

Sense-data Theories and Berkeley's Philosophy

Takefumi TODA

1.

Sense-data theories have attracted the attention of numerous philosophers in the previous century. However, despite their popularity, thinkers did not arrive at a consensus regarding the meaning of a sense-datum. If we were to define a sense-datum, we would, at best, be able to state that it refers to 'a given'.

Although the meaning of a sense-datum is somewhat ambiguous, many philosophers use this term very casually. At the same time, philosophers in the twentieth century often identified a sense-datum as an idea, a concept that was used by philosophers in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

In this regard, A. A. Luce, who was the opinion leader for Berkeley studies, stated the following:

Objects seen, touched, heard, tasted, or smelled, sensible qualities or things or ideas, sensation, *sensa*, or *sense-data*, call them what you please or what fashion dictates, they, one and all, when I perceive them, are in my mind, only in my mind, and are entirely distinct from my mind: and *that*, says Berkeley, is what I mean by existence in the human mind. (*italics mine*) (Luce, 1968: 285–286)

The key terms in the above extract are *sensa* and *sense-data*. In addition, there is already a problem with this extract. That is, *sensa* and *sense-data* have different implications¹. In this case, what are the reasons for their casual use or for people using them depending on what is more fashionable? Strictly speaking, can *sensa* and *sense-data* be used interchangeably? On the surface, the answer would undoubtedly be 'No'. This is because in philosophical works, these terms always have a theory as their background and the meanings of the terms depend on the theory. If the background is ignored, there will be confusion regarding the actual meanings. Conversely, if we need to highlight the difference between the terms, we have only to show the differences between the standpoints of each theory. As stated earlier, Berkeley's *idea* was not

¹ Sense-data may or may not be considered to be identical to a part of a physical object, while *sensa* are considered to be non-physical (Barnes, 1965: 143).

² See my previous article (Toda, 2006b).

strictly identical to a sense-datum². However, in this short paper, I will provide some considerations about the relation between Berkeley's theory and the sense-data theories in order to reveal the influence of Berkeley's theory on sense-data theorists.

2.

I will begin by stating a few points so that we can observe the similarity between Berkeley's theory and the sense-data theories. When there is a problem regarding the nature of sense-data, one of the main issues to be considered is the relation between sense-data and the material body. Some researchers say that sense-data are identified with a material body or more strictly a part of the surface of that material body. G. E. Moore attempted to establish the truth in this statement, but eventually abandoned it. Bertrand Russell was also of this opinion initially. However, there was a difference between their positions. Moore's was more realistic and Russell's was more phenomenological. In this paper, I will first deal with the latter position.

From the phenomenological perspective, a material body is identified with a collection of perceived sense-data and sensibilia that will be perceived once several conditions are satisfied. The origin of this perspective can be traced to J. S. Mill. Some thinkers were of the opinion that this position was similar to that of Berkeley. Although he advocated idealism, Berkeley admitted that a material thing existed when no man perceived it. By such an insistence, he seemed to admit to the existence of sensibilia. Where or how do they exist? Berkeley replied, 'In God's mind'.

Hylas. Supposing you were annihilated, cannot you conceive it possible that things perceivable by sense may still exist?

Philonous. I can; but then it must be in another mind. When I deny sensible things an existence out of the mind, I do not mean my mind in particular, but all minds. Now, it is plain they have an existence exterior to my mind; since I find them by experience to be independent of it. There is therefore some other Mind wherein they exist, during the intervals between the times of my perceiving them: as likewise they did before my birth, and would do after my supposed annihilation. And, as the same is true with regard to all other finite created spirits, it necessarily follows there is an *omnipresent eternal Mind*, which knows and comprehends all things, and exhibits them to our view in such a manner, and according to such rules, as He Himself hath ordained, and are by us termed the *laws of nature*. (Berkeley, 1713: 230–231)

As shown by this argument, man perceives a thing actually and possibly. (However, a thing possibly perceived by man is actually perceived by God.) Therefore, these may appear to correspond to sense-data and sensibilia. However, there exists a

difference between them. In the above argument, Berkeley's sensible things—that is, the ideas—do not form a part of the surface of a material body but the material body itself. In this argument, Berkeley's aim is not to explain the formation of a concept of a material body. Nowhere has Berkeley stated that ideas form some part of the surface of a material body. For Berkeley, an idea is a material body itself as well as a sensible quality. With regard to this point, there is an important difference between Berkeley and Russell.

Russell's definition that the thing of common sense may be identified with the whole class of its appearance was met with some opposition. It may be of use to refer to the following criticism by R. J. Hirst:

'[A]pppearance' is normally used to refer either to the fact that something appears or to how it appears, and so is not strictly complete in itself an appearance is always the appearance of something which appears. (Hirst, 1959: 77)

Moreover, Hirst pointed out that Russell's definition is circular. This is because in Russell's definition, 'its' is the thing of common sense. As a result, a thing defined appeared in the definition. On the other hand, Berkeley's view on appearance is as follows:

Hylas. As for the difficulties other opinions may be liable to, those are out of the question. It is your business to defend your own opinion. Can anything be plainer than that you are for changing all things into ideas? You, I say, who are not ashamed to charge me with *scepticism*. This is so plain, there is no denying it.

Philonous. You mistake me. I am not for changing things into ideas, but rather ideas into things; since those immediate objects of perception, which, according to you, are only appearances of things, I take to be the real things themselves.

Hylas. Things! You may pretend what you please; but it is certain you leave us nothing but the empty forms of things, the outside only which strikes the senses.

Philonous. What you call the empty forms and outside of things seem to me the very things themselves. Nor are they empty or incomplete, otherwise than upon your supposition—that Matter is an essential part of all corporeal things. We both, therefore, agree in this, that we perceive only sensible forms: but herein we differ—you will have them to be empty appearances, I, real beings. In short, you do not trust your senses, I do.

This claim shows that for Berkeley, appearances—which Hylas refers to as ideas—are real things; it can also be said that Berkeley's appearance is the same with a material body itself. Therefore, his argument is not circular in nature because he did not define the material body by 'appearance'. For him, the thing of common sense is an

idea and an idea becomes an empty appearance only if it is ‘an idea of *something* that is not an idea’. This something is the material substance, the existence of which Berkeley denied. In this respect, Berkeley’s position is quite realistic or commonsensical, not phenomenological. Therefore, we can observe a similarity between this type of sense-datum theory and Berkeley’s idealism; however, we cannot identify one with the other. In this case, what can be said about Moore’s realistic sense-datum theory? I will return to this question later.

3.

I would now like to focus on a linguistic sense-datum theory. A. J. Ayer was the representative promoter of this theory. Although it is rejected now, initially, many thinkers considered this theory to be the most sophisticated.

Ayer claimed that the perception of sense-data cannot be determined by empirical observation. He proceeded to say that this problem has nothing to do with the fact that a sense-datum theory is not factual but linguistic. In other words, according to him, the statement ‘We perceive sense-data’ is a substitute for the statement ‘We perceive a chair’. Since the former statement is useful for an analysis of the latter, Ayer believed that we should use the sense-datum language (Ayer, 1940).

It is a well known fact that this theory ended in failure. There were mainly two reasons for this: (1) the sense-datum language cannot be used to analyse our ordinary language and (2) a sense-datum theory has never been linguistic, but factual.

In this paper, I will focus on the second criticism. In the above quotation from *Dialogues*, Philonous said, “I am not for changing things into ideas, but rather ideas into things”. Moreover, in *Principles*, Berkeley considered the following linguistic criticism for his idealism:

But after all, say you, it sounds very harsh to say we eat and drink ideas, and are clothed with ideas. I acknowledge it does so—the word idea not being used in common discourse to signify the several combinations of sensible qualities which are called things; and it is certain that any expression which varies from the familiar use of language will seem harsh and ridiculous. But this doth not concern the truth of the proposition, which in other words is no more than to say, we are fed and clothed with those things which we perceive immediately by our senses. (Berkeley, 1710: sect. 38)

From this passage, it seems that Berkeley’s idea-language is a substitute for our ordinary language. However, this is not the case; his words should not be taken at face value. Moreover, it is possible that Berkeley himself does not believe this. There is one crucial difference—concerning ontological states—between Berkeley’s idea and the

thing of common sense. Even if a theorist can use his theory to explain the concept of the thing of common sense, it would not follow that his theory is commonsensical³. In other words, it should be understood that Berkeley attempts to explain the concept of a thing of common sense based on his idealism. By this act, he defends the commonsensical belief about a material body.

Ayer believed his sense-data to be linguistic in nature, but this was an incorrect assumption; on the other hand, Berkeley did not think his idea to be linguistic from the outset. Therefore, although there appears to be some similarity between sense-data and Berkeley's idea, we cannot conclude that they are the same.

4.

Thus far, I have stressed the fact that Berkeley's idea is not the same as sense-datum. However, this is not the only point to be considered. On one hand, although Berkeley's idealism and the sense-datum theory are not identical, we do notice some similarities between the two. In this section, I refer to another one of these interesting similarities.

With regard to this similarity, the theorist that comes to mind is C. D. Broad, a prominent sense-datum theorist. Broad denied the fact that a perceiver does not make an inference about a material thing based on *sensa*. He talks about the relation between a material thing and *sensa*, as follows:

The best analogy that we can offer to the relation between our sensing of a *sensum* and our perceiving a physical object is to be found in the case of reading a book in a familiar language. What interests us as a rule is the meaning of the printed words and not the peculiarities of the print. [...] *Sensa* themselves "cut no ice." We therefore pass automatically from the *sensum* and its properties to judgments about the physical objects and its properties. (Broad, 1965: 96)

As I have shown in a previous article, in Berkeley's theory of perception, it is by *suggestion* that we can perceive a material body. In this paper, I provide a short explanation of Berkeley's theory of perception.

According to Berkeley, we perceive visual ideas first. These ideas are only a

³ This point can be observed in the so-called error theory. Projectivist colour theory states that we see colours on the surfaces of material things incidentally. However, the projectivists do not entirely deny our ordinary belief in colour. They admit to the practical value of our ordinary belief and attempt to explain why we come to have such a belief (Wright, 2003). In Berkeley's case, at best, he provides such an explanation. I have attempted to bridge the gap between his idealism and his defence of common sense in another paper (Toda, 2006a).

diversity of colours and lights. In this stage, we cannot comprehend a percept as a material thing. Then, these visual ideas *suggest* to the mind tactual ideas, which are already experienced to be connected visual ideas. Further, when visual ideas are combined with tactual ideas, we establish our perception of a material body. Thus, 'suggestion' plays an important role in the process of perception of a material body. Berkeley says that 'suggestion' is different from 'inference'. The former is an unconscious mental faculty that makes perception immediate, while the latter is a conscious mental activity that makes perception mediate⁴.

'Suggestion' is derived from our ordinary linguistic usage.

No sooner do we hear the words of a familiar language pronounced in our ears, but the ideas corresponding thereto present themselves to our minds: in the very same instant the sound and the meaning enter the understanding: So closely are they united that it is not in our power to keep out the one, except we exclude the other also. We even act in all respects as if we heard the very thoughts themselves. So likewise the secondary objects, or those which are only *suggested* by sight, do often more strongly affect us, and are more regarded than the proper objects of that sense.... (italics mine) (Berkeley, 1709: sect. 51)

Visual ideas are to tactual ideas what words are to their meanings. Similarly, the relation between *sensa* and material things is also the same. The most important similarity is that a signifying thing goes unnoticed but a signified thing gets noticed. Of course, there is a difference between the theories of Berkeley and Broad. As already mentioned, Berkeley's ideas are not different from a material thing, while Broad's *sensa* are. Broad assumes that *sensa* are non-physical. Therefore, although we can highlight several similarities between their theories, they cannot be considered to be identical.

Thus far, I have discussed some prominent sense-data theorists and drawn a contrast between them and Berkeley. There are, of course, still other sense-data theories and theorists. As we know, numerous debates have attempted to define the nature of sense-data. However, I would not go into the details of all these sense-data theories (To do so is beyond my scope.) However, since some theories are directly contrasting with Berkeley's, I will see an exponent of them. For example, Price's sense-datum theory differs significantly from Berkeley's. Price denied the representative theory of perception; however, his theory can be said to be similar to it in that Price postulated

⁴ Therefore, an advocate of immediate perception often uses this concept. For example, Thomas Reid uses the concept of 'suggestion' from Berkeley (Reid, 1764).

that a physical object is distinct from a family of sense-data.

I had mentioned earlier that I would provide an explanation of Moore's sense-datum theory; strictly speaking, this is the very theory that Moore finally abandoned. I will examine this in the next section.

5.

In the sense-datum theory under consideration, sense-data are considered to be part of the surface of a material thing; this is often believed to be naïve realism. There is a drawback to this type of sense-datum theory. When I view a paper under normal conditions, I assume that I have a white sense-datum. And I again assume that someone switches on the lights in my room, illuminating my room with orange light. In this case, my white sense-datum will turn into an orange sense-datum, or the white sense-datum will disappear and the orange sense-datum will appear. Therefore, the surface of the paper I am viewing will be white and orange. However, it is believed to be an inconsistency that the same thing is A and not-A. Further, let us look at another example. Assume that I am looking at a piece of paper with the naked eye under white light and another person is looking at the same paper with orange-tinted glasses. In this case, I have a white sense-datum and the other person has an orange sense-datum. Therefore, in this sense, the same piece of paper is simultaneously white and orange. This poses an inconsistency.

Due to these difficulties, thinkers either dismissed this type of sense-datum theory or modified it. However, if we were to address the sense-datum theory that has the most similarity with Berkeley's theory, I think it would be this type of sense-datum theory. This is because both the theories are in accordance in terms of a relation between sense-data or ideas and a material thing. Both Berkeley and this type of sense-datum theorist believe that what is immediately perceived is a thing itself or some parts of the surface of a material thing. Then, we may want to ask, 'Did Berkeley's theory lead to inconsistency?' This is the serious problem that is difficult to answer. Therefore, I will not enter into a detailed discussion of it in this short paper; I will only make some comments.

First, I take up the case in which there are different colours under different types of lighting. This is the easiest case to understand. In this case, white and orange colours do not appear on paper at the same time. Therefore, even if the same paper has different colours at different times, it would not be inconsistent in the strict sense of the word. However, one might say, 'Then, according to Berkeley, must we say that the white paper we saw changed to an orange paper?'

If the orange-tinted light is turned on, the colour of the paper would certainly have changed to orange. We would have to admit to this point, were we to take Berkeley's theory seriously. Even if this is the case, we need not say that the *white*

paper changed to the *orange* paper. In other words, Berkeley could say that the white paper appeared to be orange under an orange-tinted light. This is because Berkeley believes that there are laws of nature at work in the world, and these are regulated for our ordinary lives. Further, our ordinary conceptions are well adapted to the laws of nature. A material body change or the change from a white paper to an orange paper with a change in light is not practical and does not coincide with our ordinary beliefs. So, even in Berkeley's theory, we can say that a white paper is always white but looks orange under an orange-tinted light⁵.

Second, I take up the case in which a piece of white paper—seen with the naked eye—appears orange when seen by a man wearing orange-tinted glasses. This problem is more complicated than the former. Therefore, I will only provide the reader with a hint and discuss the answer in detail on another occasion.

If we consider this problem from an ontological perspective, it can be said that no idea will be viewed by two perceivers in the same manner; further, these ideas do not exist in the same place because they exist in the minds of each of the perceivers. This answer is not useful. In tackling this problem, if we rely on Berkeley's idealism, we will miss the point. This is because when we see the surface of a material thing, we are considering the situation as commonsensical. Moreover, this solution will make Berkeley's position not-commonsensical, which will be against his intention⁶. Therefore, we must consider this problem under a commonsensical situation, without relying on idealism.

The clue to solving this problem is to consider that Berkeley defends commonsense from the perspective of the perceiver. In other words, a situation is considered based on how the perceiver judges that situation by his own perspective. Now, let us observe a situation in which two perceivers look at the same piece of paper—one with the naked eye and the other with orange-tinted glasses. In this case, the perceiver looking at the paper with the naked eye cannot see the paper as being orange. He can only see a white paper. Undoubtedly, he can judge that the other perceiver with the orange-tinted glasses can see the paper as being orange. However, based on this fact, he does not judge that the other person sees an orange paper; rather, at best, he judges that the white paper appears orange to the other person. Therefore, for the *perceiver himself*, this situation does not result in an inconsistency. The inconsistency arises because we think of the situation from the *point of view of God*. I understand that this solution is too simplistic; in fact, it is dubious whether this is

⁵ For this problem, it is useful to refer to the article below (Atherton, 2003).

⁶ I can add yet another comment on this point. Assuming the commonsensical position, Berkeley answers in the affirmative with regard to the problem on whether many people see the same thing. Therefore, if we answer the present problem by means of idealism, the answer will not coincide with Berkeley's answer.

actually a solution to the problem. Thus, the problem should be considered in further detail on other occasion⁷.

6.

In this paper, I have considered some of the similarities (and differences) between Berkeley's theory and the sense-data theories. Each sense-datum theory is similar to or differs from Berkeley's in some respect or the other. This is an important point to be noted because sense-theorists do not necessarily look with favour at the ideal theories proposed by their ancestors. However, the similarities between the theories show that the modern thinkers were significantly influenced by their predecessors.

As we know, sense-datum theorists failed in their attempts. Their methods were certainly numerous and exhaustive. In this sense, their projects had merit. However, they failed to investigate the works of their ancestors more thoroughly. If they had properly evaluated the rich content of their ancestors' theories, they might have attempted to search for different possibilities or enhance their methods further⁸. In the history of philosophy, similar arguments have often been repeated. We should not believe it to be natural that we progress more than past philosophers. Before we judge their theories as being of a good or poor quality, we must examine them completely and meticulously. This is the moral left to us by sense-datum theorists.

References

- Atherton, M. (2003), "How Berkeley can Maintain that Snow is White," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 67, pp. 101–113.
- Ayer, A. J. (1940), *The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge* (London: Macmillan).
- Barnes, W. H. F. (1965), "The Myth of Sense-data," *Perceiving, Sensing, and Knowing*, ed. Robert J. Swartz (New York: Doubleday & Company), pp. 138–167.
- Berkeley, G. (1709), *An Essay Towards a New Theory of Vision* in *The Works of George Berkeley, Bishop of Cloyne*, vol. 1, eds. A. A. Luce and T. E. Jessop (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1948).

⁷ Prof. Lazarin pointed out an interesting problem on my argument about Berkeley. It is the problem on after-image. For example, if one looks at an orange patch then at a white patch the while will be tinted blue-violet. Prof. Lazarin wonders how Berkeley explains the appearance of this third color that is neither white nor orange. I want to consider this problem on other occasion, too.

⁸ In all honesty, with regard to this point, there may be the most similarity between Berkeley and sense-data theorists because Berkeley also underestimated his ancestors. The fact is that his idea had its origin in the theories of Locke and Cartesian.

- Berkeley, G. (1710), *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge* in *The Works of George Berkeley, Bishop of Cloyne*, vol. 2, eds. A. A. Luce and T. E. Jessop (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1949).
- Berkeley, G. (1713), *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous* in *The Works of George Berkeley, Bishop of Cloyne*, vol. 2, eds. A. A. Luce and T. E. Jessop (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons).
- Broad, C. D. (1965), "The Theory of Sensa," *Perceiving, Sensing, and Knowing*, ed. Robert J. Swartz (New York: Doubleday & Company), pp. 85–129.
- Hirst, R. J. (1959), *The Problem of Perception* (London: George Allen & Unwin).
- Reid, T. (1764), *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense*, ed. Derek R. Brookes (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997).
- Toda, T. (2006a), "Kokoro no nakano Sonzai – Berkeley no Kannenron Saiko –,” *Siso* 982, pp. 77–95.
- Toda, T. (2006b), "Berkeley ni okeru Keiken – Kannen to Kankakuyoken no Hikaku wo Tegakarinisite," *Genshogaku Nenpo* 22 (in print).
- Wright, W. (2003), "Projectivist Representationalism and Color," *Philosophical Psychology* 16, pp. 515–533.