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Russel's Knowledge of Acquaintance and Knowledge of Description

In this essay, I will discuss whether if Russell is succesfull explaining how we obtain knowledge with his argument "Knowledge with acquaintance" and "Knowledge with description". First I will explain what is Russel's knowledge by acquaintance and how he uses this to gain knowledge about certain things. Then I will explain what is "Knowledge by description" and how Russell builds up this term on knowledge by acquaintance to gain knowledge where knowledge by acquaintance cannot. From there I show you how Russell discusses a key problem about knowledge by description and how he tries to solve that problem. Finally I will discuss why his argument about solving that problem is not sufficient and what should he add his argument to make his argument about gaining knowledge complete.

Russell begins by explaining that the acquaintance is a having a direct relationship with an object, being aware of an object. What is important in here that Russell states this direct relationship happens not with judgement but presentation "the relation of subject and object which I call acquaintance is simply the converse of the relation of object and subject which constitutes presentation. That is, to say that S has acquaintance with O is essentially the same thing as to say that O is presented to S" (Russell 1911, 108). Then Russell explains that the objects of acquaintance are only what are we directly aware of like sense-data, many universals, and possibly ourselves, but not with like physical objects or other minds. So in order to gain knowledge about things which are

not the objects of acquaintance, we can use descriptions to gain knowledge about them. In order to have descriptive knowledge about objects according to Russell, first description must give us the information about the properties of that object which we are acquainted. This is because properties which we are not acquainted are unintelligible to us "Every proposition which we can understand must be composed wholly of constituents with which we are acquainted" (Russell 1911, 117). Secondly those properties of that object must belong uniquely to that object and do not belong anything else. Because some descriptions can be indefinite descriptions like "some people" or can be empty descriptions like "round squares". With this way, we can have knowledge by description with that object even we are not acquainted with that object. Now we said that in order to have knowledge by description about an object, we need to know properties that belongs to that object and nothing else. When we talk about an object, we can make various descriptions that belongs to the same object. Now the question is this: How can we determine whether any specific description is also a definite (logically) description? How can we make a description that makes sure that description belongs to that object and nothing else? Russell uses the proposition "a is the so-and-so" for this and argues that "a is the so-and-so" means a has the property so-and-so and nothing else has. He gives the example, "Sir Joseph Larmor is the Unionist candidate" and argues that this description give you the knowledge that only the person Sir Joseph Larmor is the Unionist candidate and no one else is. From this kind of description Russell argues that you cannot gain knowledge beyond what description gives you. "For example, "the most long-lived of men" is a description which must apply to some man, but we can make no judgments concerning this man which involve knowledge about him beyond what the description gives"(Russell 1911, 115). This is because we can only have knowledge by description and acquaintance we cannot have more than that "when we say "the author of Marmion was the author of Waverley," Scott himself is not a constituent of our judgment, and ... the judgment cannot be explained by saying that it affirms identity of denotation with diversity of connotation" (Russell 1911, 128).

Now I want to start discuss about Russell's proposition of "a is the so-and-so" first here.

Russell argues that "a is the so-and-so" means a has the property so-and-so and nothing else has but this is not always true. For example if we follow Russell's argument, when we say "the author of The Communist Manifesto" we get the conclusion that there only one author of The Communist Manifesto and no one else, but in truth there is actually two authors of The Communist Manifesto, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. The reason Russell's argument did not work here is because description that gives us the specific properties of that object is not enough to gain knowledge about that object. If we had also localized them with observation through some reference point, we could specifically know that the Communist Manifesto has two authors. This is also pointed out by Kant too "If it is [spatio-temporal] appearance, then the issue is not all one of comparing concepts, but rather, however identical everything may be in regard to at [conceptual comparison], the different locations of these appearances at the same time is a sufficient ground for the numerical difference of the object (of the senses) itself "(I. Kant, Critique of Pure Reason [1781, 1786], A263–4/B319; KRW tr.). The description "author of The Communist Manifesto" here only stays in the thought level since it does not give us a reference point to make a difference between Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels.

Frege criticized the descriptions for exactly this reason " The words 'the celestial body most distant from the Earth' have a sense, but it is very doubtful if they also have a reference. The expression 'the least rapidly convergent series' has a sense but demonstrably has no reference, since for every given convergent series, another convergent, but less rapidly convergent, series can be found. In grasping a sense, one is not certainly assured of a reference" (Frege 1960, 58). So in order to gain knowledge potentially from certain specific object, not only we must make descriptions about properties of that object, we must localize them with some reference point through some observations. That means we must make judgements about them. So when Russel says "the author of Marmion was the author of Waverley," Scott himself is not a constituent of our judgment, and ... the judgment cannot be explained by saying that it affirms identity of denotation with diversity of connotation" (Russell 1911, 128), he is right about implying that you cannot gain knowledge beyond what description gives but

the problem here is that the description “the author Marmion was the author of Waverley” does not give you any kind of knowledge even if you were acquainted with all parts of the description because it is not justified here that if the author of both Marmion and Waverley is only one person or two persons or multiple persons so your description could be wrong, without judgement, your description only stays in thought level. The sentence “the author of Marmion was the author of Waverley” is not judgement here it is just a thought. In order to gain knowledge from this description we must localize the author or authors, from a reference point through some observation, like yourself reading a book about them to learn if there is truly only one author.

So in conclusion I want to say, Russell’s concepts about knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge by description in reality is not sufficient enough to give your true “knowledge”. It will only give you a starting point to obtain knowledge which is the thoughts you make.

References:

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