RUSSELL’S ROBUST SENSE OF REALITY:
A REPLY TO BUTCHVAROV

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This paper is a reply to Professor Panayot Butchvarov’s recent article entitled “Our Robust Sense of Reality”. Critical of Russell from a Meinongian viewpoint, Butchvarov raises a deep ontological question concerning the Russellian critique of Meinong: Just what is the “robust sense of reality” Russell accuses Meinong of lacking when Meinong claims that “There are objects of which it is true to say that there are no such objects?” It is more fundamental than the standard semantic question: What is the meaning or proper use of Russell’s existential quantifier? For meanings and uses themselves must be real. Butchvarov claims that: (i) Russell’s existential quantifier needs a more fundamental conception of existence to determine its applicability in specific cases. (ii) For Russell this conception is that: CON. All objects exist. (iii) But CON begs the question against Meinong’s theory of objects. (iv) And CON unravels because all genuine concepts (including existence) are classificatory. (v) A determining conception of existence as identifiability is a preferable (i.e. genuinely classificatory) alternative to Russell’s CON.

I shall accept claim (i) but shall reject claims (ii)-(v). My rejection is largely based on three points: (1) Russell does not use the word “real” and its synonyms (“exists,” “is actual,” “has being”) univocally, but in three senses. These senses are not rival theories or given at different times by Russell. They are related parts of one theory given in one broad period, 1905-1919. They are perhaps best seen working together in the single work, “The Philosophy of Logical Atomism”. (2) In one of these three senses

Russell is a neglected major early proponent of the “No entity without identity” sort of theory advocated by Quine, the later Wittgenstein, and Butchvarov himself. (3) It is this sense, and not CON, which is Russell’s conception of existence that governs the applicability of his existential quantifier. So that claim (v)’s conception of existence as identifiability, far from being an alternative to Russell, is very close to Russell’s own view.

It is easily understandable why Butchvarov does not notice the three points I just mentioned: they seem to be unnoticed in the whole literature on existence and identity. This is probably because identifiability has been associated at most with Russell’s theories of sense-data and of logical fictions, and not with his theory of denoting. This has led to a neglect of how these three theories fit together. Indeed, admitting only what I call Russell’s primary and tertiary senses of the word “real” may be called the standard interpretation of Russell’s theory of denoting. Butchvarov is just giving a version of this standard interpretation. That is the real problem.

What, then, is Russell’s robust sense of reality, from 1905 to 1919? Russell says that “[the word ‘real’] ... is a vague word, and most of its uses are improper”. But he is best known for writing of a “sense of,” “feeling of,” or “vivid instinct” for reality which we have or ought to have. However, other passages indicate that Russell admits no fewer than three fairly clear, quite distinct, and theoretically interrelated senses of the word “real”.

The primary (Parmenidean) sense is minimal. It is that to be real is not to be nothing. Russell says, “... there is no such thing as the unreal”. He says, “... the unreal is simply nothing”. This sense is more or less a negative survival of Russell’s notion of being in his 1903 Principles of Mathematics. As everything has being in this sense, it is anti-Meinongian, even though Russell considered it Meinongian in Principles of Mathematics.

The secondary (Berkeleyan and Humean) sense is correlative. In the primary sense of “real,” hallucinated or phantom particulars “... have the

7. Ibid.
10. op. cit., p. 150. See also “On Denoting”, in Logic and Knowledge, p. 55.