

Bertrand Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy*

Bertrand Russell, Los problemas de la filosofía

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Bertrand Russell dedicated his life to the study of the kind of philosophy that people today point to as an example of a waste of time, a waste of money, and generally find quite useless. When laymen – or academics that know no philosophy – speak of philosophy as having no use, works like *Principia Mathematica*, authored by Bertrand Russell and Alfred North Whitehead, become fit subjects for abuse, and it becomes a psychological question why anybody would spend their limited lives – especially the philosophers, who are all too aware of the finitude of their lives – studying philosophy.

Today, perhaps in embarrassment, perhaps because they are struggling to say anything intelligent about such a large tradition, philosophers have diversified enormously, theoretically but also practically, studying many commonplace matters that would previously have been below the dignity of a philosopher. Cambridge University Press' series titled "A Philosopher Looks At" is, I think, exemplary of a certain paradigm of our age, but we see even in academic journals the appearance of philosophies of popular culture, of perfume, of film, of sports – until there are no objects left in the world without a man to consider them and call himself a philosopher.

What makes *The Problems of Philosophy* a remarkable book is Mr. Russell's ability to introduce Analytic philosophy – the most impractical philosophy, consisting traditionally of only logic, epistemology and language – with linguistic simplicity and a lack of high seriousness and, moreover, to treat of it in a sense in which it is valuable to the real world in which we live. On the 5th of September 1912, *The Journal of Education* summarized the book in terms which could have been drawn from its final chapter:

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The chief value of philosophy lies in its broadening influence, its teaching of the desirability of many points of view. After years of study the philosopher may be no nearer a conviction of ultimate truth than when he entered upon his studies, but he has acquired an attitude of mind which will be of value when applied in any field of human endeavor.

Over a century later, *The Problems of Philosophy* remains of remarkable interest. Admirably clear both in statement and in arrangement, any contemporary student of philosophy would be left wanting if this book did not constitute some part of their studies. Likewise, I should recommend to those that struggle to see why we call philosophers wise rather than ridiculous, that they should enter into this book with the same questions that drove them as a child, or at least read the final chapter with the cynicism of adulthood.

Technically speaking, however, the book is neither novel nor important, with all the views therein having been published by Mr. Russell earlier and in greater detail. The previous year, in 1911, Mr. Russell had offered up his theory of universals in an essay "On the Relations of Universals and Particulars." Half a dozen years before that, in 1905, he distinguished between knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge by description in an essay, now especially famous, "On Denoting," which was described by Frank Ramsey as a 'paradigm of philosophy'. Mr. Russell's taxonomy of propositional, procedural and personal knowledge is one which has been known to philosophers for some time, and which is the first lesson taught to students in epistemology. His treatment of relations, though neglected in the history of philosophy, is not exactly new, for Thomas Hill Green, according to Bernard Bosanquet, 'talks of hardly anything else'. His criticism of Kant is almost word for word the same as Mr. Green's, as is his theory of falsehood. He deploys the distinction between a mental act and its object against George Berkeley in the same way Thomas Reid did, to whose common-sense school his method belongs. And a platonic realism permeates the text, closely following John Locke.

But it is not because of its novelty that the book remains essential reading. Unconcerned with inventing comforting answers, but rather with gaining new insights, Mr. Russell builds his epistemology from first principles. The book begins with a strikingly Cartesian question: 'Is there any knowledge in the world which is so certain that no reasonable man could doubt it?'. Thus begins an analysis of perception. He gives

the name 'sense-data' to what are 'immediately known in sensation'. Henri Bergson calls these 'images' and other philosophers call them 'presentations'. Sense-data are caused by physical objects. They are mental insofar as they are private to the subject's mind, but they are supposedly not mental states. Physical objects are not observed; instead their sense-data are the object of a subject's awareness. This seems perverse, but it is probably because appearance and reality are intuitively synonymous. Ultimately, what we can know about physical objects is only their relational structure, not their intrinsic nature. But before this, physical objects must be established to exist at all, so he sets about rejecting solipsism and idealism: the former is logically possible, the latter is fallacious. The common-sense belief in matter is instinctive and simple: though it may be false, it may be abductively accepted.

Having established *what* can be known, Mr. Russell addresses *how* it can be known. 'Anything of which we are directly aware' is known by acquaintance. This means sense-data, but extends to memory, introspection, universals and probably to the self. An object is known by description when we know that it is 'the so-and-so'. This includes physical objects and other minds, which we know but are not acquainted with. Of the connexion between knowledge and understanding, he says: '*Every proposition which we can understand must be composed wholly of constituents with which we are acquainted*'.

Having spoken of knowledge of particulars, Mr. Russell considers knowledge of principles. Principles are 'self-evident', though self-evidence has its degrees. They are understood through experience, but it is realised that the particularity is irrelevant, and they are then known a priori. This includes the propositions of pure mathematics, logic and ethics. Mr. Russell is a realist and denies that a priority is in some sense mental: principles are about *things*, not about *thoughts*. But he is also a platonist and affirms that these things are neither physical nor mental, but rather qualities and relations. And relations belong to the 'world of universals'.

The Russellian world of universals is different from the Platonic world of forms. Mr. Russell's reinterpretation of the forms is designed to make the two meet, but is overall a misinterpretation. It does not necessarily cohere with his account some three decades later in his *History of Western Philosophy*; but then he later admits of variation in his philosophic views. But this is beside the point, which is to elucidate universality: Qualities cannot be proven but relations can, because the

relation of resemblance cannot be denied. Universals therefore subsist. As for knowledge of universals: '*All a priori knowledge deals exclusively with the relations of universals*'. There is no principle to decide which universals can be known by acquaintance, but sensible qualities, relations of space and time, similarity, and certain abstract logical universals can be known. Empirical generalizations differ from a priori propositions insofar as the evidence for the former must be particular, whereas the latter is universal.

These propositions are truth-apt, whereas actual sense-data are neither true nor false. Acquaintance itself cannot be deceptive but errant inferences may be drawn. Truth consists in coherence and falsity in incoherence. What distinguishes knowledge from probable opinion is the degree of coherence. What distinguishes knowledge from true belief is whether it has been deduced from known or false premisses.

This epistemology seems bleak: we are left only a piecemeal investigation of the world. Mr. Russell believes, however, that this is how philosophy is supposed to be: in itself, it only diminishes the risk of error. '*The value of philosophy is, in fact, to be sought largely in its very uncertainty*'. It is the widening of the self and the intellect for which philosophy is valuable.

The veracity of what Mr. Russell writes is another matter entirely. Most interesting are his accounts of universals and knowledge by acquaintance. Of the latter, it is neither knowledge nor acquaintance, but mere perception i.e. direct apprehension. As for the former, universals are not perceived but conceived, so their apprehension by acquaintance is unclear. Whether Mr. Russell intends a Platonic anamnesis is unlikely, but it seems difficult to make much sense of the acquaintance with universals without it: how one could recognize by acquaintance something imperceptible without having previously perceived it – i.e. in the realm of the Forms – it is not known.

This notion of acquaintance leads to a bizarre account of introspective knowledge. It seems absurd to say that only Bismarck could make a judgment of which he himself was a constituent. One can have an appreciation of the epistemic limitation on passing judgement on others' selves but still maintain that the reality of such selves can be known beyond themselves. Mr. Russell, it seems, gets caught up in knowing *everything* about oneself and, realising its impossibility, forgets that *something* can still be known.

His foundation of intuitive knowledge is less interesting than what he has to say of acquaintance, but more problematic. About such a philosophic method, A. J. Ayer wrote that 'words like 'intuition' and 'telepathy' are brought in just to disguise the fact that no explanation has been found'. Indeed, Mr. Russell admits of his argumentative use of intuition that it is 'doubtless less strong than we could wish'. Like acquaintance with universals, it is difficult to make much sense out of the veracity of intuition without any appeal to anamnesis, for it is otherwise a mystery as to how something can 'seem' true, i.e. by intuition, without having the accumulated experience of that thing before – just as, for example, a carpenter might intuit that a board seems the right length on account of his great experience, but it is another matter entirely whether a layman could make such a judgement. Mr. Russell seems to want the fecundity of Platonism without committing himself to the tenets most widely rejected.

The book is also limited, although this was purposive. Somewhat surprisingly, from a polymath, Mr. Russell confines himself to only what he can speak positively about; epistemology and not metaphysics; and consequently omits many topics much discussed by philosophers. This limitation, however, is greater than Mr. Russell imagines, since philosophy goes beyond the logic, epistemology and linguistics of his analytic school. *The Problems of Philosophy* is, then, perhaps more properly considered 'the problems of epistemology' or 'some problems of analytic philosophy'.

Apart from its brevity, it is surprising that such a book would come to be regarded as a classic in philosophy. How it came to be regarded so much more highly than G. E. Moore's book on the same topic is unfathomable. Make no mistake, the book is undoubtedly interesting and, considering its brevity, it would be foolish to forgo reading it. But it is not fit to be a classic. It simply ignores too much philosophy, and what it does offer is either too widely accepted or too highly contested. Of greatest philosophic interest are his accounts of universals and knowledge by acquaintance. The former belongs to a paper in 1911, the latter to one in 1905. It is not right to attribute classic status to the book on account of these two ideas.

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