Robert Durfee

David Balcarras

24.00 – Topic III

May 17, 2018

**Appearance Is Reality**

Humans innately trust that their senses accurately depict reality. Is this faith justified? Take, for example, this table on which I am writing this essay. As I look at this table, it appears brown and rectangular. If anyone were to ask of this table’s color or shape in reality, I would instantly assert that this table is brown and rectangular. But what if this person asks for my evidence? After careful examination of my observations, I realize that the table does not simply appear brown. Rather, it appears to be many different shades of brown which vary greatly with the presence of different shadows and lighting conditions. Additionally, the shape of this table appears, from most conventional angles, more like a trapezoid or a parallelogram than a rectangle. With great frustration, I realize I cannot convince this skeptic of the table’s color or shape in reality as these qualities do not directly follow from the appearances in my observations. This innate connection between sensation and reality no longer seems justified.

The foreign and unsettling realization that sensation is disconnected from reality is affirmed by Bertrand Russell. In particular, he argues that the table which I seem to perceive may not even exist in reality. Furthermore, he says this real table, if it did exist, would not be immediately known to me (Rosen 413). To consider this further, it is important to define the scope of this statement more definitively. Although he doesn’t explicitly define it, Russell’s *Appearance and Reality* implies a ‘real’ object is defined only by qualities independent of perspective (Rosen 412). Similarly, it is implied that an object is ‘known’ if its qualities can be described (Rosen 412). Using these definitions, I will argue there exists a real table and it is known through perception.

The first component of this argument involves proving a real table exists. According to the employed definition of real, a real object must exist unchanged regardless of any perspective, including no perspective at all (i.e. the object is not being perceived). First consider the latter case when there is no perspective. The Buddhist monk Vasubandhu argues for the concept of idealism in his *Twenty Verses*. Under idealism, the table is only its appearance and cannot exist outside the mind. However, Vasubandhu fails to satisfactorily refute several shortcomings of idealism without appealing to Buddhist cosmology. Specifically, suppose my friend and I both seem to see the table described before. If the table does not exist outside my mind, how could my friend also be aware of the same table, at the same time, and in the same location? To counter this, Vasubandhu points to hungry ghosts’ shared vision of rivers of pus in Buddhist cosmology (Rosen 431). To him, this is evidence that multiple individuals (different ghosts) can perceive the same object (rivers of pus) without the existence of the object in reality. However, if one does not accept Buddhism, this evidence is not persuasive, and the best explanation is the existence of a mind-independent table which does not cease to exist when not perceived.

In addition to proving that there is a table which remains in existence when not perceived, to prove a real table exists, it must be shown that this table does not change when subjected to different perspectives. Russell directly disagrees with this claim in his *Appearance and Reality*. To demonstrate this disagreement, he sets out to describe the color of the real table. Initially, he comes to a similar conclusion as I did in the introduction: the table is brown. However, Russell then attempts to be more precise. He notices, like I did, that the table has varying shades of brown and reflects light in different ways at different angles. Therefore, he concludes that no two individuals simultaneously observing the table will see the exact same distribution of colors as they represent two different viewpoints. Furthermore, even if the *same* individual were to put on colored glasses, the colors of the table would no longer appear the same (Rosen 411). The texture and shape of the table follow a similar analysis. These peculiar observations, which appear to contradict the thesis, require a thorough explanation.

To make it easier to consider this situation, Russell defines the terms ‘sense data’ and ‘sensation’ explicitly. Sense data are things known through sensation such as colors, sounds, smells, hardness, etc. Sensation is the act of becoming aware of this sense data (Rosen 413). Using these terms, Russell characterizes his viewpoint on the connection between the perceived table and the real table. He argues that sense data is associated with the real table, however, it cannot be considered to *be* the real table or even be *qualities* of the real table because they depend on the perceiver and a specific perspective (Rosen 414). Therefore, it is clear that Russell disagrees that the real table can exist unchanged depending upon perspective, certainly contradicting the thesis.

I argue that Russell is unjustified in separating the sense data of the perceived table from the real table. It is clear in the examples Russell provides that sense data is dependent upon perspectives. However, the sense data for the table does not vary widely, nor does it produce unexpected results. On the contrary, it follows a constant pattern. To aid discussion of this idea, I will define a new term to refer to this pattern. Let the ‘sense data span’ be the set of all possible sense data associated with the table. At first glance, the sense data span may seem useless in qualifying a *real* table. After all, it must be infinite as there are infinitely many ways to perceive the table. The distance, angle, lighting conditions, perceiver conditions can all be altered in an infinite number of ways. But the sense data span turns out to have significant importance on defining the real table sought by the thesis.

The concept of a sense data span has a certain special quality not immediately apparent: its unique type of infinity. To better characterize this quality, consider an analogy to all positive integers (e.g. 1, 2, 3, etc.). There are infinitely many, however, they do not contain decimal numbers such as 1.01, 1.001, 1.0001, etc. As a result, the infinite set of positive integers follows a pattern and is limited and constant, in a sense. Under no circumstance could a decimal number be added to the list of infinite integers without changing the meaning of ‘integer.’ In the same way, the sense data span follows a limited and constant pattern. Once a few sense data are defined in the sense data span, it defines all other possible sense data perceived through alternate perspectives. For example, once I establish the table appears brown with my desk lamp turned on, I know that turning off the lamp will make the table appear a darker shade of brown. I also know that no alterations in lighting conditions will make the table appear neon purple. Additionally, once I view the table from an angle and determine it appears trapezoidal, I know that standing directly above—or below—the table will make it appear exactly like a rectangle. I also know that no shift in viewpoint will make the table appear circular. Thus, the sense data span establishes a form of constancy for the sense data of the table.

With this form of constancy of the apparently ever-shifting table, the definition of real can be revisited. If the real table is described wholly by the sense data span, it no longer depends on a perceiver and a perspective. The sense data span itself remains unchanged. Therefore, the real table can exist not only independent of perception, but also qualified independent from perspective. Hence, the real table exists as defined in the thesis.

Now that I have constructed an idea of a real table which is mind-independent and qualified independent from different perspectives, it must be shown that such a real table can be known. According to the employed definition of known, the real table is known if its qualities can be described. Once the idea of a sense data span is grasped, it is not too difficult to consider how to describe the real table. Suppose I am trying to simulate the table’s existence within a realistic videogame. Using a given programming language, I could specify the color and shape (along with other qualities like texture, sound, etc.) of the table under a specific lighting condition and from a certain viewing angle. To acquire this data, one only has to perceive the table through one perspective. Once these qualities are defined, I can make infinite alterations to the lighting conditions and viewing angle which will change the appearance, but, given that the simulation matches reality, these changes in appearance will result from a strict, predictable pattern. This predictable pattern can be determined by comparing multiple perceptions of the table through different perspectives and applying knowledge of physics. Thus, since the simulated table is analogous to a table perceived in real life, the real table’s sense data span can be described and is therefore known.

Before moving forward, it’s worthwhile to assess what has been proven to identify the shortcomings. From the rejection of idealism, it was shown that there must exist a table even when it is not being perceived. This was the first step in proving the existence of a real table. Next, it was shown that the table’s appearance, namely its sense data, is affected by different perceivers and perspectives. However, there was a common pattern recognized within the changing sense data, namely the sense data span, which remained constant independent of perspective and could be used to predict the sense data in different perspectives. Together, this confirmed that a real table exists. Then, through the argument of simulation, it was clear how to describe the table’s sense data span. Therefore, the real table could be described and known.

A possible shortcoming of the argument arises in examination of optical and auditory illusions. With sensory illusions, the goal is to relay faulty sense data which results leads to an appearance which doesn’t match reality. For example, take the optical illusion with blue-gray strawberries (Rogers). Although there are no red pixels in this blue-gray image, the strawberries appear red. Although this could be incorporated into the sense data span for strawberries, that would undermine the legitimacy of the theory as it would make it seem more ad hoc than deliberate. However, this should not be taken as a property of the strawberries, rather it is a property of a specific perspective: one in which there is an abundance of blue light. Whenever something in blue light is perceived, the brain automatically subtracts some of the blue component from each pixel (Rogers). Thus, gray pixels become red. Although this is not as ad hoc as adding to the sense data span for strawberries alone, it still feels a little ad hoc, but it is important to realize the alteration was made universally to all objects and perceivers in connection with blue light.

Another form of sensory illusion is one that appears different between multiple individuals. For example, consider the picture of the viral dress of 2015 which, depending on the individual, appeared blue and black or white and gold (Ford). The same phenomenon occurs with this image as the one with the blue-gray strawberries, however, the color of the light source is not as clear (Rogers). As a result, different individuals’ brains choose different colored light sources and adjust accordingly. Once again, the sense data span can be adjusted to account for this, but not universally. It is not clear how to apply this predictably to a given perceiver. Therefore, the only solution is ad hoc which undermines the legitimacy of the theory. However, I remain hopeful that there is a yet-to-be-discovered, definitive method for determining which perceivers will see blue and black or white and gold and under which perspectives. With this discovery, the theory will remain conclusive.

Russell would most likely accept this argument in the form of a technicality. Although I defined ‘real’ and ‘known’ in the sense that I felt he implied throughout his essay, upon further examination, I may have misinterpreted. In regard to ‘real,’ my definition may have been too strong. Russell seems to regard the table as ‘real’ only if it is constituted of matter and exists in the physical world (i.e. mind-independent) (Rosen 413). As such, he effectively admits through the words of Leibniz and Berkeley that the table is in fact real (Rosen 414). Therefore, he concedes the first component of my thesis. Furthermore, there was a subtlety associated with the use of the word ‘known’ within Russell’s essay: it was prefixed with ‘immediately.’ As a result, Russell will probably concede that the real table I described is known, but not *immediately* known (Rosen 413). Rather, the real table involved a certain degree of inference. To prove the real table is *immediately* known would require a stronger definition and thus a stronger thesis.

Vasubandhu, on the other hand, would be confused about the purpose of my argument. This is most apparent when considering the first component of my definition of ‘real.’ He would likely be unsettled that the chosen definition requires that a real table exists independent from the mind. After all, Vasubandhu believes that no object can exist without being perceived (Rosen 431). Therefore, he could easily reject this definition and assert that the table is real even though it does not exist independent of perception. Furthermore, the concept that the table can be known would seem trivial as, to Vasubandhu, the table is only its appearance which is clearly known if it is perceived. Thus, the whole argument would appear misguided and meaningless.

**Bibliography**

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