## Is Russell’s Conclusion about the Table Coherent? (Alan Schwerin)[[1]](#footnote-1)\*

But it will be a very difficult book to write.

-Bertrand Russell to Ottoline Morrell, May 18, 1911

**Introduction—General Thoughts on Russell’s Conclusion**

In his *The Problems of Philosophy* Bertrand Russell presents us with his famous argument for representative realism. After a clear and accessible analysis of sensations, qualities, and the multiplicity of perceptions of the qualities of physical objects, Russell concludes with a bold statement:

The real table, if there is one, is not *immediately* known to us at all, but must be an inference from what is immediately known (emphasis in original; underlining added; Russell 1971, pp. 3, 4)

Russell's argument for his striking conclusion is complex, and a comprehensive investigation of the associated intricacies and their assumptions would take us beyond the confines of my paper. However, what is within reach is a critical investigation of the standing of Russell's provocative thesis about the table. My paper is an attempt to show that the conclusion that Russell reaches in his argument for representative realism is counterintuitive and incoherent. The philosophical statement that he presents on the table, in the first few pages of *The Problems of Philosophy,* is fundamentally misconstrued, *and as it stands*, it is logically unacceptable.

Now if my analysis of Russell’s conclusion carries any water the depiction here of the thesis clearly leaves open the possibility that the concluding statement that Russell is reaching for in his argument for representative realism can be recast. *I* shall resist the opportunity to rewrite this portion of Russell’s famous chapter.[[2]](#footnote-2) Any attempt to convert the conclusion as it has been presented in *The Problems of Philosophy*—in order to yield an arrangement that is hopefully less problematic—will necessarily entail serious modifications of Russell’s original remarks. And of course, had this to happen it would be incumbent on the rewriter to show that the modifications could meet with Russell’s approval, a task that is way beyond the orbit of this paper. So I intend to focus more directly on the conclusion as originally presented by Russell in order to highlight what I regard as its problems. However, before we explore the (alleged) shortcomings of Russell’s bold claim about the table I suggest that we withdraw from the text completely and revisit important aspects of the *context* that defines the *gestalt* in which the *The* *Problems of Philosophy* is embedded.[[3]](#footnote-3) As we shall see, the charge that Russell’s thesis on the table is incoherent becomes especially poignant when we take into account the background that informs the 1912 text, with its famous conclusion for representative realism. So what is the context for Russell's argument, with its allegedly problematic thesis on the table?

**Russell’s Concerns about Accessible Philosophy**

The decision to write *The Problems of Philosophy* did not sit lightly on Russell’s shoulders.[[4]](#footnote-4) The correspondence between Russell and Gilbert Murray, one of the three editors for the publisher Williams and Norgate, makes it abundantly clear that the co-author of *Principia Mathematica* had serious qualms about the enterprise.[[5]](#footnote-5) More importantly, Russell had second thoughts about his ability to complete the project as originally envisioned. The original intent was to produce a

text that would appeal to neophytes in philosophy and be regarded by them as accessible. But this objective begs an important question: can the philosopher, renowned for his technically demanding contributions in logic and the investigation of problems from the more esoteric regions of philosophy and mathematics, descend from the rarefied confines of the ivory tower at Cambridge and produce a work that the uneducated masses below will take to heart? While it is clear that the aspiring author of *The Problems of Philosophy* has his doubts about the prospects of this project—as I shall show in detail shortly—Russell's editor certainly thinks that his famous and prodigious colleague will be able to execute the assignment with aplomb.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Lest Russell think otherwise, Murray resorts to a well-worn ploy that has proven itself time after time: sycophancy. To solicit his approval and willingness to undertake the demanding project Murray shamelessly flatters Russell. While in the throes of putting the finishing touches to the first two volumes of *Principia Mathematica* Russell is approached by Murray to commit to an ambitious assignment.[[7]](#footnote-7) Russell is invited to share his insights into the problems of philosophy in such a way that regular citizens—presumably even uneducated individuals, such as those who might be involved in menial, undemanding manual labor—will be able to follow his analyses. In an affable letter to Russell from Castle Howard on September 19, 1910, Murray implores Russell to contribute to his Home University Library series. Opening with the endearing salutation, “My dear Bertie,” Murray’s one-page letter cuts to the quick and immediately proceeds to coax Russell into believing that he has the wherewithal to successfully share his refined and sophisticated views on philosophy with the common man:

You have got *a message [for] the shop-assistants about philosophy*, if you would only think it out. If you don’t want to tell them what Mathematics is, can you not tell them what Philosophy is? *You could do it with great detachment from the conventional* *schools, and you could put all* *the main problems in their very lowest terms* (emphasis added; Letter to Murray, September 19, 1910).

While Russell is understandably reluctant to share his insights into mathematics with the masses—presumably because they would not be interested in the issues of logicism raging round Russell at the time—perhaps something on philosophy would meet with Russell’s approval? Surely the impartial message that the esteemed professor from Cambridge is thought to possess on philosophy and its problems will strike a chord with the masses?[[8]](#footnote-8) What is needed, suggests Murray, if the presentation is to be accessible, is an account of philosophy that does not contain language that is too sophisticated. Relying on shop-assistants as the touchstone for the broadest level of accessibility, Murray implores his Cambridge colleague to accept the assignment on the understanding that the problems be addressed in simple terms. While the more esoteric mathematical material that Russell clearly is in the position to write on cannot be presented “in their very lowest terms,” Murray assumes that Russell is able to produce a work in a different field—namely, philosophy—that even uneducated novices will comprehend and find valuable. But a critical question remains: does Russell want to stoop this low? And even more fundamentally, is Russell able to complete this task as originally envisioned?

For some reason Murray believes that his aristocratic and cerebral colleague, who openly admits that he is “quite hard and intellectual,”[[9]](#footnote-9) is able and willing to write in such a way that the central philosophical issues that he is being asked to address will be presented “in their very lowest terms.” While the shop assistants might be denied the opportunity to learn about the nature of mathematics and presumably might not be encouraged to reflect on the relationship between mathematics and logic from *the* internationally renowned scholar immersed in these issues, perhaps Russell will be generous enough to share his views on philosophy and its problems with the philosophical novices in the shops and on the streets?

The overture from Murray is interesting. The remarks here suggest that Murray believes that Russell can—and presumably is willing—to provide an *impartial* and accessible account of the problems of philosophy that regular citizens will understand. But why does Murray harbor these thoughts? At least *two* questions about Murray’s comments strike me as especially important and call for closer scrutiny.

1. In the first place, will Russell be a *neutral* guide into the problems of philosophy?
2. Secondly, in his letter Murray suggests that the Cambridge professor “could put all the main problems *in their very lowest terms*” (emphasis added). This proposal trades on the assumption that Russell has both the ability and the inclination to reach an audience that calls for this type of straightforward language. But is this assumption warranted?

As it happens, in the correspondence that follows these suggestions from Murray for a basic text on some of the problems in philosophy, Russell has a fair amount to say about both of these issues. The letters to his editor reveal a great deal about Russell’s views on Murray’s proposal and its unstated assumptions, and equally importantly, Russell’s letters provide us with some interesting insights into his own understanding of his abilities and limitations. The upshot of my analysis of this correspondence strongly suggests that Russell is not entirely sold on the project. As will emerge from my analysis, Russell has serious and fundamental reservations about the invitation, as originally presented to him by Murray in his September 19, 1910 letter, in large measure due to his reservations about the assumptions behind the proposal from Murray. We need to consider Russell’s reservations about Murray’s proposal and his thought on the assumptions identified here. To begin, let me say a few words about the suggestion from Murray that Russell is able to present the issues in philosophy impartially, i.e., that he is able topresent the problems “*with great detachment* from the conventional schools” (emphasis added).

What are the reasons for Murray’s optimistic assessment of Russell’s skills at reconnoitring the problems in philosophy in an even-handed manner? Unfortunately, Murray does not elaborate on his suggestion that Russell is able to present the problems of philosophy in a detached manner. This proposal and its accompanying assumptions are clearly regarded by Murray as unproblematic. This is most unfortunate, as there are good reasons for being a little skeptical on these points. If anything, Murray ought to have known that Russell, around 1910, was heavily engaged in a range of contentious philosophical debates, and as an active and aggressive participant *most* *unlikely* to qualify as a candidate for a position calling for impartiality. Had Murray been after a partisan of various philosophical positions—whether on issues metaphysical, epistemological, religious or mathematical, to mention only a few of the concerns Russell was writing on at that time—he would have been hard pressed to find a more suitable candidate than Russell. Yet a central assumption behind Murray’s remarks to Russell in the September 19, 1910 letter strongly implies that his colleague is able to rise above the intense philosophical debates of the day and that he will be able to address the issues dispassionately. As it turns out, Russell himself gives the lie to this assumption of impartiality in his later correspondence with Murray.

In a telling letter sent from Upper Wyche, Malvern, Russell bemoans the fact that the project is not working out according to plan. As he explains to Murray, there are two major problems that threaten to compromise the assignment as originally envisioned:

I am writing my book for your series, and have written more than half of it. I find, however, that one or two things are happening to it which you may not desire. In the first place, I find it deals almost entirely with theory of knowledge, only occasionally arriving at metaphysics through theory of knowledge. This seems difficult to avoid, owing to the exclusion of religion and ethics. In the second place, *I find that, quite contrary to my intention,[[10]](#footnote-10) it is an exposition of my own views, not an impartial account of what is thought by various philosophers. I found it impossible to write interestingly or freely or with conviction, unless I was trying to persuade the reader to agree with me* (emphasis added; Russell to Murray July 12, 1911).[[11]](#footnote-11)

The request that Russell adopt a non-partisan approach to the project was clearly not being met. The impartiality that Murray initially sought from Russell, and thought attainable—an objective that Russell (initially) appears to have embraced—apparently is beyond the reach of the Cambridge philosopher. In order to engage his audience of philosophical neophytes, the originator of intellectually-demanding texts—including *The Principles of Mathematics*, “On Denoting,” and the co-authored monumental *Principia Mathematica,* to mention but three exacting artifacts—*must* present the arguments and analyses of the challenging philosophical issues in *The Problems of Philosophy* from his own perspective. That is to say, as Russell sees it, he has no other option than to draw on the point of view that he is already committed to in order to explain and analyze the problems that he has been charged to write about. For the fact is that the field of enquiry that Russell has been asked to write on is populated with numerous contentious philosophical positions. And the participants who defend their arguments in the various debates defend their views robustly. Given this state of affairs, in order to have his voice heard above the clamor, Russell deems it necessary to rely on a perspective that he is familiar with and confident about—namely, his own. All other points of view—that is to say, those in which he is not invested—strike Russell as unlikely to motivate him to “write interestingly or freely or with conviction.” In the light of this, Russell points out to Murray that unless he is afforded the opportunity in *The Problems of Philosophy* to use arguments and conceptual frameworks that are specifically designed to “persuade the reader to agree with *me*,” rather than with his philosophical competitors, he will not be able to produce appealing material that has heft.

In the end, the decision by Russell to inject his own perspective into the production of *The Problems of Philosophy* apparently did not bother Murray. The initial emphasis on impartiality in the correspondence between the two professors was soon replaced by other concerns about the book. One issue emerges as paramount. The focus now turns to Russell's ability to write in a non-technical manner, in order to produce a text that satisfies the request from Murray that the final version presents “all the main problems *in their very lowest terms*” (emphasis added). But can Russell present the material so simply that even the uneducated shop assistants will be able to understand it? This is an issue that bothers Russell, for a number of reasons.

*Immediately* after his remarks (in the July 12, 1911 letter) against the impartial treatment that his editor had prescribed in September 1910 for *The Problems of Philosophy*, Russell draws attention to another issue not anticipated by his editor. And this problem, unfortunately, is more fundamental than the previous one. Perhaps the erudite, aristocratic philosopher from Cambridge University is unable to determine whether or not his writing is intelligible to an *uneducated* audience? The suggestion from Murray that Russell present the problems of philosophy “in their very lowest terms” rests on the assumption that the author of the text is able to determine whether or not the language that he is using will be understood by his audience. But what if the members of the audience are radically different to those Russell is familiar with? What if the audience consists of uneducated individuals, with interests vastly different to his—individuals possibly without any concerns about the problems that he is addressing? Would the Cambridge professor of philosophy be able to find the language to reach *these* individuals? Russell, apparently, is not entirely convinced that he can write at this level:

I find that after the first four chapters [my manuscript] grows rather difficult. It remains quite easily intelligible, without trouble, to any educated man, however little he may know about philosophy; but it would be difficult for a shop-assistant unless he were unusually intelligent. *I hardly know myself whether it is too difficult or not. If it is, I must re-write it.* (emphasis added; letter to Murray, July 12, 1911).

The sentiments in this part of the July 1911 letter to Murray, especially the concern behind the final two sentences here, are especially telling. After suggesting that the evolving manuscript will pose serious problems for (presumably uneducated) shop-assistants, unless they are “unusually intelligent,” Russell proceeds to draw attention to an issue that Murray apparently has not even contemplated. Perhaps the auspicious author of *The Problems of Philosophy* is not even able to gauge the level of difficulty of the manuscript? That the readers of the text will need to be exceptional in order to understand it is one thing. But for Russell to openly admit that he is uncomfortable with the text because he, as its author, is unable to pass judgement on its accessibility, is another, arguably more serious issue.

In somewhat dramatic terms Russell is drawing attention to a major problem that threatens to undermine the entire project. The July 1911 letter from Malvern—written some ten months after the initial approach from Murray—has been written after “more than half” of the book has been completed. At this late stage into the enterprise Russell is giving voice to concerns that are serious—concerns that were surely there from the outset. As he sees it from his vantage point, it is becoming increasingly difficult to determine whether or not others, presumably others who are substantially less educated than himself, will understand what he is writing. Others coming from a radically different background are likely to find the language that he is using unintelligible, and consequently will surely not grasp the ideas that he is exploring in the text. So the suggestion from Murray that Russell resort to the “lowest terms” in order to produce a text that the masses in general will understand is an especially challenging task, at least as far as Russell is concerned.

Now if *the author* is unable to pass judgement on the broad accessibility of the book that he is producing, someone else will be needed to assist with the project. Hence Russell’s revealing plea at the end of the letter: hopefully there is someone—perhaps even Murray—who is in the position to judge on the intelligibility of the material to assist him. And if the judgment is made by this third party that *The Problems of Philosophy* is too difficult for the targeted audience of uneducated shop-assistants, Russell will accept the recommendation and undo what he has done. That is to say, if the script is determined to be “too difficult” by someone, given the author’s inability to pass judgement, Russell will acquiesce and “re-write it:”

I hardly know myself whether it is too difficult or not. If it is, I must re-write it.

Don’t bother to answer if *you* think it will be all right. But if *you* really wish stupid shop-assistants to be able to read it in armchairs, I must do it again (my emphasis; letter to Murray, July 12, 1911).

This frank admission from Russell that he is unable to determine the broad accessibility of his manuscript, and so needs an external prompter (such as Murray) to help him with the assignment, resonates with remarks made a few weeks earlier in a letter to Lady Ottoline. Writing from Trinity College, on Thursday, May 18, 1911, Russell informs his lover that for years he lived a distant existence, disconnected from humanity. The problems of the everyday citizen were remote and presumably did not affect Russell for a large part of the time. This period of insensitivity characterized the early years spent married to Alys:

My love of mankind, which I was saying was intermittent, did not exist at all in the first years of my marriage. *At that time I was quite hard and intellectual*…Other feelings began to revive in me with the war—then various other people’s great troubles touched me very nearly (Letter 72: emphasis added; letter to Morrell, May, 18, 1911).

Apparently there are times when Russell is in touch with the world and there are times when he is not in touch with the world. Early in his marriage to Alys, there were periods where he felt disconnected from the worldly issues that surrounded him at the time. The war and the suffering that ensued shattered this insensitivity. Now Murray is asking Russell to produce a text that will be viewed by others, with backgrounds very different to his, as intelligible. But Russell points out that this is a particularly difficult task for him to accomplish because it assumes that he is able to assess the accessibility of his own work and determine whether or not *The Problems of Philosophy* will be intelligible to the uneducated shop-assistants. But as the shop-assistants are committed to an entirely different worldview to his, and as he has a record of lapses of insensitivity, it is understandable that Russell will be anxious about his ability to reach the shop-assistants, let alone the uneducated members of his targeted audience. With no direct connection with his intended audience, and a spotty record of insensitivity to the concerns of the common man, Russell alerts Murray that the request he produce an accessible text for this audience will prove difficult, if not impossible, to satisfy. Given the difficulties that Russell experienced in the first years of his marriage with Alys, the prospects are bleak that he will now succeed in understanding others where he previously failed.

So who will assist Russell in determining the accessibility of his manuscript? More specifically, who is in the position to judge whether *The Problems of Philosophy* will be regarded as accessible by the shop-assistants? Neither Murray nor Russell addresses this issue explicitly in their correspondence. But Russell writes in such a way that the impression is created that, as far as he is concerned, *Murray* is able to serve in this role. After pointing out to Murray that he is not to be relied on as the arbiter of accessibility for shop-assistants, Russell puts the ball in Murray’s court with the suggestion that the Regius Professor of classics from Oxford University is able to pass judgement:

I hardly know myself whether it is too difficult or not. If it is, I must re-write it.

*Don’t bother to answer if you think it will be all right*. But if *you* really wish stupid shop-assistants to be able to read it in armchairs, I must do it again (emphasis added; letter to Murray, July 12, 1911; see also appendix).

These comments from Russell are puzzling. The erudite author, who admits that he is unable to determine the broad accessibility[[12]](#footnote-12) of the material that he is producing, appears to be asking Murray to make the call about the accessibility of the work, “Don’t bother to answer if *you* think it will be all right.” What encourages Russell to assume that Murray is in a better position than he is in to judge on the accessibility of the work for shop-assistants? If anything, as a highly regarded Oxford University classics professor of Greek literature it is not clear that Murray is in a better position to make the call about shop-assistants than Russell. But even if Murray does possess the requisite credentials to make the judgement, a second problem vitiates Russell’s attempt to determine the accessibility of his text: he fails to send the material out to Murray.

Russell’s desperate exchanges with Murray over the accessibility of the evolving manuscript and his plea for assistance from Murray where the determination of the level of difficulty of the contents of the work are concerned all point to one course of action: send Murray the material for his considered input. *But Russell fails to send the material to Murray for feedback until the eleventh hour*. Without the manuscript, how can Murray decide on the accessibility of the text? To make matters worse, not only does Russell fail to provide Murray with the manuscript when he needs feedback on its intelligibility, he also provides absolutely no indication of the contents of his (supposedly difficult) text other than a list of eleven titles for the chapters that have been produced to date. How in the world is Murray to judge on the merits of the contents of the book-in-progress if all he has in his possession are the brief titles for some of the chapters? So Russell’s concerns about the accessibility of the book in its early stages of development remain unresolved at least until he ships out most of the completed manuscript to Murray in early August 1911. But at this late stage, with most of the manuscript under wraps, the issue about accessibility appears to be little more than a faded memory. It is swept under the rug, and for the most part conveniently ignored.

While there is some uncertainty about the dates, it appears that Murray eventually sees most of the completed manuscript early August 1911.[[13]](#footnote-13) The correspondence at this late stage of the proceedings suggests that overall both parties are satisfied with the material. There do appear to be a few nagging issues, but these seem to be inconsequential. While the concerns with the accessibility of the text with respect to the uneducated shop-assistants have still not been resolved, both Russell and Murray are positive about *The Problems of Philosophy*.

Writing from Marlborough in a letter dated August 12, 1911, Russell makes it clear that he is pleased to discover that Murray approves of the material sent to him: “I am *greatly relieved* that you like the stuff,” says Russell (emphasis added). At this stage of the proceedings, Murray has received eleven chapters, with the twelfth chapter included with the August 12 letter sent by Russell. Other than the ongoing unresolved issue of appeasing, as Russell had previously (and undiplomatically) put it, the uneducated “*stupid* shop-assistants” (my emphasis), the project appears to be headed for a successful conclusion. And in his typed letter sent from Fairhaven at Goathland on August 15, 1911, Murray continues with the euphoric note, reassuring Russell that the material sent to him so far is “extraordinarily good.” Vestiges of the unaddressed concerns about the level of difficulty of the text linger in brief comments from Murray, but these now appear to be concerns that can be relegated to the category of “minor problems.” Murray writes:

My dear Bertie

I like XV immensely. XII seems to me convincing, but I expect some day you will get it “more elegant.” *It is evidently a very difficult subject*, and I cannot pick any holes in your statement. *Two trifles occur to me. One about [t]he order of words in a sentence, where I shd like the stupid reader to be guarded*. See text…

I don’t know if you can make this clearer…*I put these poi[n]ts not to argue with you but to suggest difficulties to be met…*

The whole thing seems to me extraordinarily good. I only mention my objections, not my enthusiasms (emphasis added; letter Russell, August 15, 1911).

Unfortunately, as we shall see in the remaining portion of this paper, the issue regarding the accessibility of the text for stupid shop-assistants—an issue that appears to have faded from the foreground for both Murray and Russell—will haunt Russell’s analysis. This issue will cast a long shadow over his argument for representative realism. For the conclusion from this argument, which Russell presents to his audience in the opening pages of *The Problems of Philosophy,* isincoherent—an incoherency due in large measure, or so I argue below, to Russell’s failure to present the thesis of representative realism clearly and in an accessible manner. Had Russell taken to heart the initial injunction from Murray to present a carefully crafted intelligible thesis that (even stupid) shop-assistants would be able to understand, the shortcomings that I am about to identify would likely not have materialized.

**On the Incoherency of the Conclusion**

When the recently-appointed Regius Professor of Greek from Oxford University approached Russell to write a modest philosophy text for his Home University Series in 1910, he did not anticipate that this would prove a daunting task. At the time, the invitation to produce a shilling shocker that will be a hit with the masses seems well within reach for the highly regarded and prolific Cambridge professor of Philosophy. But as we have seen, the concerns with accessibility and the need to write on difficult philosophical issues “in their very lowest terms” threatens to kill the project. The correspondence between the two professors makes numerous references to Russell’s unease about his ability to address successfully the difficulties endemic to this enterprise. As he pointedly puts it in the July 12, 1911 letter informing Murray that most of the assignment has been completed, the material is growing naturally, and “but for doubt about difficulty I should be satisfied with the stuff.”[[14]](#footnote-14) Russell’s dismissive attitude towards this text and the associated challenges it raises are palpable—an impatience that manifests itself, or so I argue below, in the cursory treatment that he metes out to some of the central philosophical statements in *The Problems of Philosophy*. What Russell has to say about the reality of physical objects, such as tables, is a case in point.

The shilling shocker opens on a dramatic note: our ordinary ideas, apparently, are vague and confused.[[15]](#footnote-15) And unfortunately, we do not realize this. These shortcomings, as far as Russell is concerned, have serious repercussions for all of us. As our ideas are defective, any attempt to provide an answer to our fundamental questions has to contend with numerous obstacles. However, as he sees it, *philosophers* are well placed to ameliorate the situation. Not only can philosophers help identify the problems with our ideas; they are also well-equipped to guide us towards a deeper appreciation of the critically-acceptable answers to these challenging questions:

for philosophy is merely the attempt to answer…ultimate questions, not carelessly and dogmatically, as we do in ordinary life and even in the sciences, but critically, after exploring all that makes such questions puzzling, and after realizing all the vagueness and confusion that underlie our ordinary ideas (Russell 1971, p. 1).[[16]](#footnote-16)

So philosophers, suggests Russell, are *not* careless and dogmatic, but careful critical thinkers who “explore all that makes [our fundamental] questions puzzling.” Fortunately for us, their methodical ways enable them to make discoveries that tend to escape the attention of ordinary citizens. And with their heightened sensitivities and enhanced talents, philosophers can present us with views about reality and our experiences that, presumably, are free of the shortcomings that beset the perspectives of the careless and dogmatic common man.[[17]](#footnote-17)

The philosopher’s careful attention to detail, suggests Russell, puts her in a unique position to appreciate the obstacles that we face when we attempt to articulate our views about the world and its relationship to us. When we attempt to use our (vague and confused) ideas—as when we strive to speak about our experiences of the world, for instance—the *statements* upon which we rely on to articulate those (defective) ideas leave us unable to produce a statement that is true:

In the search for certainty, it is natural to begin with our present experiences, and in some sense, no doubt, knowledge is to be derived from them. *But any statement as to what it is that our immediate experiences make us know is very likely to be wrong* (emphasis added; Russell 1971, p. 1).

In short, in light of the insights from the philosophers about ideas and statements, it is incumbent on all of us to be cautious about any attempt to articulate our views of the world and its relationship to us.[[18]](#footnote-18) *More importantly, we need to be cautious about the statements that we rely on in order to talk about the world and our experiences of this world*. With problematic ideas and the shortcomings endemic to the linguistic tools upon which we rely when talking about the world and our experiences, we ought to be circumspect in our attempts to express our knowledge about the world. Yet Russell, the prolific professor of philosophy, renowned for his substantial contributions on various philosophical problems, has himself overlooked these warnings. Or so I think.

Given Russell’s dire warnings about our ideas, along with his emphasis on the shortcomings of language, one would expect the co-author of *Principia Mathematica* to be acutely aware of the need to present his difficult philosophical ideas clearly and coherently.[[19]](#footnote-19) As concerned as Russell is with precision and attention to detail where *mathematical* ideas are concerned, we are well within our rights to expect the same attention to careful analysis where *philosophical* ideas are concerned. But the evidence is disappointing.

After warning his readers about the unnoticed problems that beset our attempts to acquire and express certain knowledge, in the opening chapter of *The Problems of Philosophy* Russell presents us with his first profound statement in his shilling shocker.

*The real table…must be an inference* from what is immediately known (emphasis added; Russell 1971, pp. 3, 4).

Russell’s conclusion to his first fully developed argument in the opening section of his popular account of some of the problems of philosophy certainly grabs the attention of the reader. Not many philosophical texts bowl readers over as suddenly and as dramatically as does *The Problems of Philosophy,* with itsstrident opening crescendo. With proclamations like this, from a renowned English philosopher famous for his insights and contributions into a wide range of challenging problems, both philosophical and non-philosophical, the modest text is bound to elicit a great deal of interest from even the most casual of casual readers. So the real table, after all, if there is one, apparently “must be an inference.” Unfortunately, this opening philosophical statement from Russell is problematic. As he might reluctantly concede, the statement on the real table “is very likely to be wrong.” There are a variety of reasons for viewing Russell’s statement in this unflattering light.

While Russell’s opening gambit gives rise to many issues, *three* strike me as especially egregious:

a) There is a crucial shift in the discussion from talk about *the table* in Russell’s office to references to *the real table*.

b) Russell relies on the loaded word “must” in the concluding statement.

c) The concluding statement in Russell’s argument for representative realism trades on the assumption that real tables *can* be identified with inferences.

Let us consider each of these concerns separately, beginning with what I view as the least contentious.

*a) The sudden shift*: In order to prepare his reader for his philosophical statement about real tables Russell presents a straightforward example. The analysis opens with what appears to be a routine reference to a *table*:

It seems to me that I am now sitting in a chair, at *a table* of a certain shape, on which I see sheets of paper with writing or print (emphasis added; Russell 1971, p. 1).

To this Russell adds comments about plausible elements of the scene to which the reader will be able to relate. So far, so good. And after this straightforward reference to a common physical object that his readers—including the stupid shop-assistants—will be able to understand, Russell gently ups the ante and invites his readers to think more carefully about the mundane situation in front of them. In order to help isolate some (presumably unnoticed) difficulties, and to make them more apparent, the readers are invited to reflect on aspects of the physical object under consideration; namely, the table:

To make our difficulties plain, let us concentrate attention on *the table* (emphasis added; Russell 1971, p. 2).

What follows is an account of many of the properties of *the table,* to be followed with the suggestion that we distinguish between appearances and reality—a distinction Russell suggests is important in philosophy:

Here we have already the beginning of one of the distinctions that causes most trouble *in philosophy*—the distinction between “appearance” and “reality”, between what things seem to be, and what they are (emphasis added; Russell 1971, p. 2).

So this is a distinction that causes trouble in *philosophical* circles. That is to say, philosophers struggle with this (conceptual?) distinction and are troubled by the terms “appearance” and “reality.” But nothing is said here about the rest of us. Russell might be right—perhaps philosophers are caught up with the problem. But why draw the attention of the non-philosophers or practical individuals in the audience, such as the stupid shop-assistants, to this problem? Russell does not provide us with an explicit account of the motives and behavior of the practically-orientated in the audience. But rather than leave it to the readers to interject their own explanations for determining the relevance of this philosophical problem to the lives of ordinary citizens, he suggests that philosophers and the practical individual are both driven by the same urge to know:

The painter wants to know what things seem to be, the practical man and the philosophers want to know what they are; but *the philosopher’s wish to know this is stronger than the practical man’s, and is more troubled by knowledge as to the difficulties of answering the question* (emphasis added; Russell 1971, p. 2).

So the philosopher’s wish to know about the world and its contents, apparently, is acute and more intense than that of the practical man.[[20]](#footnote-20) But the realization that this knowledge will not materialize easily bothers the philosopher who apparently is aware of the difficulties that beset any attempts to acquire knowledge of the world. Such a philosopher is “more troubled by knowledge as to the difficulties of answering” questions that are raised about the world and its contents than are those who are more practically inclined. Does this desire to know about the world, and the heightened sensibility about the challenges that threaten to undermine this knowledge, engender *a more cautious* approach to the problems from the philosopher? One would think so. Unfortunately, an analysis of Russell’s argument for representative realism in his *The Problems of Philosophy* suggests that this expectation is not always met.

Having opened with an accessible account of his table and its properties, Russell now introduces an unaccounted-for twist into the conversation. For the discussion suddenly shifts to talk about *real* tables, with absolutely no explanation from Russell on the relationship between tables and real tables. Are the tables that he has been talking about all along *the same* as the so-called real tables to which he is now alluding? If so, why invoke the use of the term “real?” This additional term carries with it the assumption that there are features about real tables that are not exemplified by tables. So the real table is probably different from the table. Well, in that case, if we ought not to confuse the two types of entities, what precisely are the differences between them? Unfortunately, there is no explanation from Russell on this important issue. The mythical stupid shop-assistant is bound to be bemused and confused by this lacuna.[[21]](#footnote-21)

The situation, unfortunately, becomes more confusing the further we go into Russell’s proposals on the relationship between ourselves and our world, with its allegedly mysterious content. And Russell, unfortunately, does not appear to notice that he is making our world darker with his so-called philosophical insights, for there are no helpful markers to assist us along the way. Without explanations from the philosopher on some of the crucial moves in his analysis, both the educated and uneducated readers of *The Problems of Philosophy* are likely to wonder about the value of the hitherto-unearthed insights that Russell is revealing for our benefit. At some stage in the proceedings the practical shop-assistant is bound to question the advisability of “exploring all that makes such questions puzzling.” Rather than enlightening us, Russell appears to be adding to our sense of unease and confusion.[[22]](#footnote-22)

*b) The loaded word “must:”* The problems with Russell’s account of representative realism mount as we consider the inclusion of the word “must” in his concluding statement on real tables. According to the author of *The Problems of Philosophy*, we are faced with no choice: we are required to accept that in the event that there is a real table, it must necessarily be an inference:

The real table, if there is one, is not *immediately* known to us at all, but must be an inference from what is immediately known” (Russell 1971, my underlining)

But what does Russell mean by the word “must?” Why does he not merely say that the real table is? Can the table not be, on its own, and the real table be, on *its* own? That is to say, can these two types of entities not co-exist, in some separate realms? Russell seems to be suggesting here that the existence of the real table, for some unexplained reason, is not neutral, but is dependent on the existence of the (ordinary) table. To go a little further down this path: Russell seems to be suggesting that the reality of the real table hinges on the existence of the ordinary table—that real tables are sustained by ordinary tables in some mysterious and explained manner. But why must their existence be dependent upon the prior existence of ordinary tables? Unfortunately, there is no suggestion from Russell on how to read this invocation.[[23]](#footnote-23)

*c) The identification of a real table with an inference:* What now of the third, and possibly most egregious, problem with Russell’s statement about the real table? How are we to understand his suggestion that “the real table, if there is one…must be an *inference*” (emphasis added; Russell 1971, pp. 3, 4)? In his concluding philosophical statement for representative realism, Russell appears to be *identifying* tables that are real with inferences. What is more, he seems to demand that *all* of us—and this includes the incredulous shop-assistants—accept this identification: the real table, if it exists “*must be* an inference.”[[24]](#footnote-24) The situation cannot be otherwise! These are strong words. How do we account for these fervent demands from the Cambridge philosopher? On the one hand, the proposal that a (real) table can be identified with an inference appears to be preposterous. On the other hand, Russell’s decision in the text to compound matters with his insistence that the real table *needs to be* an inference, appears to be an equally absurd suggestion. Both of these contentious moves by the erudite philosopher beg many questions. Let me say a few words on each of these elements of Russell’s questionable concluding statement.

From the outset, it is important that we remind ourselves about tables. As we are slowly drawn into Russell’s enigmatic philosophical world, we run the risk of losing our footing and sliding down into the dark and intimidating rabbit hole.[[25]](#footnote-25) It is critical that we anchor our feet in a robust sense of reality from the very beginning. So what precisely are tables? Tables, we will remember (and more importantly, as we need to remind the philosopher) are useful physical objects that serve a variety of purposes in our lives. Made of a great variety of different substances, and produced in a wide range of shapes, tables are common physical objects that help make life more manageable. Of course, Russell knows this, as his opening comments on the table in his room testify. And his remarks on the various sensible *physical* properties of the table make it clear to us that he is equally aware of many of the features of his table. All well and good. So why does he go on to suggest that the table is an inference? This move in his argument is puzzling—if not absurd.

What *precisely* is an inference? To help resolve this important question, let’s consider the application of the word “inference.” Unfortunately, the word “inference” is ambiguous. Two interpretations of this word strike me as particularly important. On the one hand, an inference can be a *process*. On the other hand, the word “inference” is often used to describe a *product*. Consider the first interpretation of the word:

a) The word “inference” is typically used when describing a *logical process*. To make an inference, in this case, is to draw conclusions from prior statements. That is to say, the act of reaching or deriving another statement from some previously accepted statements (or premises) is generally described as reasoning or making an inference. In situations like this one produces a statement at the end of this logical process.

b) There is a second application of the word “inference” that we need to remember. An inference, on this interpretation, is a *logical product*, such as a statement. After one has reasoned from a set of previously accepted statements—perhaps by relying on the process of inferring from those statements—a statement emerges from this logical process We call this emergent statement an inference. So the term “inference” can also be used to refer to the product of the logical process that yields the derived statement from the set of supportive statements.

Now it is important to note that the logical product of the logical process that we call “making an inference” has its own set of properties—namely, *logical* properties, including truth-values. That is to say, when one makes an inference in order to derive—or in order to infer—a statement, the resultant statement is a logical product with truth-values, among other logical properties. More pointedly, irrespective of what is produced when we make an inference, the act of making an inference does not—and *cannot*—result in an entity to which truth-values cannot be applied. It does not make sense to suggest that the entity that might result from an inferential act cannot have a truth value. But Russell’s argument for representative realism—and more especially, his conclusion that the real table must be an inference—carries with it the distinct implication that the term “inference” can be applied to an entity that does not possess a truth-value. This implication, on the face of it, is contrary to our regular understanding of inferences and appears to be absurd.

In suggesting that the real table must be an inference, Russell is inviting the shop-assistant to accept that the entity to which the phrase “real table” refers does, and actually must, possess a truth-value. *But tables, whether real or otherwise, do not, and cannot possess truth-values. Only statements possess truth-values, and tables cannot be statements.* All this suggests that Russell’s provocative thesis that the real table, if there is one, must be an inference from what is immediately known is tantamount to the proposal that an inference can be an entity to which the ascription of a truth-value does not make sense. As Russell does not address this important counter-intuitive implication, we must conclude that his argument for representative realism in the opening pages of *The Problems of Philosophy* leaves much to be desired. For the analysis here strongly suggests that the conclusion that he is reaching for is seriously confused and incoherent.[[26]](#footnote-26)

When one adds up the problems enumerated above, we are left with the inevitable assessment that Russell’s foray into representative realism in *The Problems of Philosophy* is problematic. I have tried to show that the argument for his striking conclusion that the “real table, if there is one, is not *immediately* known to us at all, but must be an inference from what is immediately known” cannot be sound. That the argument cannot be sound becomes evident when we realize that Russell’s concluding statement about the real table is incoherent—an incoherency due, as I have argued in my paper, to the confusion endemic to a statement that appears to be logically absurd. For a philosopher who proudly trumpets the virtues of his enterprise as “the attempt to answer ultimate questions, not carelessly and dogmatically…but critically…after realizing all the vagueness and confusion that underlie our ordinary ideas,” this is an ironic turn of affairs. The shop-assistants, even the stupid shop-assistants, would be bemused.

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**Appendix**

What follows is a transcript of the letter from Russell to Murray written while Russell was working on *The Problems of Philosophy.* As with most of his letters, this letter is exceptionally clean and free of superfluous corrections and marginalia. This copy of the letter is stored in the Russell Archives, McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario.

\* \* \*

Address Trinity The View, Upper Wyche, 80 Malvern

12. July. 1911

B. Russell

Dear Gilbert

I am writing my book for your series, & have written more than half of it. I find, however, that one or two things are happening to it which you may not desire. In the first place, I find it deals almost entirely with theory of knowledge, only occasionally arriving at metaphysics through theory of knowledge. This seems difficult to avoid, owing to the exclusion of religion & ethics. In the second place, I find that, quite contrary to my intention, it is an exposition of my own views, not an impartial account of what is thought by various philosophers. I found it impossible to write interestingly or freely or with conviction, unless I was trying to persuade the reader to agree with me. In the third place, I find that after the first four chapters it grows rather difficult. It remains quite easily intelligible, without trouble, to any educated man, however little he may know about philosophy; but it would be difficult for a shop-assistant unless he were unusually intelligent. I hardly know myself whether it it too difficult or not. If it is, I must re-write it.

Don't bother to answer if you think it will be all right. But if you really want stupid shop-assistants to be able to read it in armchairs, I must do it again. My chapters are so far:

I. Appearance & Reality

II. The existence of matter

III. The nature of matter

IV. Idealism

V. Knowledge by acquaintance & knowledge by description

VI. Induction

VII. On our knowledge of general principles

VIII. How a priori knowledge is possible

IX. The world of universals [on Plato & Ideas]

X. On our knowledge of universals

XI. On intuitive knowledge.

The chapters grow naturally out of each other, & but for doubt about difficulty I should be satisfied with the stuff.

Love to Mary.

Yours aff[ectionately],

B. Russell

1. \* Many of the ideas expressed in this paper were originally presented in a Master Class at the 2015 annual meeting of the Bertrand Russell Society. I must thank the participants at this meeting for their constructive responses to my arguments. We met at Trinity College, Dublin. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Naturally, others might be tempted to do what I shall not do here. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For the moment assume that in the opening section of his *Problems* Russell is presenting us with a *metaphysical* thesis on the reality of tables. This is an issue that calls for further investigation, a problem that will be addressed in the next section of my paper. For there are strong reasons to suggest that Russell’s concerns are not metaphysical. As we shall see, a strong case can be made that he is actually attempting to defend an *epistemological* thesis on the philosophical problems that need to be addressed in order to acquire knowledge of the (real) table. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. In correspondence with Lady Ottoline Morrell, Russell, soon after accepting the invitation to write *The Problems of Philosophy*, makes it clear that this is a daunting assignment that he is legally—and morally?—compelled to complete. The suggestion that he is obligated to complete the book is expressed by Russell in a letter to Ottoline on March 25, 1911:

   I have…undertaken to finish by July a popular book on philosophy, which I have not yet begun. Heaven knows how I shall manage, but *I must do it as I have signed the contract* (emphasis added).

   This sense of duty serves as a powerful motivator for a project that Russell does not appear to be excited about. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The other editors were Herbert Fisher and Professor J. Arthur Thomson. G.H. Perris was an assistant editor at the time. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Donovan Wishon and Bernard Linsky have a more accommodating understanding of Russell’s approach to his assignment. In their “The Place of *The Problems of Philosophy* in Philosophy” they suggest that Russell is comfortable with the task assigned to him by Murray, and that he is “*pleased with his own ability to adapt his style to popular writing,* something he suggests that Moore cannot do” (emphasis added; Wishon and Linsky, ed. 2015, p. 6). This positive assessment of Russell’s ability to adapt to the demands of the common man is misleading. As my argument below will show, and as Russell’s own words will confirm, the co-author of *Principia Mathematica* has serious misgivings about his ability to write about philosophical problems in such a way that he “put[s] all the main problems in their very lowest terms” (emphasis added; *ibid.*). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Gilbert Murray was six years older than Russell and came from Sydney, Australia. As a classics scholar he produced numerous influential translations of the masters of ancient Greek drama. In 1908 he was appointed Regius Professor of Greek at the University of Oxford. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. With the material that I currently possess on the correspondence between Murray and Russell, I am not in the position to say what Russell said to Murray about the invitation to present something on mathematics to the masses. Further work on the correspondence between Russell and Murray, and perhaps an investigation of other correspondence, in the Russell archives at McMaster might throw more light on this interesting question. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. In a letter from Trinity College, written on Thursday May 18, Russell informs Lady Ottoline Morrell that for years he was remote and distanced from humanity: “My love of mankind, which I was saying was intermittent, did not exist at all in the first years of my marriage. At that time I was quite hard and intellectual” (Letter 72). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. This remark suggests that the intention was Russell’s. But it was *Murray,* who some ten months before this letter implored his colleague to write dispassionately. As Murray had put it in his letter, “You have got a message [for] the shop-assistants about philosophy, if you would only think it out…*You could do it with great detachment from the conventional* *schools*…(emphasis added; letter from Murray, September 19, 1910). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. A transcript of this letter is included as an appendix to this paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. The phrase “broad accessibility” is important in this context. Russell, for obvious reasons, is in an excellent position to judge the merits of his work where *educated* citizens are concerned. But where uneducated shop-assistants are concerned the aristocratic professor from Cambridge is at a distinct disadvantage. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. The date on this letter has been scratched out and it appears that the letter was sent on August 12. But this alteration seems incorrect, as the letter from Russell makes specific references to comments made by Murray in his August 15 letter from Fairhaven, Goathland. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Why in the world is Russell demeaning his contribution to Murray’s series as mere “stuff?” Surely intellectual contributions that require research, effort, and care would warrant a more appropriate moniker? This dismissive, if not derogatory, way of referring to his philosophical essays in *The Problems of Philosophy* is employed on a number of occasions in the correspondence between Russell and Murray. For instance, on August 12, 1911, Russell writes from Marlborough and says this to Murray: “Many thanks for your letter. I am greatly relieved that you like *the stuff*.” And a few days later, in a letter to Murray changing his plans regarding a proposed trip to Yorkshire (due to the expense and the amount of academic work to which he needs to attend at Cambridge), Russell reiterates that he is pleased with Murray’s response to the material sent to him: “I am very much relieved that you are satisfied with *the stuff* on the whole” (emphasis added). Perhaps the frequent use of the unflattering term “stuff” is due to Russell’s reluctance to undertake a project like this that is designed to appeal to and to stimulate the common man? Is Russell not deliberately making clear to Murray his displeasure with a project that has as its rationale the attempt to accommodate and reach out to an audience with which Russell is uncomfortable? [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. I am stretching a little here. Strictly speaking, Russell says that there is confusion and vagueness *underlying our ordinary ideas.* This suggests that there is a substratum to our ordinary ideas that is vague and confused. What this foundation is that presumably supports our ordinary ideas is not spelled out in the text. Or is there another way to interpret Russell’s remarks here? Perhaps there is, but this would take us away from my task in the paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. What precisely is Russell’s conception of vagueness? This is an issue that I explore in Schwerin (1999). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. This inflated conception of the abilities of philosophers begs many questions, of course. High on my list are these questions: What accounts for the special abilities of philosophers to go where others fear to tread? Where did they acquire their talents? And at what price? [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Russell does not explain precisely why we are unable to produce true statements about our experiences. Is the problem due to *our* failings, perhaps? Or are our *statements* to blame? For that matter, precisely what are statements for Russell in 1912? These questions are not explicitly addressed in *The Problems of Philosophy.* I have explored this issue in some detail in Schwerin (2002). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. We need to remember that a major reason for creating the notation in *Principia Mathematica* was to express challenging mathematical propositions with perfect precision. This would happen, suggested Russell, by virtue of the fact that the notation would enable one to effect “the greatest possible analysis of the ideas with which it deals and of the processes by which it conducts demonstrations” (Russell and Whitehead 1910, p. 1). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. This theme has been explored by many philosophers. George Berkeley, for instance, in his *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge* makes much of the travails with which one needs to contend as one leaves the practical world in order to explore philosophical questions:

    Philosophy being nothing else but the study of wisdom and truth, it may with reason be expected, that those who have spent most time and pains in it should enjoy a greater calm and serenity of mind, a greater clearness and evidence of knowledge, and be less disturbed with doubts and difficulties than other men. Yet so it is we see the illiterate bulk of mankind that walk the high-road of plan, common sense, and are governed by the dictates of nature, for the most part easy and undisturbed. To them nothing that’s familiar appears unaccountable or difficult to comprehend. They complain not of any want of evidence in their senses, and are out of all danger of becoming *sceptics*. But no sooner do we depart from sense and instinct to follow the light of a superior principle, to reason, meditate, and reflect on the nature of things, but a thousand scruples spring up in our minds, concerning those things which before we seemed fully to comprehend (quoted in Schwerin 2010 , p. 152). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. The situation is actually more complicated than this. Not only does Russell move suddenly from talk about tables to talk about real tables, he also invokes use of the unexplained “real” table:

    If we look at [the table] through a microscope, we should see roughnesses and hills and valleys and all sorts of differences that are imperceptible to the naked eye. Which of these is the *“real” table*? (emphasis added; Russell 1971, p. 3).

    So in his argument for representative realism in *The Problems of Philosophy*, we are presented with *three* designations: tables, real tables and “real” tables. And unfortunately, absolutely no explanations are presented to help us distinguish between these different designations. For a philosopher who sings the praises of precision and rigor in the execution of careful and undogmatic philosophical analyses this is most unfortunate. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. If we are to believe Berkeley, the unease and confusion arises only *after* the philosophers present us with their ideas. Before these thinkers show up “the illiterate bulk of mankind that walk the high-road of plain, common sense, and are governed by the dictates of nature, [are] for the most part easy and undisturbed” (quoted in Schwerin 2010, p. 152). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Is this merely a vestige of Russell’s commitment to Plato’s heaven? In this case tables are to be understood as mere ephemeral shadows of the real tables that can be learned about only indirectly from their earthling entities. One wonders what the stupid shop assistants would make of this sudden, and unexplained, injection of Platonism into a text for philosophical novices. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. This is an important addendum to Russell’s conclusion for representative realism. As he sees it, not only ought careful philosophers, with their refined education, agree that real tables can and ought to be identified with inferences, but all non-philosophers without exception ought also to buy into this (absurd) identification. This is an unusual move by Russell. Even Hume and Berkeley, to cite but two other philosophers who distinguish between the world of the philosopher and that of the common man, leave open the possibility that the two conceptual frameworks can co-exist. While they might give priority to the philosopher’s world of philosophical entities, they resist the temptation to negate the world of the vulgar or common man. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. I must thank my wife, Helen, for reminding me of this colorful and useful analogy from Carroll’s *Alice through the Looking Glass.* [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Or is Russell presenting us with another suggestion? Perhaps the philosopher is proposing that the *knowledge* of the real tables—assuming, of course that they are different for ordinary tables—is dependent on the knowledge of ordinary tables with their properties? That is to say, is Russell’s conclusion to his argument for representative realism actually an *epistemological* thesis—the appearances notwithstanding? On this interpretation of his grand statement, the conclusion is not to be viewed as a *metaphysical* thesis on tables—or even a statement on the existence of real tables—but a pronouncement on our attempts to acquire knowledge of the contents of some rarified universe populated by real objects, such as real tables. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)