



COLLOQUIUM SERIES

“Russell on Memory”

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I will look at Russell’s theory of memory in both the acquaintance and the neutral monism periods. I will argue that memory is the only experiential cognitive faculty that remained in the focus of his analysis even after the shift to neutral monism, providing a solid thread between the two periods which periods are often interpreted in the scholarship as disconnected. As I will argue, the main reason being that in both periods memory is central for the understanding of knowledge.

While Russell struggled with issues surrounding knowledge of the past in both periods, it seems that the difficulties his theory of memory faced in the acquaintance period were mostly (but not completely!), addressed in the neutral monism period. I will argue that, on the backdrop of Russell’s overall philosophical framework, the work he did on memory as well as the significance he placed on knowledge of the past with regards to certainty of knowledge and personal identity, shows the importance his theory of the cognitive faculties carried for him – something, more often than not, – overlooked in the scholarship.

I will argue that knowledge of the past is for Russell central to understanding knowledge by acquaintance. Russell thinks that unless he can show that knowledge of the past is unmediated knowledge, then certain knowledge (which is grounded in knowledge by acquaintance) cannot go beyond the very limited knowledge of the specious present (provided by sensation). This account of knowledge of the past, however, has its difficulties and complications. The most obvious one is the ambiguity stemming from the fact that the objects of memory are in the past, and yet we know them directly, that is, without the help of images (copies). So, we are acquainted with something that is not temporally present any more. It is a fact, however, that if we are acquainted with something, then the relation of acquaintance presupposes that whatever we are acquainted with is present in the non-temporal sense. So, the objects of memory are present in the sense that we are acquainted with them, but not in the temporal sense.

I will argue that when he abandons the acquaintance theory for the view that all knowledge is mediated (which comes with the acceptance of neutral monism), some of the issues with memory that he found troubling earlier (the problem of distinguishing between immediate memory and remote memory, for example), disappear. The new theory of neutral monism and the relevant changes in the theory of knowledge it leads to, makes Russell introduce new concepts, such as the ‘feeling of belief’.

This does not mean, however, that Russell’s theory of memory in the neutral monism period does not suffer from difficulties of its own. For example, belief-feeling (the act of believing), which accompanies memory-images, is what distinguishes memory-images from imagination-images. The act of belief, however, seems to be in a complicated relationship with the content of belief which relationship leads Russell to revise his view on the feeling of pastness.

Friday, September 25th, 2015

Room: B146 Loeb Building

Time: 11:30 am

All are welcome!