BERTRAND RUSSELL ON MIND, MATTER AND BRAINS

1.

The present essay will be chiefly an analysis and an attempt to evaluate logically Lord Russell’s most recent theses, expressed in writings published in 1956 and 1958, concerning the nature of "mind" and "matter," or more precisely, of "mental" and "physical" objects or events, and concerning their interrelations. But these theses and Russell’s arguments did not all make their first appearance in his philosophy in the present decade. They are mainly either repetitions and elaborations of contentions which he had set forth over forty years earlier—in 1914 and 1915—or revisions and emendations of them, due to new developments in theoretical physics, that science (together with some new fashion in metaphysics) playing a crucial part in his doctrines on these questions in both periods. I think, therefore, that his later reasonings on the psychophysical problem will be somewhat better understood if we first recall certain of his previous reflections on that issue. They are to be found chiefly in a lecture on "The Ultimate Constituents of Matter," first published in 1915, and in a journal article on "The Relation of Sense-data to Physics," published in 1914.

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are alike illusions." (The "of course" is characteristic of Russell's style; the expression usually is a signal that what is to follow is, not a self-evident or a generally accepted proposition, but, for most readers, unintelligible. The purpose, then, of the essay is "to restate the relations of mind and brain in terms not implying the existence of either." But, the reader may ask, how can two supposed entities that in fact do not exist have relations that do exist? Or if they can be conceived to do so, how can it be important for a philosopher to explain what the relations between two non-entities are? But leaving aside these dialectical difficulties—which the author of Appearance and Reality would, I imagine, have insisted upon—there remains the paradoxicality of the main thesis which Russell informs us that he is about to prove: that both "mind" and "matter" are non-existent. This sounds like an alarmingly comprehensive negation. When we are called upon to think of entities that are neither physical or psychological, neither material nor mental, do we find that we are thinking of anything definite

2. C. M. Bradley, Appearance and Reality, New York, 1893.
at all? There are some philosophers who assert that there are "neutral" entities, which are both physical and mental, or sometimes one and sometimes the other; but this is not what Russell appears to be asserting. And there is, of course, Plato, with his numerous followers in all ages, who think that there are realities which belong neither to the physical nor the mental realm, but "subsist" apart from time and space and have no causal efficacy. But since Russell regards Plato as the originator of the dichotomy of the known world into two categories, which he proposes to annul, it cannot be the world of Platonic Ideas that he believes exists. What, then, is left that does "exist"? Or does nothing "exist?"

But the reader of these preliminary promulgations of Russell's theorem must not be either startled or puzzled by them, for if he reads a few pages further he will discover that they do not mean what they might most naturally be understood to mean. He will find Russell declaring, first, that "you cannot significantly say of anything that it exists," but also that there exist both a "mental" and a "physical world"—or rather, in certain senses of the term, two "physical" worlds. "We must distinguish between the physical world of physics and the physical world of our everyday experience." The properties or predicates of the two have almost nothing
in common. But Russell assures his reader that he believes that both

even these "worlds" exist, in the ordinary sense of the term. Although he prefers to refer to them both as "realities" and gives his reasons for doing so, he believes.

As to the first, the physical world, Russell is in accord with "common-sense" and also with the contemporary philosophers who reject metaphysical

both and
idealistism ab initio in its Berkeleyan and its neo-Kantian or neo-Hegelian

forms. His basic doctrine is simply physical realism. He admits, it is true, that he cannot give an apodictic proof of it; "there may be no such thing as a physical world distinct from my experience." But we have no good reasons for holding that there is such a world, and we have reasons for believing that there is not. If the inferences which lead to matter are rejected, I ought also to reject the inferences which lead me to reject my own mental past." What the valid grounds for the latter inference are

Russell does not explain, which is regrettable. It is not evident that the reasons for believing more or less, in the occurrence of remembered events in my own experience, are the same as the reasons for believing in the reality of entities which never have been and never can be experienced; they seem to me to be fact very different reasons.

Nor does he pause to explain how I can know my "mental past," which does not exist, or "occur," when I am remembering it, without any present representation—
Russell's bête noire—of those bygone occurrences. A serious consideration of the problem of memory was required at this point, but none is given. Russell merely points out—quite rightly, I think—that "no one sincerely rejects beliefs"—i.e., about his past experiences—"which only such inferences can justify," and proceeds to his conclusion, which, it will be noted, is not about past experience, but about the extra-experiential reality of the physical world: "I therefore take it that there are events which I do not experience." 3. "I do not" here mean, of course, nobody experiences them"; Russell is not telling us about a personal peculiarity of his own. Thus the reality of physical events never experienced by anyone is a fundamental premise of Russell's philosophy. But an equally fundamental and more unquestionably certain premise—at least in this phase of the doctrine—is the reality of "mental" events, occurring only when and in so far as they are experienced by individual perceptors.

But of what sort are the physical events? How can they be described? We can, as we have been told, learn about their characteristics only from the hypotheses devised by the physicists to explain the extra-corporeal causal antecedents of our perceptual experience. Unfortunately,

3. P. and E., p. 162.
Unfortunately, the contemporary physicist can tell us very little about his "real" physical world. That it is a spatial world he postulates, for the processes in it which he conceives to be the indispensable antecedent causes of our perceptions are movements—of something. But of what? Of electrons or, when the effects they cause are visual sensations, of photons; and photons are quanta of light-energy, which are not visible physical objects. Belonging as they do to the really "physical" world of the physicist, they cannot be visible, since events in that world, as we have just seen, are, for Russell, extra-experiential. We do not see them, but only the effects produced by their impact upon a certain specialized portion of our bodies—the eyes, optic nerves, and optical centers in the cerebral cortex—and these, like all portions of the body, are presumably physical, in the physicist's sense, are "distributions" or interactions of energy—quanta (though not, apparently, of photons; the photons presumably do not enter the optic nerve or the brain). But, aside from their spatiality and mobility, and their effects in the world that we do experience, we know, as Russell emphasizes, virtually nothing about the nature of the events occurring in the real physical world. Since we have no immediate empirical knowledge of them, we cannot say with complete
certainty that they occur. The inference assuredly, if, indeed, we can be
assured—of their occurrence only by inferences from our actual experiences,
and therefore we cannot be entirely certain that any such events do occur.
The inference may be unwarranted. While Russell recognizes this, he
nevertheless concludes that the validity of the inference may reasonably
be assumed. When it is assumed, what do we learn about the material world?
"All that I know about matter," he answers, "is what I can infer by means
of certain abstract postulates about the purely logical attributes of its
space-time distribution. Primarily, these tell me nothing whatever about
its other characteristics." Now that even Bohr's atom has, in quantum
physics, been "disintegrated," all that we know about a so-called unit of
matter is that "it is a distribution of energy which undergoes various
sudden transitions." This definition, however, is a little too abstract
even for Russell; its more concrete equivalent is that the object I say
I am "seeing" is really "a mad dance of billions of electrons undergoing
billions of quantum transitions." This, Russell observes—a masterpiece
of understatement—is "something very unlike a visual experience."
Such, then, in the light of recent physics, is matter; or rather—since the word "matter" may seem to designate some sort of perduring and changeless "substance"—such, and such only, is the character of the events that make up collectively the real physical world, which we never perceive or otherwise experience, but which we may infer, really occur. Then, is to be said of the other so-called "physical" world that is composed of the ever-changing and almost infinitely various objects or events that we find "in our everyday experience?" Russell's answer is, of course, that it is not a "physical" world; it is the "mental" world; in short, these objects exist only when they are being experienced. This must not be construed to mean that they are not "real"; they are the most certainly real things we know. For there is nothing inferential about them, and it is from them alone that we can infer—that physical science has inferred—the occurrence and the character of physical events. Nothing that is actually experienced can properly be called "unreal"; it is (to use the term I have previously suggested) "experientially existent," and that is the only kind of existence that is "indubitable." Even the phantasms that I see in dreams or hallucinations, Russell points out, are, and are precisely what I see them as being, while the dream or hallucination continues—though
my subsequent "memories" of them may be more or less false, and I cannot
legitimately infer from them, as I do from my perceptions when I am awake,
anything about the processes or laws of the physicist's physical world.