomism", p. 274.

13. *Ibid.*

14. *op. cit.*, p. 232.

15. *Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy*, p. 170. Compare "On the Nature of Acquaintance", p. 153.

correlations in fact obtain. Thus for ordinary things (which are logical fictions for Russell), tertiary sense concerns the logical form of assertions that they exist, and secondary sense concerns whether they exist.¹⁶

Definition of a given kind of logical fiction proceeds by *identity conditions*, that is, by defining what it is to have the *same* thing of that kind, at least for tables,¹⁷ and persons and numbers.¹⁸ Why may only logical fictions be informatively identified for Russell? For Russell, the very particulars found to be correlated with an initially given particular simultaneously confirm both informative existence and informative identity propositions about the logical fiction in question. In contrast, we understand individual particulars only through acquaintance. And we know particulars so completely that all identity statements whose subject-terms are names used as names are tautologous and therefore uninformative.¹⁹

Now Butchvarov identifies Russell's *fundamental* understanding of existence as that of satisfying a propositional function. That is, F's exist just in case the propositional function Fx is sometimes true.²⁰ Butchvarov then raises the question, Which objects are we to allow as arguments that satisfy propositional functions? If we wish to rule out Meinong's golden mountain, then there must be "a more fundamental notion of existence ... that would allow us to tell what to count as arguments satisfying a propositional function..."²¹ Similarly for saying that for a simple object to exist is for it to be nameable by a logically proper name: What should we count as nameable by a logically proper name?²² May not a nonexistent simple object, an hallucinated white patch, be named by a proper name?²³ Similarly for acquaintance. Similarly for other proposed definitions or criteria of existence.²⁴ What is this more fundamental notion of existence? Russell "did not even attempt to answer"²⁵ this question.

I have several comments.

Comment 1. It is important to distinguish two questions: (Q1) What is it to exist?, and (Q2) Which things exist? Russell is clearly answering (Q1) when he says that to exist is to satisfy a propositional function. Russell does not

16. See *Our Knowledge of the External World*, Lecture III.

17. "The Philosophy of Logical Atomism", p. 273.

18. *op. cit.*, p. 277.

19. "The Philosophy of Logical Atomism", p. 246; "On Denoting", p. 46.

20. "Our Robust Sense of Reality", p. 404. Russell calls it fundamental only within his theory of the tertiary sense. See Reference 19.

21. *op. cit.*, p. 405.

22. *Ibid.*

23. *op. cit.*, p. 406.

24. *op. cit.*, p. 405.

25. *Ibid.*

even appear to be answering (Q2). To think he does answer (Q2) when he says that is to confuse describing the logical form of singular existence assertions with determining the truth or falsehood of each individual assertion having that form.

Comment 2. Russell *does* answer question (Q2). To tell *which* things to count as existing, the more fundamental sense we look to is the secondary sense. A thing may be truly said to exist if certain correlations obtain.

Comment 3. What might Russell say about hallucinated golden mountains or nonexistent white patches? Russell has an analysis available for such cases. To see a golden mountain would be to be acquainted with a real particular, perhaps while thinking of that particular in connection with a definite description. For Russell, being acquainted with a particular (or "aspect") is the "only sense in which" even an existing mountain can be seen.²⁶ We would see a certain nonexistent golden mountain, then, just in case the definite description in effect indicates what correlated particulars one might expect to be acquainted with in various situations, and these further particulars are not forthcoming. For Russell, to think of a golden mountain would be to think of a particular, perhaps in connection with a description. (Concepts should serve as well as descriptions do in this analysis.²⁷) The hallucinated white patch is simply a lone particular. Butchvarov calls this a "primitive phenomenology,"²⁸ but this is a difficult issue. Nor must a particular be bare for us to be able to intend it apart from intending it "as" an aspect of a golden mountain.²⁹ Presumably it would have at least a golden color and a mountainous shape, at least in Russell's *Our Knowledge of the External World*.

I return to Butchvarov. Butchvarov next criticizes Reinhardt Grossmann's suggestion that nonexistent objects cannot satisfy propositional functions because they cannot have properties. Butchvarov makes two points. First, he says this suggestion begs the question against Meinong, who would hold that the golden mountain is golden. Second, he says that the suggestion puts the cart before the horse. He says that we believe that the golden mountain lacks properties because we first believe that there is no such mountain. We do not judge that the golden mountain does not exist because we have determined that it lacks properties.³⁰ My comments are these.

26. *Our Knowledge of the External World*, p. 74.

27. Compare Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy* (London: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 52ff., *An Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy*, p. 168.

28. "Our Robust Sense of Reality", p. 406.

29. *op. cit.*, p. 414.

30. *op. cit.*, p. 406.

Comment 1. Butchvarov's two points do not apply to Russell's primary sense at all. The primary sense is that to exist is not to be nothing. This is the Parmenidean sense. It was Parmenides who said that you cannot say or think anything about what is not. It was Plato who asserted the contrapositive of this to say that if you can say or think anything about something, then it must be.³¹ Nothing, so to speak, is not a thing that can have properties. Therefore, having properties is logically sufficient for being a thing which is real in the primary sense. Let me take each of Butchvarov's two points in turn for further discussion of this matter.

Concerning Butchvarov's first point, it is Meinong who begs the question by assuming that there is a golden mountain in any sense beyond the ordinary and trivial sense in which we so call or think of an object of thought or perception. This assumption may lead to a primitive phenomenology indeed!

Now Meinong might argue as follows. Being an object that has properties and can be thought about is one thing. Being nothing is a second thing. And having some kind of being is a third thing. So that in between nothingness and the several kinds of being there is room, so to speak, for objects that are not nothing, yet have no specific kind of being.³² My reply to this is simply that the broadest kind of being *is* not being nothing. It is precisely with respect to the primary sense, and not at all the secondary sense, that Meinong lacked Russell's robust sense of reality. Surely nobody claims that ~~Meinong lacked Russell's robust sense of reality. Surely nobody claims that~~ Meinong could not tell hallucinations from reality, or whether golden mountains exist in the secondary sense.³³

In this connection Meinong's three arguments against a third kind of being (besides his existence and subsistence) which all objects would have are surprisingly weak. They are as follows. (1) Being which is not opposed by nonbeing cannot be called being at all. (2) Such being is a mere postulate. (3) It is "... the essence of assumption that it direct itself upon a being which itself does not need to be".³⁴

Concerning Meinong's first argument, the primary sense is the only sense which *is* genuinely and fully opposed by nonbeing. Call any kind of being an object cannot cease to have and still be an object at all, a *robust being*. Call any kind of being which is not a robust being, a *weak being*. Only a robust being is genuinely and fully opposed by nonbeing, since if an object loses a weak being, the object, which is not nothing, remains. Clearly Meinong's

31. P.L. Heath, "Nothing", in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Vol. 5, p. 524.

32. "Theory of Objects", pp. 79, 86.

33. See "Our Robust Sense of Reality", p. 407.

34. "Theory of Objects", p. 85.

existence and subsistence are weak beings. Reality in the secondary sense is a weak being: particulars can gain or lose correlations. Reality in the tertiary sense is a weak being: propositional functions can gain or lose satisfaction. Only reality in the primary sense is a robust being.³⁵

When Meinong speaks of requiring that being must be opposed by nonbeing, he does not really mean that. What he really wants is a *classificatory* sense of being which objects can have or not have. Without such a sense his theory of objects beyond being and nonbeing obviously would not have a chance. And this is just what limits Meinong to consider only weak beings. So for his theory of objects to succeed, Meinong must be *actively committed* to lacking a robust sense of being. After all, what kind of being is it that objects can cease to have, yet continue on their merry way? Could a weak being like that ever be the very being of an object? Then Russell was right. Meinong does lack a robust sense of reality.

Concerning Meinong's second argument, it is not a postulate but an *a priori* necessity that every object having any *Sosein* have being in Russell's primary sense as well. The famous independence of objects consists only in our being able to attend to their *Sosein* without attending to their primary being.

Concerning Meinong's third argument, the proper role of assumption is with respect to the secondary sense of the word "real". And this role is not even possible without the assumed object, A, minimally having reality in the primary sense, so that our assumption is not about nothing.

Comment 2. Let us turn now to Butchvarov's second point. Can we tell something is real by telling if it has properties? Think of looking at an orange on your desk and telling whether it is real or hallucinated by determining whether it is really orange and round. It cannot be done! But this fact would pertain for Russell only to the secondary sense of reality. But to go on and question whether it is real in the *primary* sense of reality is self-defeating. Of course it exists in the sense of not being nothing.

Butchvarov now moves to his deeper criticism of Russell.

Part One. Russell's more fundamental conception of existence appears to be: CON. All objects exist. Russellians take CON as beyond argument (and thus beg Meinong's question).

Part Two. If Russell's view, CON, is a substantive one, then the fundamental notion of existence which it uses must be a genuine concept.³⁶ But it is reasonable that "*nothing can count as a genuine concept unless we can make sense of what it would be for it to fail to apply to something* [italics

35. Usually it is objects which exist only in the primary sense which are called weak or shadowy beings. This shows the importance of nonclassificatory conceptions.

36. "Our Robust Sense of Reality", p. 409.

mine]”.³⁷ But then Russell’s position simply unravels, for to admit this much is to admit that Meinong’s view of existence as something which objects may or may not be said to have, is correct.³⁸ It is but a short step to employ our ordinary notion of reality to “the objects of our thought, imagination, dreams,”³⁹ and judge of many of these objects that they obviously do *not* exist.

Part Three. CON appears to be obviously true to many philosophers because of a certain special feature of the concept of existence: it does not stand for anything, “real or unreal, individual or a property or a relation”.⁴⁰ That being so, “we do not understand how the concept of existence can be classificatory,”⁴¹ and mistakenly considering it to be *not* classificatory, we believe it must apply to all objects. The only alternative would be to apply it to no objects, which is absurd.

Part Four. Butchvarov’s claim that the concept of existence is transcendental i.e., is classificatory but does not stand for anything, is “suggested”⁴² by Kant’s argument that “being” is not a real predicate, since in thinking of 100 thalers, and in then thinking of the 100 thalers as existing, nothing is added to our first concept, not even a single coin.

I have several comments.

First comment. Neither Russell nor Butchvarov takes CON as beyond argument. Butchvarov himself argues against it in *Part Two*. Concerning reality in the primary sense, Russell takes CON as resting on the fact that “... the unreal is simply nothing”.⁴³ And Russell takes that fact as resting in turn on considerations about perception, description, property, and logical form.⁴⁴

Concerning reality in the secondary sense, Russell would *reject* CON. Surely the concept of being correlated with other particulars *is* a classificatory concept. It is not a non-property, but a relational property.

Concerning the tertiary sense of the word “real,” Russell, of course, again clearly *rejects* CON. And it is this *rejection* of CON that leads Russell to hold that the word “exist” in the tertiary sense stands for no property of *things*, but for a property of *propositional functions*.

Second Comment. Russell might well accept Kant’s argument for each of

37. *op. cit.*, p. 410. Compare *Meinong’s Theory of Objects and Values*, p. 47.

38. “Our Robust Sense of Reality”, p. 411.

39. *Ibid.*

40. *op. cit.*, p. 412.

41. *Ibid.*

42. *Ibid.*

43. “On the Nature of Acquaintance”, p. 150.

44. “The Philosophy of Logical Atomism”, pp. 223-224, 233-244, Compare *Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy*, pp. 172-173 on definite things.

Russell's three senses of the word "exists," since in none of them can the concept of existence be intelligibly added to the concept of a possible \$100. (i) For Russell the concept of even an imaginary \$100 *already is* a concept of something that exists in the primary sense. (ii) Concerning the secondary sense, the concept of an imaginary \$100 essentially excludes, while the concept of a secondarily real \$100 essentially includes, a correlativeness-content perhaps in Kantian terms, a synthesis-of-appearances-content). Thus existence in the secondary sense is not addable to the concept of an imaginary \$100, since doing so would *essentially change* the concept to that of an actual \$100. (iii) Russell's only explicit discussion of possibility and actuality concerns the tertiary content. Here the concept of a possible \$100 is the propositional function "x is \$100," and the concept of an actual \$100 is the concept of that concept's being sometimes satisfied.⁴⁵ Due to type levels the latter *must be predicated of, not added to*, the former.

Third Comment. The argument of *Part One* can be applied in turn to the concept of a classificatory concept. If Butchvarov's claim that the concept of existence is a classificatory concept is a substantive one, one that "means something,"⁴⁶ "a fact of philosophical importance, one that is worth arguing about,"⁴⁷ then Butchvarov's *concept of a classificatory concept* cannot count as a "genuine" concept "unless we can make sense of what it would be for it to *fail* to apply [to a concept]".⁴⁸ But then, to continue Butchvarov's argument, this is as much as to admit that there may be concepts which are not classificatory concepts. Thus Butchvarov's position simply unravels. Once this is admitted, it might be but a short step to finding concepts which in fact *are* not classificatory concepts. Perhaps the concept of primary existence is just such a concept, as well as Butchvarov's concept of "'there are' in its unrestricted sense".⁴⁹ This is not to mention the concept of an object. (There is, of course, no difference between a genuine concept and a concept.)

Suppose we admit that genuine concepts can be nonclassificatory. The issue is then whether in particular the concept of existence is classificatory. But there seems to be no reason why existence in the primary sense should (or even explanation of how it could) be classificatory. How, then, could Russell's position, CON, unravel?

I proceed to the last part of Butchvarov's article. Butchvarov asserts that

45. This is a slight revision of "The Philosophy of Logical Atomism", p. 231. Compare Russell's later view in *An Inquiry Into Meaning and Truth* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1985), pp. 37, 170, 182.

46. "Our Robust Sense of Reality", p. 409.

47. *op. cit.*, p. 410.

48. *Ibid.*

49. *op. cit.*, p. 419.

the concept of identity is a transcendental concept more fundamental than that of existence.⁵⁰ He then gives this elucidation: For an object to exist is for it to be indefinitely identifiable.⁵¹ And many objects do not exist, since they are not indefinitely identifiable. My comments follow.

Comment 1. Even accepting that many objects are nonexistent in the sense that they are not indefinitely (nor thus informatively) identifiable, this would concern at most the secondary sense of the word "exist". There is no reason why it should, or explanation of how it could, concern the primary sense.

Comment 2. On Butchvarov's own understanding of a genuine claim, the claim that to exist is to be informatively identifiable raises possibilities that (i) some things might be informatively identifiable but not exist, and (ii) some things that exist might not be informatively identifiable.⁵² And from possibility (ii) it may be but a short step to finding such things, at least in the primary sense of "exists". Russell's particulars, of course, come immediately to mind. For informative identities are needed only for logical fictions.⁵³ Thus once again, Butchvarov's position simply unravels.

In conclusion, far from just championing Meinong against Russell, Butchvarov has achieved a profound synthesis of their philosophies, where so many have seen only incompatibility. May we not add Russell's robust sense of reality to it?

NOTE

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50. *op. cit.*, p. 416.

51. *op. cit.*, pp. 417-418. Butchvarov's full discussion is in *Being Qua Being: A Theory of Identity, Existence, and Predication* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979).

52. D.W. Hamlyn, *Metaphysics* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 159.

53. It is not logically necessary that particulars be informatively identifiable because (i) they are fully known if presented, and (ii) "Each might happen to be the whole universe,..." "The Philosophy of Logical Atomism", p. 202. Russell says "it will be generally implied that" we are not acquainted with things we know by description, but allows that it is possible, *The Problems of Philosophy*, p. 53. "This is the fifth patch below the green patch in my visual field" might be an informative identity for me. "The pain I had yesterday is the worst pain I ever had" might be an informative identity for other people, or even for me.