

Reviewing Mr. Russell's *Problems of Philosophy* a Hundred Years Later

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## Abstract

Mr. Russell's *Problems of Philosophy* is generally considered a classic text within the history of philosophy. This is, however, not the case: every 'original' idea therein had been presented by Mr. Russell previously; the book is replete with unoriginal ideas; and a great deal of everything that is considered 'philosophy' is ignored in the book. The problematics under discussion are, ultimately, only those of Mr. Russell's own understanding of philosophy which, as Analytic Philosophy, is quite narrow. Furthermore, what Mr. Russell says in the book is not without its opponents.

*Keywords:* Bertrand Russell; History of Philosophy; Analytic Philosophy.

**Bertrand Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy***

London, Williams & Norgate, 1912, viii + 250 pp., index and bibliography.

This work, it has been properly said, is of great interest.<sup>1</sup> Admirably clear both in statement and in arrangement,<sup>2</sup> any contemporary student of philosophy would be left wanting if this book did not constitute some part of their studies. It is, after all, meant as an introduction to philosophy:<sup>3</sup> with linguistic simplicity and a lack of high seriousness,<sup>4</sup> it seems prime for the general reader.<sup>5</sup>

It is not, however, either novel or important.<sup>6</sup> All of the views in the book have been presented before, and in greater detail.<sup>7</sup> His views on universals had been offered up the previous year.<sup>8</sup> His distinction between acquaintance and description half a dozen years before that;<sup>9</sup> then a ‘paradigm of philosophy’.<sup>10</sup> And his delineation of propositional, procedural and personal knowledge is one which has been known to philosophers for some time.<sup>11</sup> Nor is his discussion of relations especially avant-garde: Thomas Hill Green ‘talks of hardly anything else’.<sup>12</sup> Mr. Russell’s criticism of Kant<sup>13</sup> is ‘almost word for word the same’ as Green’s,<sup>14</sup> as is his theory of falsehood.<sup>15</sup> He deploys the distinction between a mental act and its object against George Berkeley<sup>16</sup> in the

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<sup>1</sup> Bosanquet, 1912: 556; *The Journal of Education*, 1912: 246. cf. Egner et al., 2009: xxx.

<sup>2</sup> Bosanquet, 1912: 556-557; Turner, 1913: 163-164. Egner et al., 2009: xxx-xxxii.

<sup>3</sup> Skorupski, 2001: vii.

<sup>4</sup> Russell, 2009: xv.

<sup>5</sup> Turner, 1913: 161, 163-164.

<sup>6</sup> *Contra* Bosanquet, 1912: 556-557; Egner et al., 2009: xxxi; Skorupski, 2001: vii, x, xi.

<sup>7</sup> Bosanquet, 1912: 556.

<sup>8</sup> Russell, 1911.

<sup>9</sup> Russell, 1905.

<sup>10</sup> Ramsey, 2001: 263; Sparkes, 1991: 199; Ludlow, 2005.

<sup>11</sup> Skorupski, 2001: x.

<sup>12</sup> Bosanquet, 1912: 558.

<sup>13</sup> Russell, 1912: 132.

<sup>14</sup> Green, 1911: 8-9; Bosanquet, 1912: 561.

<sup>15</sup> Green, 1969: §23; Bosanquet, 1912: 563.

<sup>16</sup> Russell, 1912: 21-22.

same way Thomas Reid did,<sup>17</sup> to whose common-sense school Mr. Russell's method belongs.<sup>18</sup> And a strange realism permeates the text, closely following John Locke's doctrine.<sup>19</sup>

The book is also limited, although this was purposive. Somewhat surprisingly, from a polymath,<sup>20</sup> Mr. Russell confines himself to only what he can speak positively about;<sup>21</sup> epistemology and not metaphysics;<sup>22</sup> and consequently omits many topics much discussed by philosophers.<sup>23</sup> This limitation, however, is greater than Mr. Russell imagines,<sup>24</sup> since philosophy goes beyond the logic, epistemology and linguistics of his analytic school.<sup>25</sup> It is perhaps more properly considered 'the problems of epistemology' or 'some problems of analytic philosophy'.

Unconcerned with inventing comforting answers, but rather with gaining new insights,<sup>26</sup> Mr. Russell builds his epistemology *sequentially*.<sup>27</sup> 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?'.<sup>28</sup> Thus begins an analysis of perception.<sup>29</sup> He gives the name 'sense-data' to what are 'immediately known in sensation'.<sup>30</sup> Bergson calls these 'images' and other philosophers call them 'presentations'.<sup>31</sup> Sense-data are caused by physical objects. They are mental insofar as they are

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<sup>17</sup> Skorupski, 2001: x.

<sup>18</sup> Skorupski, 2001: ix.

<sup>19</sup> Bosanquet, 1912: 558-559.

<sup>20</sup> Slater, 2009: ix.

<sup>21</sup> Russell, 1912: v; Bosanquet, 1912: 556; Turner, 1913: 161; Skorupski, 2001: vii.

<sup>22</sup> Russell, 1912: v; Bosanquet, 1912: 556; Skorupski, 2001: vii.

<sup>23</sup> Turner, 1913: 161.

<sup>24</sup> cp. Russell, 1912: 237.

<sup>25</sup> cf. Honderich, 2005: 973.

<sup>26</sup> Egner et al., 1992: 216.

<sup>27</sup> *Contra* Turner, 1913: 161.

<sup>28</sup> Russell, 1912: 9. cf. Descartes, 2013: 41 ff.

<sup>29</sup> Skorupski, 2001: viii.

<sup>30</sup> Russell, 1912: 17.

<sup>31</sup> Carr, 1914: 28.

private to the subject's mind, but they are supposedly not mental states.<sup>32</sup> Physical objects are not observed; instead their sense-data are the object of a subject's awareness.<sup>33</sup> This seems perverse, but it is probably because appearance and reality are intuitively synonymous.<sup>34</sup> Ultimately, what we can know about physical objects is only their relational structure, not their intrinsic nature.<sup>35</sup> But before this, physical objects must be established to exist at all,<sup>36</sup> so he sets about rejecting solipsism<sup>37</sup> and idealism.<sup>38</sup> The former is logically possible,<sup>39</sup> the latter is fallacious.<sup>40</sup> The common-sense belief in matter is instinctive and simple: though it may be false, it may be abductively accepted.<sup>41</sup>

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.<sup>42</sup> This means sense-data, but extends to memory, introspection, universals and probably to the self.<sup>43</sup> An object is known by description when we know that it is 'the so-and-so'.<sup>44</sup> This includes physical objects and other minds, which we know but are not acquainted with.<sup>45</sup> 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*'.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> cp. Bosanquet, 1912: 557.

<sup>33</sup> Russell, 1912: 23-24.

<sup>34</sup> cf. *The Journal of Education*, 1912: 246.

<sup>35</sup> Russell, 1912: 49 ff.

<sup>36</sup> Russell, 1912: 24.

<sup>37</sup> Russell, 1912: 26 ff.

<sup>38</sup> Russell, 1912: 21 ff., 58 ff.

<sup>39</sup> Russell, 1912: 27, 34.

<sup>40</sup> Russell, 1912: 21, 57.

<sup>41</sup> Russell, 1912: 31, 35, 38.

<sup>42</sup> Russell, 1912: 73.

<sup>43</sup> Russell, 1912: 75, 76, 77, 81, 80.

<sup>44</sup> Russell, 1912: 83.

<sup>45</sup> Russell, 1912: 81.

<sup>46</sup> Russell, 1912: 91.

Having spoken of knowledge of particulars, Mr. Russell considers knowledge of principles. Principles are ‘self-evident’,<sup>47</sup> though self-evidence has its degrees.<sup>48</sup> They are understood through experience, but it is realised that the particularity is irrelevant, and they are then known *a priori*.<sup>49</sup> This includes the propositions of pure mathematics, logic and ethics.<sup>50</sup> Mr. Russell is a realist and denies that *a priori* is in some sense mental:<sup>51</sup> principles are about *things*, not about *thoughts*.<sup>52</sup> He is also a Platonist and affirms that these things are neither physical nor mental,<sup>53</sup> but rather qualities and relations.<sup>54</sup> And relations belong to the ‘world of universals’.<sup>55</sup>

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.<sup>56</sup> It does not necessarily cohere with his account some three decades later;<sup>57</sup> but then he admits of variation in his philosophic views.<sup>58</sup> But this is beside the point, which is to elucidate universality. Qualities cannot be proven but relations can,<sup>59</sup> because the relation of resemblance cannot be denied.<sup>60</sup> Universals therefore subsist. As for knowledge of universals: ‘*All a priori knowledge deals exclusively with the relations of universals*’.<sup>61</sup> There is no principle to decide which universals can be known by acquaintance, but sensible qualities, relations of space

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<sup>47</sup> Russell, 1912: 112-113.

<sup>48</sup> Russell, 1912: 183.

<sup>49</sup> Russell, 1912: 110 ff., 116 ff. cf. Whitehead, 1911.

<sup>50</sup> Russell, 1912: 125.

<sup>51</sup> Russell, 1912: 136.

<sup>52</sup> Russell, 1912: 138.

<sup>53</sup> Russell, 1912: 152; Turner, 1913: 162.

<sup>54</sup> Russell, 1912: 139.

<sup>55</sup> Russell, 1912: 142 ff.

<sup>56</sup> Bosanquet, 1912: 564.

<sup>57</sup> cf. Russell, 1945: 119 ff.

<sup>58</sup> Russell, 2009: xiv.

<sup>59</sup> Russell, 1912: 149.

<sup>60</sup> Russell, 1912: 151.

<sup>61</sup> Russell, 1912: 162.

and time, similarity, and certain abstract logical universals can be known.<sup>62</sup> Empirical generalizations differ from *a priori* propositions insofar as the evidence for the former must be particular, whereas the latter is universal.<sup>63</sup>

These propositions are truth-apt,<sup>64</sup> whereas actual sense-data are neither true nor false.<sup>65</sup> Acquaintance itself cannot be deceptive but errant inferences may be drawn.<sup>66</sup> Truth consists in coherence and falsity in incoherence.<sup>67</sup> What distinguishes knowledge from probable opinion is the degree of coherence.<sup>68</sup> What distinguishes knowledge from true belief is whether it has been deduced from known or false premisses.<sup>69</sup>

This epistemology seems bleak. We are left only a piecemeal investigation of the world.<sup>70</sup> Mr. Russell believes, however, that this is how philosophy is supposed to be:<sup>71</sup> in itself, it only diminishes the risk of error.<sup>72</sup> ‘The value of philosophy is, in fact, to be sought largely in its very uncertainty’.<sup>73</sup> It is the widening of the self and the intellect for which philosophy is valuable.<sup>74</sup>

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.<sup>75</sup> As for the former, universals are not

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<sup>62</sup> Russell, 1912: 171.

<sup>63</sup> Russell, 1912: 165 f.

<sup>64</sup> Russell, 1912: 186 ff.

<sup>65</sup> Russell, 1912: 178.

<sup>66</sup> Russell, 1912: 186, 217.

<sup>67</sup> Russell, 1912: 190.

<sup>68</sup> Russell, 1912: 217.

<sup>69</sup> Russell, 1912: 207. cf. Gettier, 1963.

<sup>70</sup> Russell, 1912: 226.

<sup>71</sup> Russell, 1992: xix; Russell, 1927.

<sup>72</sup> Russell, 1912: 236.

<sup>73</sup> Russell, 1912: 242.

<sup>74</sup> Russell, 1912: 237 ff. cf. Russell, 1926; Russell, 1992: xix.

<sup>75</sup> Moore, 2014: 77.

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.

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.<sup>76</sup> 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<sup>77</sup> is less interesting than what he has to say of acquaintance, but more problematic. 'Words like 'intuition' and 'telepathy' are brought in just to disguise the fact that no explanation has been found'.<sup>78</sup> Indeed, Mr. Russell admits of his argumentative use of intuition that it is 'doubtless less strong than we could wish'.<sup>79</sup> Like acquaintance with universals, it is difficult to make much sense out of the veracity of intuition without any appeal to anamnesis.<sup>80</sup> He seems to want the fecundity of Platonism without committing himself to the tenets most widely rejected.

Apart from its brevity, it is astonishing that such a book would come to be regarded as a classic in philosophy. How it came to be regarded more highly than G. E. Moore's book on the same topic is unfathomable. Make no mistake, the book is undoubtedly interesting and,

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<sup>76</sup> Bosanquet, 1912: 563; Skorupski, 2001: xi.

<sup>77</sup> Russell, 1912: 31, 35, 38, 39, 172.

<sup>78</sup> Ayer, 1956: 30.

<sup>79</sup> Russell, 1912: 38.

<sup>80</sup> cf. Plato, 1997: 57 ff., 70 ff.



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,<sup>81</sup> the latter to one in 1905.<sup>82</sup> It is not right to attribute classic status to the book on account of these two ideas.

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<sup>81</sup> Russell, 1911.

<sup>82</sup> Russell, 1905.

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