Bertrand Russell

the problems of philosophy

The Problems of Philosophy

Bertrand Russell was one of the most important philosophers of the twentieth century. His primary interest was in the foundations of mathematics, and his three-volume *Principia Mathematica* (written with Alfred North Whitehead) is the classic attempt to carry out the programme of deriving the whole of mathematics from a set of simple, self-evident truths. He also wrote widely on other areas of philosophy, and published a large number of writings on social and moral issues.

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Introduction

BERTRAND RUSSELL (1872–1970) wrote this celebrated introduction to philosophy in 1911 and published it in January 1912. It has been read by generations of students of philosophy—in and out of universities—ever since. The book belongs to one of Russell's most fertile philosophical periods. In 1910 he had completed the long and wearying technical work required for *Principia Mathematica*, his great collaborative work with A. N. Whitehead and one of the cornerstones of modern mathematical logic. He said that his 'intellect never quite recovered from the strain'; yet on questions of general philosophy he evidently experienced a new release of freshness and vigour. Though the book is written as a popular introduction—Russell called it his 'shilling shocker'—it advances definite views and introduces thoroughly new ideas, for example on truth. It does so crisply, undogmatically, unobtrusively, with luminous clarity. It certainly deserves its continued popularity.

Russell does not deal with all the problems of philosophy. As he explains in the preface, he confines himself to those about which he thinks he can be positive and constructive. The upshot, given his interests at the time, is that the book is mainly concerned with epistemology—the branch of philosophy which investigates what we can be said to know or reasonably believe. Russell also comes to some striking conclusions, on the basis of this investigation, about the ultimate kinds of things there are. He does not deal with ethics or with a range of classical questions concerning mind and action, such as the nature of the self or the question of free will. But something of his ethical outlook is conveyed in what he has to say about the character and value of philosophy—a topic which recurs throughout the book and gets a final chapter to itself.

Sense-data, physics, and instinctive belief

Russell begins with an analysis of perception. Appearances are relative: a table looks different from different angles and in different lights. But we do not think the table itself changes. So Russell postulates what he calls 'sense-data'. They are 'things that are immediately known in sensation', 'of which we are immediately aware' (p. 4); they change, though the table doesn't. In introducing them, Russell also distinguishes between an act or state of awareness and its object. A state of awareness is mental, its object may or not be mental. This leads to a first important turning point. For with this distinction to hand (and it will be important throughout the book), Russell might have concluded that when you perceive the same table from different angles or in different lights, the object of your awareness is the same though the experiences you have, which constitute your awareness of it, differ. He could have held that the *object* of your awareness is the table, not the way it looks. He does not take this view; he makes the way it looks to you the object of your awareness, and he takes this object, the sense-datum, to be mental in the sense that it is private to your mind and would not exist if you did not.

What then is the relation between sense-data and physical objects? Physical objects cause sense-data; it is the aim of physics to tell us whatever we can know about them. What we can know about them and the physical space and time they occupy, Russell eventually concludes in Chapter 3, is only their relational structure, not their intrinsic nature. But first he raises a more basic question—'if the reality is not what appears, have we any means of knowing whether there is any reality at all? And if so, have we any means of finding out what it is like?' (p. 6). It is logically possible, he thinks, that I and my experiences and thoughts are all that exists. But the common-sense belief in matter is instinctive and leads to the simplest systematic view, so we may accept it, even though we recognize the logical possibility that it is false (pp. 10–11).

Russell proceeds to draw a moral:

> All knowledge, we find, must be built up upon our instinctive beliefs, and if these are rejected, nothing is left. But among our instinctive beliefs some are much stronger than others, while many have, by habit and association, become entangled with other beliefs, not really instinctive, but falsely supposed to be part of what is believed instinctively.
>
> Philosophy should show us the hierarchy of our instinctive beliefs, beginning with those we hold most strongly, and presenting each as much isolated and as free from irrelevant additions as possible. . . . There can never be any reason for rejecting one instinctive belief except that it clashes with others; thus, if they are found to harmonize, the whole system becomes worthy of acceptance.

It is of course *possible* that all or any set of our beliefs may be mistaken, and therefore all ought to be held with at least some slight element of doubt. But we cannot have *reason* to reject a belief except on the ground of some other belief. (pp. 11–12)

Two points stand out about Russell's method, as exemplified here.

1. It makes essential appeal to the rational authority of instinctive belief. Russell is not simply inferring to the simplest hypothesis, instinctive or otherwise. In chapter 6, where he discusses induction, he does not mention inference to the simplest hypothesis (or 'best explanation') as a method of inference at all. The inductive principle which he there states on p. 37 could not allow us to infer from sense-data to physical objects; it could only allow us to infer to correlations among sense-data.

In this respect his method belongs to a very British tradition in philosophy, notably represented in the nineteenth century by the 'common-sense' school of Thomas Reid and also by John Stuart Mill (who lived just long enough to be Russell's godfather). So it is interesting to note how Russell's *position*, as against his method, differs from theirs. Like Russell, Reid had affirmed the authority of instinctive belief and the instinctive character of the belief in matter. However, he had also very penetratingly criticized the notion that the 'immediate' objects of perception are sense-data, or in his word, 'ideas'. The view he took was the one which I said Russell might have taken, given his distinction between an act of awareness and its object. Reid's analysis of perception is very powerful and many philosophers would be inclined to take his as against Russell's side on this.

Mill too agreed on the authority of instinctive belief. Like Russell in this book (Ch. 11) and Reid earlier he regarded memory beliefs as instinctive and so accepted them as authoritative. But unlike Reid and Russell he argued that belief in matter is *not* instinctive. It results from the 'habit and association' Russell allows for in the passage above. On these grounds Mill denied that there was any reason to accept the existence of matter, if it is conceived as a non-mental cause of sensations. Matter should instead be analysed as the permanent possibility of sensation—a position much like one Russell himself was later to adopt, though only temporarily.

2. But why should we agree with Russell (and Reid and Mill) that if a belief is instinctive it is rationally authoritative? Russell does not raise this question, even though he agrees that the fact that a belief is instinctive does not entail that it is true. His attitude is the same as Reid's and Mill's: if we do not accept the rational, though defeasible, authority of instinctive beliefs then no belief at all can be justified. Against an absolute sceptic nothing can or needs to be said.

This may be right so far as it goes, but it leaves a philosophical mystery. Let *P* be some procedure, acceptable to Russell, for refining and systematizing our instinctive beliefs. Then he is committed to the thesis that an instinctive belief which survives *P* is a reasonable belief. What makes *that* belief reasonable? Is it just that we instinctively believe it? One might surely hope to shed further light on this obviously important connexion between 'instinctiveness' and reasonableness, by a philosophical examination of these concepts. But Russell, like Mill and Reid before him, makes no attempt to do so.

Idealism: knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge by description

The criticism of idealism (Russell defines it on p. 19) is a recurring topic of *Problems of Philosophy*. Idealism is represented in various places in the book by Berkeley, Kant, and Hegel—very different philosophers whom Russell deals with in very different ways. Some of Berkeley's arguments are efficiently dispatched in Chapter 4. Russell returns to his distinction between a mental act and its object and (surprisingly perhaps, given his own endorsement of 'sense-data') deploys it against Berkeley in pretty much the way Reid did (pp. 21–2). Further, one of Berkeley's central arguments for idealism says that 'we cannot know that anything exists which we do not know' (p. 22). But as Russell notes, 'The word "know" is here used in two different senses' (p. 23). There is knowledge that something is the case, knowledge of truths, such as my knowledge that Paris is the capital of France; and there is knowledge of things as against truths. Russell calls this latter kind of knowledge *acquaintance*. For example I know Paris, that is, I am acquainted with it. I don't know Brasilia, even though I know that it is the capital of Brazil. As Russell says, we certainly can and do know that there exist objects that we do not know, i.e. that there are objects with which we are not acquainted.

This is a good point to make about idealism, though as Russell says it only deals with one of many arguments for idealism, and it is not particularly novel. In the next chapter, however (Ch. 5), the discussion takes a novel turn. Russell introduces the notion of *knowledge by description*. I can be said to know an object by description, if I know that it uniquely satisfies a description, For example I know that Brasilia uniquely satisfies the description 'capital of Brazil', so I know it by description even though I do not know it by acquaintance. Knowledge by description, unlike knowledge by acquaintance, is reducible to knowing truths. Russell says that we are *acquainted* only with objects 'of which we are directly aware, without the intermediary of any process of inference or any knowledge of

truths' (p. 25). This is an important part of his epistemology—call it thesis *X*. On the analysis so far the only items of which we can strictly speaking be said to be aware, and with which we can therefore be acquainted, are our sense-data and ourselves (pp. 27–8). So I can't really be acquainted with Paris, only with sense-data of it. Now Russell adds another important thesis, about the connexion between acquaintance and understanding:

Every proposition which we can understand must be composed wholly of constituents with which we are acquainted. (p. 32)

Call this thesis *Y*. It follows that we can only make judgements about objects with which we are acquainted, thus, so far, only about ourselves and our sense-data. Even this would be impossible, however, were these the *only* items with which we were acquainted. For to make a judgement about an item is to predicate something of it, and to do that I must be acquainted with the something which is predicated. Russell calls these things which are predicated *universals*. A very important and novel part of his vision is that universals can be relations of any number of places. Properties are just the special case of one-place relations. There can also be two-place relations like *a loves b*, three-place relations like *a gives b to c*, four-place relations like *a is further away from b than c is from d*, and so on.

It follows by *X* that we must be directly aware of universals. So Russell's complete list of what we are directly aware of comprises ourselves, our sense-data, and universals. Of these, only universals are public; only they are possible objects of more than one person's acquaintance. This view, together with *X* and *Y*, leads Russell to very peculiar conclusions about what we can talk about. For example it leads him to the conclusion that we cannot affirm any propositions about Bismarck. For consider 'B was an astute diplomatist', where 'B' is the object which is Bismarck. Only Bismarck himself is able to judge that. The best we can do is describe such propositions—e.g. 'the proposition asserting, concerning the actual object which was the first Chancellor of the German Empire, that this object was an astute diplomatist' (p. 31). Having produced such a description we can judge that the proposition which uniquely satisfies it is true. Only because the universals which enter into such descriptions are public are we able to communicate. Every other object of our acquaintance is private to us.

We would not be forced to the strange conclusion that only Bismarck is acquainted with Bismarck if we gave up either *X* or Russell's restrictive doctrine of what we can be said to be directly aware of. Isn't a person

talking to Bismarck 'directly aware' of Bismarck? Again, on any ordinary sense of what I can be said to be acquainted with, I am acquainted with Paris but not Brasilia. Certainly this has some connexion with facts about my awareness. I'm acquainted with Paris because I've been there, not asleep but conscious of my environment. *Y* has some plausibility if we combine it with this ordinary notion of acquaintance. Consider, for example, the statement 'The longest-lived of men is not yet born'. I may judge that to be true. In an important sense, however, it is not a judgement *about* the actual object which is the longest lived of men. For suppose that Fred, whom I know well, is in fact going to be the longest-lived of men. Then my judgement is false; but still it was not a judgement *about* Fred—that is, I wasn't judging, in an *obviously* false way, of *Fred* that he is not yet born. On the other hand, I certainly can make judgements *about* Fred, in this sense—whereas other people, born centuries ago, could not, though they could have judged that the longest-lived of men was not yet born. What then must hold for a person to be able to make judgements *about* Fred? Must that person be acquainted with Fred? And if so in what sense? These questions ramify in a surprising way and continue to puzzle philosophers.

Self-evidence, the a priori, *and the world of universals (Chapters 6–11)*

From Chapter 6 onwards Russell examines how we know general principles. First he argues that the inductive principle itself can neither be proved nor disproved by experience; if known, it must be known by its 'intrinsic evidence' (p. 38). Nor is induction the only general principle known in this way. Chapter 7 adds that fundamental logical principles are also intrinsically evident, or 'self-evident'—indeed in Russell's view they have a greater degree of self-evidence than induction. Russell uses the traditional term '*a priori*' to denote the knowledge we have of general principles based purely on their self-evidence or the self-evidence of principles from which we deduce them. He means that we can *know* them prior to, or independently of, the evidence furnished by experience, though he agrees that experience may be necessary for us to become aware of them. Nor are logical principles the only ones we know *a priori*. So are those of ethics (the doctrine of what is intrinsically desirable) and arithmetic.

In Russell's usage '*a priori*' does not coincide with 'self-evident'. For on the one hand some *a priori* principles are not self-evident, they are only deducible from principles which are. On the other hand, he also