
Our Statements Are Likely to Be Wrong: On Russell's Big Thesis

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400. Here I am inclined to fight windmills, because I cannot yet say the thing I really want to say.

Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*

The title of my paper notwithstanding, there can be no doubt that the relationship between Bertrand Russell and his enigmatic student Ludwig Wittgenstein was both intense and on occasion vituperative. My intention here is to review some of the intricacies of this famous relationship. While the central task here is to revisit a thesis central to Russell's philosophy and to show how it relates to Wittgenstein's views, I shall also consider the important context that animates the thesis and its arguments.

In *The Problems of Philosophy* Russell expresses an interesting thesis on the truth-status of statements on our experiences. This position is buried in a paragraph on philosophy and the search for certainty and is articulated very tersely—as is Russell's wont. This is what he says: "In our 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" (1, my emphasis). This view on statements plays a significant role in Russell's conception of philosophy. Or to be more precise, a *variant* of this view features prominently in Russell's view of philosophy. It is this alternative version of his view that I intend to focus on. As the discussion that follows the introduction of his view on statements in *The Problems of Philosophy* makes abundantly clear, and this will emerge later in my presentation, Russell is actually committed to the following view on statements:

Big Thesis: "Any *ordinary language* statement as to what it is that our immediate experiences make us know is very likely to be wrong" (1, my emphasis).

This view, with its important qualification, is what I shall refer to, with deliberate irreverence, as Russell's Big Thesis. Before we consider this view and its argument, I shall say a little on the background that appears to fuel the Big Thesis and its argument. The context for Russell's negative assessment of statements on experience is scepticism and its role in his conception of philosophy. Let me open with a few speculative, but hopefully not misleading, thoughts on this issue. This will prepare the way for my main mission: namely, the critical exploration of Russell's Big Thesis.

THE CONTEXT FOR THE BIG THESIS: SCEPTICISM AND WITTGENSTEIN

In the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein advises us to take a bold stand against scepticism: we are to treat it with the contempt that it (apparently) deserves. In his view, we ought not to engage with the doctrine in any way. Adopting the contentious assumption that we are not intent on establishing the veracity of scepticism—now who in their right mind would want to argue for the *truth* of scepticism?—Wittgenstein concentrates on what he regards as the only conceivable way of respond to scepticism—to negate it. This response is dismissed outright. Rather than attempt to show that scepticism is false, Wittgenstein advises us to recognize the utter futility of even attempting to defeat the sceptics' corrosive doctrine. This dismissive invective from Wittgenstein comes across most forcefully towards the end of the text, namely in paragraph 6.51 of the *Tractatus*:

Scepticism is *not* irrefutable, but it does raise doubts where no questions can be asked. For doubt can exist only where a question exists, and an answer exists, and an answer exists only where a question exists.

But precisely who is the sceptic? Wittgenstein, attempting "to raise doubts where no questions can be asked," Wittgenstein, unfortunately, does so in the preface to the *Tractatus* is a source of pride.¹ As Wittgenstein wishes to judge how far my efforts have gone, the philosophers. . . . [T]he reason why I have not been anticipated by someone else (one of the philosophers) who promptly has not been as slow to do so.

Max Black, to give just one example, Wittgenstein is targeting the solipsists. Wittgenstein might be shrouded in obscurity, but his message, namely, that Wittgenstein's scepticism espoused by the solipsists, Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, Black's inflammatory remarks against Wittgenstein signed to undermine the solipsist's world is *his* world and presumed to be uncertain. Wittgenstein does not correct the solipsist's judgment that worlds are not uncertain—they are.

There is something to be said for Wittgenstein's point. Wittgenstein does appear to be aware of the predicaments of the sceptic. Wittgenstein the solipsist is also engaged in a similar predicament. Wittgenstein would also be attempting to do so. But the (alleged) similarities of the doctrines espoused by the solipsist and Wittgenstein, as I believe they have Max Black's scepticism is primarily concerned with the sceptic's scepticism. A far more plausible target of Wittgenstein's irrepressible foil, Bertrand Russell.

Scepticism is *not* irrefutable, but obviously nonsensical, when it tries to raise doubts where no questions can be asked.

For doubt can exist only where a question exists, a question only where an answer exists, and an answer only where something *can be said*. (73)

But precisely who is the sceptic with the corrosive doctrine that is attempting "to raise doubts where no questions can be asked"? Wittgenstein, unfortunately, does not tell us. And if what he says in the preface to the *Tractatus* is anything to go by, the anonymity of his opponent (or opponents) in the main text, as in paragraph 6.51, is a source of pride.¹ As Wittgenstein states in the preface, "I do not wish to judge how far my efforts coincide with those of other philosophers. . . . [T]he reason why I give no sources is that it is a matter of indifference to me whether the thoughts that I have had have been anticipated by someone else" (3). However, while the author of the *Tractatus* might be reluctant to identify the philosopher (or the philosophers) who prompted his invective against scepticism, others have not been as slow to point fingers.

Max Black, to give just one example, is unambiguous: Wittgenstein is targeting the solipsists. Paragraph 6.51 from the *Tractatus* might be shrouded in obscurity, but we can be sure of at least one thing; namely, that Wittgenstein is raising objections against the scepticism espoused by the solipsists. In his text, *A Companion to Wittgenstein's "Tractatus,"* Black suggests that Wittgenstein's inflammatory remarks against the sceptic in paragraph 6.51 are designed to undermine the solipsist's commitment to the view that the world is *his* world and presumably that talk about any other world must be uncertain. Wittgenstein's response, intimates Black, is to correct the solipsist's judgment. Solipsistic statements about other worlds are not uncertain—they are nonsensical.

There is something to be said for Black's interpretation on this point. Wittgenstein does appear to establish a connection between the predicaments of the sceptic and the solipsist when he asserts that the solipsist is also engaged in an impossible enterprise. For the sceptic would also be attempting to *say* what can only be made *manifest*. But the (alleged) similarities of the predicaments endemic to the doctrines espoused by the solipsist and the sceptic must not mislead us—as I believe they have Max Black—into assuming that Wittgenstein is primarily concerned with the solipsist in paragraph 6.51 on scepticism. A far more plausible target, in my opinion, is Wittgenstein's irrepressible foil, Bertrand Russell.²

Now Russell is no solipsist. Whatever other epistemological stances he might have adopted in his long, and at times wavering and illustrious career, it was not solipsism. He might have come close, on occasion, but to the best of my knowledge Russell *never* embraced solipsism. So if Wittgenstein is targeting solipsism, as Black suggests, it seems reasonable to suggest that it cannot be Russell's solipsism. However, there is a more plausible interpretation of 6.51. Perhaps this paragraph is targeted primarily, if not exclusively, against sceptics! And as Russell is most certainly a sceptic, perhaps he needs to bear the brunt of the attack from paragraph 6.51? Wittgenstein's intimate mentor consistently espoused bold, unambiguous positions on scepticism throughout his work. It was very likely one or more of these *Russellian* stances on scepticism that provoked Wittgenstein.

At the time the *Tractatus* was in its formative stage, Russell had a great deal to say about scepticism and the methods that philosophers ought to rely on in their philosophical endeavors. As we might recall, he was working on the Lowell lectures to be delivered in Boston in March and April 1914, subsequently published as *Our Knowledge of the External World*. Equally important was the aborted project that Russell began on epistemology in May 1913 that has been published with the title *Theory of Knowledge: The 1913 Manuscript* (1984). In both of these demanding and ambitious projects, Russell writes extensively on philosophy and the methods that philosophers ought to rely on in their attempts to solve philosophical problems. Scepticism features prominently in his analyses there. And Wittgenstein certainly knew this. In fact, it was Wittgenstein's harsh criticism of the material in *Theory of Knowledge* that eventually "paralyzed" Russell, as he put it in a letter to Lady Ottoline Morrell, and forced him to jettison the project altogether.³ And if we bear in mind Gordon Baker's astute observation that "Wittgenstein's work always required a source of negative entropy in order to progress" (Luckhardt, 244), it seems reasonable to suggest that paragraph 6.51 of the *Tractatus* on scepticism is due in large part, if not entirely, to something that someone either said or wrote on scepticism. In my view, Russell fits the bill perfectly.

Black does not recognize this possibility in his commentary on the *Tractatus*. I suspect that his failure to do so is due to his willingness to play down the differences between Wittgenstein and Russell's conceptions of philosophy as they existed around 1913. Black does this in a number of places in his writings, most notably in his review

of *Notebooks, 1914–1916*. In his analysis of this precursor of the *Tractatus*, Black leaves the reader with the distinct impression that the overall conception of philosophy espoused by Wittgenstein and Russell at this time was the same. While Black concedes that there were serious differences between the two thinkers on other issues, where the nature of philosophy is concerned, they were essentially in agreement with one another. As he sees it, even if we accept the view that “Wittgenstein at this time shared Russell’s general conception of the nature of philosophy, it is also clear that he was reacting sharply to a number of specific views, either held by Russell at about 1913 or else attributed to him” (1964b, 134, my emphasis). The suggestion that Wittgenstein “shared Russell’s general conception of the nature of philosophy” does not appear to be correct, for reasons previously outlined here. However, there are further considerations that we must take into account if we are to begin to understand the dynamics between Russell and Wittgenstein over scepticism and philosophy.

My suggestion that Wittgenstein is objecting to Russell’s views on scepticism and by implication Russell’s conception of philosophy—that is to say, that he has Russell in mind in paragraph 6.51—receives further support from a consideration of Wittgenstein’s remarks on scepticism in *Notebooks, 1914–1916*. There is one, and only one, explicit reference to scepticism in the *Notebooks 1914–1916* (edited by G. H. von Wright). This paragraph, that was composed on 1 May 1915, consists of seven sentences, almost all of which are explicitly devoted to comments on scepticism, and most importantly here, to Russell. One sentence deals with a suggestion on contradiction: “The fact that $p \cdot p$ is a contradiction shews that p contradicts p ” (cf. 6.1201). Other than this, the comments in this important paragraph are confined to Wittgenstein’s views on scepticism, philosophy, and to Russell’s conception of philosophy.

In referring to scepticism and Russell’s views in the same breadth, Wittgenstein is making it clear that these two positions are inseparable. And as it turns out, Wittgenstein finds both wanting. In this intriguing paragraph from the *Notebooks* we find Wittgenstein doing three things:

- He presents what will later be *Tractatus* 6.51.
- He rejects the (Russellian) suggestion that there is something essential to philosophical activity.

- And what is especially interesting and most pertinent here, Wittgenstein explicitly refers to Russell's conception of philosophy and dismisses it as "simply a retrogression from the method of physics" (44e).

In short, in this rare instance where Wittgenstein 'elaborates' (this word might be a little too strong here) on his unfortunately sparse comments on scepticism, he makes explicit reference to *Russell* and his conception of philosophy. No other philosophers or philosophical schools in this expansion of Wittgenstein's thoughts on scepticism are referred to at all. This must surely be viewed as strong evidence that *Tractatus* 6.51 is directed primarily, if not exclusively, at Russell's conception of philosophy, with its commitment to scepticism. That Wittgenstein is targeting Russell's overall conception of philosophy, let alone his embrace of scepticism, receives further support if we take into account other remarks made by Wittgenstein.

Wittgenstein is very explicit about the nature of his book. In his preface to the *Tractatus*, written presumably fairly soon after the completion of the manuscript, when the prime reason for taking the trouble to write and publish the work is surely uppermost in his mind, Wittgenstein says the following: "*The book deals with the problems of philosophy*, and shows, I believe that the reason why these problems are posed is that the logic of our language is misunderstood. The whole sense of the book might be summed up in the following words: what can be said at all can be said clearly, and what we cannot talk about we must pass over in silence" (3, my emphasis). So the *Tractatus*, first and foremost, is a book about the problems of philosophy. And as Wittgenstein sees it, the genesis of philosophical problems is misunderstanding—the failure to comprehend what he refers to as "the logic of our language." If we understood the so-called logic of our language, we would not be tempted to posit the existence of the problems that exercise us in philosophy: they would not arise. The implication of this remark by Wittgenstein in his preface is significant, especially for scholars intent on unraveling the relationship between Wittgenstein and Russell's views on philosophy, and by implication, scepticism.

For Wittgenstein there are no genuine or real problems of philosophy. What appear to be problems are mere fabrications of some distorted or faulty comprehension. Correct this distortion and the so-called problems disappear. So philosophical problems, for the early Wittgenstein, have no more substance than ephemeral mirages. But his mentor, Bertrand Russell, has devoted an entire text to the

presentation and analysis of the very phenomena that Wittgenstein here regards as insubstantial and founded on confusion: the problems of philosophy. So when Russell suggests in *The Problems of Philosophy* that philosophical problems are rooted in vagueness and confusion, Wittgenstein probably winced—he couldn't agree with him more. But the confusion is not about the nature of the problems for Wittgenstein, but about the assumption that there are problems there at all. This suggests, as I see it, that the overall thrust of the *Tractatus* is targeted to a large extent at the enterprise in which Russell was engaged at the time he produced *The Problems of Philosophy*.

The plain talk in the preface of the *Tractatus* must be taken seriously. Wittgenstein is unambiguous here: his book deals with the so-called problems of philosophy and presents a solution that he regards as definitive. This is his 'final solution' to the problems; their complete and total elimination. After the treatment Wittgenstein is proposing in the *Tractatus*, these 'problems' disappear and ought not to concern us at all. But Russell's text is erected on an entirely different set of assumptions: that there *are* genuine philosophical problems—we only need to find a way to solve them. As we all know, the full title of Russell's text is *The Problems of Philosophy*. And if anyone ought to be sensitive to the reliance on definite articles that lack referents, it is surely Russell, even where contentious texts are concerned. For Russell, the problems that he considers in *The Problems of Philosophy* simply *cannot* be eliminated.

The problems of philosophy are very real and stubbornly resist attempts to resolve them. As Wittgenstein's professor reluctantly concedes at the end of his introductory text on philosophy, the problems that philosophers work with, by their very nature, "*must* remain insoluble to the human intellect unless its powers become of quite a different order from what they are now" (90, my emphasis).⁴ So Russell and Wittgenstein are adopting diametrically opposed positions where the nature of philosophy is concerned. While Russell is identifying some of the important problems in philosophy and outlining the various ways in which philosophers in the past have attempted to solve these problems, Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus* is attempting to demonstrate that the efforts of previous philosophers have been misspent and that *any* attempt to present a meaningful account of the essentially *nonsensical* endeavors of the philosophers of the past is misguided. Hence Russell's enterprise in *The Problems of Philosophy* is flawed from the outset for Wittgenstein. So when

Russell, in the final chapter of *The Problems of Philosophy*, suggests that attempts to solve philosophical problems can be viewed as valuable endeavors, Wittgenstein is astonished. To suggest that the pursuit of nonsensical endeavors can have value is absurd. Which explains Wittgenstein's forthright rebuke to Russell, written immediately after the publication of *The Problems of Philosophy* and disparaging Russell's attempt in the final chapter of the book to argue for the view that philosophy has value and that others ought to carefully think about its benefits: "people who like philosophy will pursue it, and others won't, and there is the end of it" (from a letter to Lady Ottoline Morrell from Russell, 12 March 1912). To attempt to sell someone on the need to solve philosophical problems is to engage in a fraudulent act for Wittgenstein, for there are none to solve. From this it follows that any attempt to reconstruct the (apparent) philosophical problems of the past is pointless and certainly not something that we need to commend.

All this shows, contrary to Black's view, that Russell and the early Wittgenstein differ greatly on the nature of philosophy and the value of scepticism. To suggest that there was a symbiotic relationship between the two, even on these most fundamental of issues, is to seriously misrepresent the relationship. As the discussion above suggests and as the arguments that follow will confirm, the relationship between Russell and Wittgenstein, at least at the time of the formation of the ideas that would later be incorporated in the *Tractatus*, is more complicated and intimate than commentators such as Black appear to have noticed. Interpretations from these critics will need to be revised, if not rejected, if the analyses and arguments in my paper hold any water. One scholar, however, who does recognize the intimacy between the ideas in the *Tractatus* and those of the author of *The Problems of Philosophy* and who has drawn attention to the need to reconsider the nature of the influence of Russell on his Austrian student is Ken Blackwell.

In his elaborately detailed analysis, "The Early Wittgenstein and the Middle Russell," Blackwell has argued that the connection between the *Tractatus* and Russell's work is far more direct than critics have previously recognized. In his opinion, the links become especially apparent when one scrutinizes the substantial text that remained unpublished during Russell's lifetime, *The Theory of Knowledge*. As Blackwell sees it, "a study of the 'Theory of Knowledge' manuscript would show the *Tractatus* to be far more directed against Russell's philosophy than has been supposed" (26-27, my

emphasis). So for Blackwell, Wittgenstein certainly does *not* share Russell's conception of philosophy. Furthermore, the fault lines between their competing conceptions can be traced through the 1913 manuscript, *Theory of Knowledge*. The analysis and arguments that follows will lend strong support to the overall thrust of Blackwell's suggestions. However, rather than locate the influences of Russell on Wittgenstein in the (then) unpublished "Theory of Knowledge" manuscript, as Blackwell suggests, my intention is to go back a stage to the earlier published text *The Problems of Philosophy*.

THE CONTEXT FOR THE BIG THESIS: SCEPTICISM AND RUSSELL

When Gilbert Murray approached Russell to contribute to his series—known quaintly by the title *The Home University Series*—he knew what he was after: a philosopher with a reputation that went beyond the confines of the ivy towers of Cambridge, and a writer with the ability to project his thoughts to a large, essentially non-academic audience. In his letter of 19 September 1910, Murray implores Russell to write a basic text in which he explains what philosophy is. Even shop assistants must be able to understand the material. "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" (Letter of 19 September 1910). The shilling shocker that Russell eventually produced in the summer of 1911 was precisely what Murray was after. The modest text of some 46 thousand words spelled out "all the main problems [of philosophy] in their very lowest terms," and did so in a manner that even Murray's proverbial shop assistant would find engaging.

The manuscript was completed on 12 August 1911. The text opens on a dramatic note and moves quickly into a set of issues that appear to be designed to unsettle, if not stun, the unsuspecting naïve reader. What we have in the first few lines of *The Problems of Philosophy* is philosophical high drama at its best. And what exactly does Russell rely on to secure the interest of his audience? In one word: scepticism. The very first sentence is a question that only a sceptic is likely to ask: "Is there any knowledge in the world which is so certain that no reasonable man could doubt it?" (1). This opening forms part of a powerful, short paragraph on Russell's concep-

tion of philosophy, with its commitment to scepticism, and is followed by an equally unsettling account of perception that centers around the argument from illusion—the weapon of choice, as it were, of the sceptic. But Russell does not leave matters at this stage. No. Not content with this cursory introduction to scepticism and its role in his conception of philosophy, Russell later devotes an entire chapter to his views on knowledge and scepticism. In other words, in spite of the constraints imposed on him by his editor, Russell devotes fully two of the fifteen chapters of his modest introduction to the problems of philosophy to a consideration of scepticism. Furthermore, he uses every opportunity that the text provides—beyond these two chapters—to incorporate a sceptical perspective in his analyses of the problems under consideration. There can be no doubt that in his introduction to philosophy Russell was clearly determined to drive home the point that philosophy and scepticism are inseparable. Chapter 14 of *The Problems of Philosophy* establishes this necessary connection most explicitly.

Entitled “The Limits of Philosophical Knowledge,” this penultimate chapter provides Russell the opportunity to draw attention to the essential role of criticism in philosophy. Committing himself to the view that philosophical knowledge “does not differ essentially from scientific knowledge,” Russell nevertheless detects a significant difference between science and philosophy as disciplines. Consider the first suggestion: Why is there, apparently, no significant difference between scientific knowledge and philosophical knowledge?

As Russell sees it, these two forms of knowledge are fundamentally similar for two reasons:

- On the one hand, “there is no special source of wisdom which is open to philosophy but not to science,” and
- On the other hand, “the results obtained by philosophy are not radically different from those obtained from science.” (87)

However, the similarities of the two forms of knowledge must not mislead us, intimates Russell. For philosophy and science can still be clearly demarcated from each other and must be, according to him, if our objective is to understand the true nature of philosophy. We must acknowledge that philosophy possesses a feature not shared by science: “the essential characteristic of philosophy which makes it a study distinct from science, is *criticism*” (87, my emphasis). Let us ignore for the moment the suggestion here about the

nature of science, and focus on Russell's remarks on criticism in philosophy.⁵

As Russell sees it, the criticism that is necessary to practice philosophy manifests itself in a number of ways, three of which he articulates explicitly:

- In the first place, philosophy "examines critically the *principles* employed in science" (87, my emphasis);
- secondly, philosophy "examines critically the *principles* employed . . . in daily life" (87, my emphasis);
- thirdly, philosophers search for the "*inconsistencies* [that] there may be" in the principles relied on by the scientist and the nonscientist. (87, my insert)

Activities in daily life and in science are governed by principles that philosophers need to evaluate. But precisely how are we to conduct this critical investigation? Russell tells us. We must accept principles if, and only if, "*as the result of a critical enquiry*, no reason for rejecting them has appeared" (87, my emphasis). That is to say, we must adopt a sceptical attitude, and if the close inspection of our principles do not reveal any defects, accept them. This approach is reminiscent of that adopted by Descartes.

In his *Meditation on First Philosophy* Descartes spelled out his methodological rule of systematic doubt: "I must withhold assent no less carefully from what is not plainly certain and indubitable than from what is obviously false; so *the discovery of some reason for doubt as regards each opinion will justify the rejection of all*" (61, my emphasis). With his (similar) methodological rule that we accept only those principles that the adoption of a sceptical attitude reveals to be problem-free, Russell proceeds to draw a sharp distinction between two forms of scepticism; namely, mitigated scepticism and pyrrhic scepticism. Intent on aligning philosophy with the more moderate form of scepticism—the scepticism advocated by Descartes with his "methodical doubt"—Russell dismisses the more radical version. Absolute or "complete scepticism" as Russell calls it, is dismissed as irrational, for "no *logical* argument can be advanced" against this extreme version. And for this reason, Russell suggests that "it is not difficult to see that scepticism of this kind is *unreasonable*" (87, my emphasis). However, what *is* reasonable, in his view, is the criticism embraced by the mitigated (or Cartesian) sceptic. For now doubts are raised only where doubts can be raised.

With this form of scepticism one doubts only whatever it is rational to doubt. The Cartesian sceptic, as Russell sees it, works systematically through the specimens placed before him for consideration and pauses with each apparent piece of knowledge to ask himself whether, on reflection, he feels certain that he really knows it. This is the kind of criticism that constitutes philosophy (87). In short, for Russell genuine or reasonable philosophy embraces mitigated scepticism with its commitment to the enterprise of critically evaluating and contrasting the principles of science and daily life. In his search for the irrefutable knowledge that can be regarded as certain, the true philosopher must adopt this form of scepticism. Russell views this as an essential requirement for genuine philosophy. To attempt to do otherwise in our philosophical endeavors—to not rely on scepticism at all, or to follow the path of the absolute sceptic—is to attempt the irrational and ultimately the impossible. For then we are “placing ourselves wholly outside all knowledge” and attempting, “. . . from this outside position, to be compelled to return within the circle of knowledge. . . . [That is to say,] we are demanding what is impossible, *and our scepticism can never be refuted*” (87, my emphasis).⁶ Given that this is how the reasonable philosopher must proceed in his philosophical activities, where ought he to begin in his search for irrefutable knowledge that can be regarded as certain?⁷

On this score Russell is adamant: we must begin with sense-data. As he sees it, our knowledge of sense-data is irrefutable: “Some knowledge, such as knowledge of the existence of our sense-data, appears quite indubitable, however calmly and thoroughly we reflect upon it. In regard to such knowledge, philosophical criticism does not require that we should abstain from belief” (87). So the knowledge that we have must rest on a foundation that is beyond repute, and the building blocks of this system of knowledge that we (apparently) are intent on constructing in philosophy must at least include the irrefutable knowledge that we acquired from the analysis of our sense-data.⁸

The foundationalist enterprise articulated here has not escaped the attention of commentators interested in Russell’s thought. Blackwell, to take one example, has drawn attention to the implicit suggestion here by Russell that we attempt to construct an impregnable body of knowledge that is founded on a solid base: “[Russell] hoped to erect an unimpeachable system, which would function deductively, demonstrating our knowledge of the external world” (15).

Russell’s suggestion that philosophy critically investigate the prin-

ciples of daily life and science, his adoption of a methodological procedure similar to that relied on by Descartes, and his view that the resulting system of knowledge be a deductive one lead me to suggest that we classify this view of philosophy as the Russell Cartesian Enterprise.⁹ As with Descartes, Russell is suggesting that philosophers strive for certainty in their endeavors. For Russell we are to search for a set of absolutely true propositions that it would be irrational to doubt.¹⁰ But the knowledge that we acquire, irrespective of its integrity, must consist of ideas and still needs a language for its articulation. Even if we comply with Russell's Cartesian methodological rule in our search for an impeachable system of deductive thought, this thought needs to be somehow articulated. This is where the problems begin to set in according to Russell. Irrespective of the method one adopts to derive workable if not certain knowledge, serious difficulties lie ahead for anyone searching for the truth. For the statements that we rely on to express the knowledge that we possess are defective. Even those statements that we are most familiar with and routinely rely on in our daily lives are beset with difficulties. Let's take a closer look at Russell's views on this important issue on the truth-status of our statements. As the first chapter of *The Problems of Philosophy* addresses this issue in some detail I'll focus on it here.

THE BIG THESIS AND ITS ARGUMENT

The very first paragraph of *The Problems of Philosophy* contains a succinct account of Russell's conception of philosophy and immediately introduces the reader to his views on scepticism and the truth-status of statements of our experiences. For Russell, "philosophy is merely the attempt to answer . . . ultimate questions" (1). So there is nothing mysterious about philosophy. However, it is the *approach* required to pursue the answers to these fundamental questions that is unorthodox and is likely to encounter some resistance. Unfortunately, suggests Russell, the basic questions of philosophy and the statements that we rely on to articulate their possible solutions are fraught with problems, apparently generating much puzzlement. Given this unfortunate state of affairs, individuals intent on solving their philosophical questions must adopt a critical attitude. With this scepticism philosophers will be able to determine what it is "that makes [their philosophical] questions [and solution

statements] puzzling”—a procedure that individuals “in ordinary life and even in the sciences” do not need to be concerned with (1).¹¹

Why then are the questions and the solution statements of philosophy puzzling? One source of the puzzlement—and presumably not the only one, for Russell—are our ideas. More specifically, our ordinary—that is to say, our *nonphilosophical*—ideas generate the confusion (apparently) endemic to philosophy. In *The Problems of Philosophy* Russell attempts to show his readers that the most mundane idea can be regarded as logically defective. As he sees it, even a cursory exposure to philosophical analysis can reveal “all the vagueness and confusion that underlies our *ordinary* ideas” (1, my emphasis).

This suggests an important relationship between philosophical and nonphilosophical (or ordinary) ideas for Russell. If he is intent on defending a thesis on the status of philosophical questions—and thus presumably on the status of philosophical ideas—and if his argument centers on references to ordinary ideas, he must be committed to a thesis on the tight relationship between philosophical ideas and ordinary ideas. For if philosophical questions are puzzling by virtue of the defective ordinary ideas we rely on in nonphilosophical contexts, there must surely be a strong association between philosophical and nonphilosophical (or ordinary) ideas. Russell’s line of reasoning in the opening section of *The Problems of Philosophy* strongly suggests that for him our ordinary ideas are possibly the misleading naïve precursors of our more refined, yet still problematic, philosophical ideas.¹²

From this it follows that Russell views *all* questions as initially vague and confused. So our failure to critically investigate the philosophical and nonphilosophical questions and solution statements that interest us will inevitably leave us in a most pernicious state of confusion. Without the requisite critical analysis, regular citizens—such as the proverbial shop assistants—will continue to face the very same predicament that philosophers (apparently) face. Whether naïve shop assistants or sophisticated philosophers, it is thus incumbent on all of us to critically investigate our questions and solution statements. That is to say, both the philosophical and ordinary languages that we rely on to express our thoughts must be assessed. A more careful scrutiny of these languages will reveal the defects embedded in our ideas.¹³ But why does Russell conclude that our ordinary language and its ideas are problematic?

Russell’s argument for the thesis that our ordinary ideas (and by

implication, their associated ordinary language) are logically defective or "vague and confused" is a variant of the argument from illusion. Consider the famous example that Russell provides in the first chapter of *The Problems of Philosophy*. While writing his chapter, Russell looks around him and remarks on the items that he perceives on the desk, in the room, and beyond. Had we to ask him to tell us what it is that he is looking at, he might reply as follows: "I am looking at a table." Now suppose we press him to be more specific about the object he perceives. Russell's assessment of the object and its properties will be significantly influenced by a number of factors. The bright light from the window might overwhelm him and account for his reply that the table is a faint, dark blur. Or he might be under the impression that it has a smooth top surface when closer inspection reveals otherwise. He might be sick and conclude that the table has a yellow tint, while another person with a different ocular condition might conclude that the table is pink. Someone with poor vision might see a fuzzy, soft object in the corner of the room, while another sees a sharp, precisely defined object. Russell might see an oblong table, while a friend in a different section of the room might argue that the table is square. Talking about observations of color, Russell maintains that

colour is not something which is inherent in the table, but something depending upon the [object] and the spectator and the way the light falls on the [object]. When, in ordinary life, we speak of *the* colour of the table, we only mean the sort of colour which it will seem to have to a normal spectator from an ordinary point of view under usual conditions of light. But the other colours which appear under other conditions have just as good a right to be considered real. (2-3)

So statements about the color of a physical object, such as a table, according to Russell, are difficult to make. Ordinary statements like "The table is white," for instance, that on the surface appear straightforward, mask innumerable variables that need to be taken into account before they are uttered. Because of the perceptual complexities associated with the situations in which objects are perceived, the statements that are produced about these situations are bound to be misleading, if not "likely to be wrong." Ordinary (i.e., nonphilosophical) statements about physical objects and the external world routinely do not contain qualifying clauses on the perceptual environment that governs the observation of an object. With these

statements there are usually no references to the quality of the air, the nature of the light source, the condition of the observer, one's location with respect to the object observed, and so on. An ordinary language statement such as "I am looking at a table," for instance, makes no reference at all to the features of the environment that circumscribed the acts of perception that preceded the production of the statement. But there is no reason why one cannot incorporate references to these features of the perceptual environment and use ordinary language statements to do so. From this it follows that many ordinary language statements could, with equal plausibility, be produced to describe a perceived object. What would characterize these alternative ordinary language statements would be the extent to which they made references to the perceptual conditions that applied at the time of the observation. This diversity of emphasis and, most important, the possibility of diverse observation reports on the same object observed—that is to say, the possibility of different ordinary language observation statements, each one of which can be true—lead Russell to suggest that our (philosophically naïve) grasp of reality is not as secure as we initially thought. Our ordinary ideas of reality are therefore to be regarded as obscure, as the proliferation of equally plausible ordinary language observation statements makes manifest. This fundamental shortcoming becomes apparent every time we rely on ordinary language statements to articulate our experiences about the objects that we have perceived in the external world.

Given this possibility of generating equally plausible diverse ordinary language statements when we attempt to describe the world, we must not assign priority to any one of them. To do so, intimates Russell, would be to act arbitrarily. The multiplicity of possible ordinary language statements that can be produced in response to questions about our observations of the contents and properties of our world thus leads Russell to conclude that the probability of any one statement being correct is very low. As he bluntly puts it, "any statement [i.e., any ordinary language statement] as to what it is that our immediate experiences make us know is very likely to be wrong" (1, my addition).¹⁴

Now it is important to note that the complexities that Russell alludes to in his famous perceptual example, with their concomitant uncertainties, compel him to retreat to a more abstract philosophical plane that he appears to find less uncertain. While knowledge of the (regular) world of tables and chairs is uncertain and marked by con-

fusion—due in large measure to our “confused and vague” ordinary ideas—knowledge of the (nonregular or philosophical) world apparently offers at least the possibility of certainty and clarity. From the (presumably more secure) vantage point of this philosophical world or perspective, statements about perceptual acts can now be produced that are free of the uncertainties that characterize non-philosophical statements. From this (lofty?) philosophical world perceptual acts and their world can now be analyzed and written about with a degree of certainty and precision unheard of in the nonphilosophical world. So Russell’s decision to adopt a philosophical framework according to which individuals that perceive a world are interpreting sense-data that have perhaps been caused by objects in the external world is a decision to choose a framework that Russell assumes “no reasonable man could doubt.” Irrespective of our diverse ordinary ideas and the bewildering range of ordinary language statements of the external world’s objects and properties that can be generated, we know with certainty that perceptual acts involve sensations that provide us with sense-data. And these mental processes and their denizens can be precisely reported on. Exactly how we produce these reports on the sense-data appears to be of little consequence to Russell.¹⁵ However, what does seem significant for him is that the sense-data exist and that they can be studied and described. Throughout his analysis he assumes that their accessibility in perceptual acts cannot be disputed.¹⁶ This division between the two worlds—the uncertain ordinary world of tables, and the far less uncertain philosophical world of sense-data—comes through most forcefully in Russell’s conclusion on perceptual acts. Referring to the perception of his table, he says, “Thus it becomes evident that the real table, if there is one, is not the same as what we immediately experience by sight or touch or hearing. 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” (3–4). The external world with its objects can be known only tentatively, for Russell. However, what is immediately known are the sense-data that we have experienced. And they can be known with certainty. Most importantly for us, the sense-data can be reported on precisely and without any hesitation. Unlike our uncertain ordinary thoughts with their obscure ideas and the misleading ordinary language accounts we tend to produce of physical objects and their properties, the thoughts and accounts of the sense-data that we experience immediately can be precise and certain.

In critically reflecting on his perceptions of the world and on his ability to report accurately on his observations, Russell intimates that he has unearthed a world of definite sense-data that promises the certainty denied him in his other, more mundane nonphilosophical world. The retreat to this world of private sensations and sense-data, as I see it, leads Russell to assume that he has found a world that now offers at least the prospects of certainty and the elimination of confusion—prospects denied those who remain content with the mundane world of physical objects. In short, it appears that Russell's world of private sense-data and sensations is his Philosophical El Dorado—a fantastic world less encumbered by the defects that beset regular perceivers with their ordinary language statements in their external world of physical objects.

But who has access to Russell's Philosophical El Dorado? In principle we all do, provided we set aside our ordinary ideas with their ordinary language statements and attempt to emulate the activities of the enlightened philosophers who are committed to the paradigm of sense-data and sensations. So where does this leave the philosophically naïve shop assistant? Let me close with a few critical thoughts on Russell's account of the predicament of the shop assistant and others left behind in the world of regular physical objects with their ordinary language statements.¹⁷

CONCLUSION—THE SHOP ASSISTANT AND RUSSELL

When Russell outlines his views on philosophy in *The Problems of Philosophy* and articulates his Big Thesis he does so to satisfy the demands of his editor, Gilbert Murray, to produce a popular text that can reach an audience of at least seventy-five thousand. Murray wants Russell to “put all the main problems of [philosophy] in their very lowest terms” (Letter of 19 September 1910). In order to communicate to a wide audience Russell has to produce an accessible text. And what better than an account with a dramatic opening? To secure the attention of the casual reader—individuals such as the proverbial shop assistant—Russell opens his presentation on a startling note: we are unable to speak correctly. Even when we attempt to produce autobiographical accounts of our personal experiences, our statements are likely to be wrong. The language that we have relied on all of our lives is defective, and we have not realized this. But how committed is Russell to these sentiments? Is this startling

opening in the popular *The Problems of Philosophy* truly representative of Russell's considered views on philosophy? Is it, for instance, accurate to regard what Russell says on our ordinary language statements as a philosophical thesis, to be taken seriously, or is he writing here merely for effect?

As is well known, Russell is notorious for his sensationalistic writing, more suited to lightweight journalistic endeavors than to serious philosophical reflection. While we might be reluctant to adopt this stance, his shilling shocker could be placed in this category. The modest book (perhaps 'booklet' is a better word) was produced very quickly, requiring a mere seven weeks for its production from beginning to end.¹⁸ Compared to other, weightier contributions, such as *Principia Mathematica*, "On Denoting," and his *The Principles of Mathematics*, to give a few examples, *The Problems of Philosophy* comes across as a glib, often superficial rendition of important philosophical issues. Should we dismiss it as a lightweight?

What counts, in spite of this uncharitable interpretation, is the fact that Russell refers to *The Problems of Philosophy* as a substantial philosophical text. Despite its popular appeal and its at times racy presentation, especially in the opening pages, Russell confides to Lady Ottoline Morrell:

The shilling shocker really seems to me better worth doing [than my technical work]. It is all puzzling and obscure. For many years I have had absolutely no choice as to work—[so much so] that I have got out of the way of wondering what is best to do. I think really the important thing now is to make the ideas I already have intelligible. And I ought to get away from pedantry. My feelings have changed about this; I did think the technical philosophy that remains for me to do very important indeed. (Letter #286, 13 December 1911)

So Russell wants *The Problems of Philosophy* in its entirety to be taken seriously. What then about the comments in the first chapter of the text, especially those in the first paragraph—the section of the book presumably designed to grab the attention of the philosophically naïve reader? While our natural inclination might be to view these sentences as serious, especially in light of the comments above to Lady Ottoline, the fact that Russell neither repeats nor refers again to this view on the improbability of the ordinary language statements of our experiences in *The Problems of Philosophy* must at least give us pause. To the best of my knowledge this 'thesis'

does not occur again in the shilling shocker. Had the Big Thesis been an important element of Russell's overall conception of philosophy, it would surely have reemerged later in a text that is explicitly devoted to an elaboration of his conception of philosophy. The abrupt appearance, its insubstantial treatment, and its unannounced departure from the text must leave one wondering about the depth of Russell's commitment to the Big Thesis. However, even if we overlook this issue of Russell's views on ordinary language statements, other problems rear their heads and call for attention. Let me close by identify two of them here.

The Big Thesis, if we can now call it that, asserts that ordinary language statements about our experiences are likely to be wrong. Russell clearly wants us to accept that the ordinary language that we rely on daily is used in a misleading manner, and that the statements that we construct from this language to articulate the ideas that we have about the world around us are unlikely to be true. Or to be more accurate, in *The Problems of Philosophy* Russell boldly suggests that it is the philosophically naïve shop assistant that is using language in a misleading manner. The shop assistant, apparently, does not know how to use his or her language. His or her statements are likely to be wrong. Russell, as the rest of us know, and as the initiate to philosophy soon discovers, has already committed himself to the (enlightened and more certain?) philosophical language of sense-data and sensations. And *his* statements are presumably free of the defects that beset those of the shop assistant. Given what follows in the chapter, it becomes apparent that Russell does not have himself in mind when he cavalierly uses the word 'our' in the opening paragraph of *The Problems of Philosophy*. The word 'our' in the opening section of the first chapter—that is to say, in the Big Thesis—thus creates the false impression that the enlightened philosopher and his unsuspecting novice are in the same boat, headed for disaster, with their common defective language.¹⁹

But Russell is not in the same predicament as that of his perceived victim. He has already righted his ways and has adopted 'the requisite' philosophical framework to reach certainty. So the implicit characterization of the relationship that exists between the shop assistant and Russell is inaccurately represented in the opening section of *The Problems of Philosophy*. What we have are two essentially unequal individuals, the one allegedly mired in language and ideas fraught with problems, the other enlightened, within reach of the truth.²⁰ Not to put too fine a point on it, Russell and the shop

assistant are not in the same class, and Russell must surely know this.²¹ For Russell is pursuing truth and certain knowledge, while the shop assistant very likely has different goals in mind when he speaks: to make a living, to communicate with others, to survive at the end of the economic ladder, to vent his feelings, and so on. Unless Russell can provide us with convincing arguments to show that both he and the shop assistant are pursuing similar objectives when they use their statements to describe their experiences, his allegations against ordinary language statements must remain just that—mere complaints, not to be taken too seriously.

However, even if Russell can establish a common motivation between himself and his proverbial shop assistant—something I strongly doubt—a more serious problem lies ahead for him. In his argument against ordinary language statements, Russell is clearly impressed by the prospect that multiple observation reports are possible in any observation instance. Now suppose we agree with Russell's suggestion that many ordinary language observation reports of external objects are possible. Does this, on its own, entitle us to infer that *no* ordinary language statement can be correct? Perhaps more importantly, does this entail that we cannot continue to rely on ordinary language observation reports, and that we ought now to rely on language reports couched in other nonordinary language terms? Are we, for instance, obliged to rely on philosophical language reports, such as Russell's sense-datum reports? I suggest not.

Russell's line of reasoning, if I have understood him correctly, appears to be fallacious. His argument does not preclude the possibility that at least one ordinary language observation report can be true. Ironically, the stress in his argument on the *multiplicity* of the possibilities ought to have alerted him to this distinct possibility. Consider the following analogy. Suppose that we were looking for a talented scrum-half to play for our team. We randomly gather a large crowd from the center of town and begin our search. While the probability that any randomly selected individual from our sample can play scrum-half is likely to be low, the preponderance of candidates, on its own, does not rule out the possibility that we have what we are looking for in our sample. And if we increase the size of the sample, the probability also increases that we will find our scrum-half. In his argument against ordinary language Russell does not allow for this possibility. All of which suggests that the determination that many, if not most, of our ordinary language statements are wrong still leaves open the possibility that some (perhaps

only one) of these statements are correct. So perhaps the ordinary language of the shop assistant, with all its foibles and attendant uncertainties, *can* be relied on to say something—even something true. As Wittgenstein might have reminded Russell, there is no need to fight the windmills of ordinary language because we can say “what we really want to say.”²²

NOTES

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 2001 conference on Russell and Wittgenstein at Linacre College, Oxford University.

1. In his trenchant critique in the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein attempts to dismiss scepticism in one bold stroke. As he sees it “6.51 Scepticism is not *irrefutable*, but obviously nonsensical.” This categorical statement, which fails to distinguish between various forms of scepticism, is characteristic of the pronouncements from the *Tractatus*. The statement is clearly written like this to create maximum effect. This power and intensity notwithstanding, Wittgenstein’s blunt assessment unfortunately fails to do justice to the views of many sceptics, not least of which are those of his mentor, Russell. Not known for his regard for the thoughts of philosophers that came before him, Wittgenstein’s blunt universal pronouncement against sceptics overlooks entirely even the most fundamental distinctions. For instance Hume’s basic division between mitigated and pyrrhic scepticism—a classification recognized by many, even the most enthusiastic of sceptics—is completely ignored in Wittgenstein’s conflation.

2. In his commentary on 6.51—a paragraph explicitly on scepticism, as we have seen—Black refers his readers back to paragraph 5.62 on solipsism, and the (alleged) impossibility of articulating this view in a meaningful manner: The reference from *A Companion to Wittgenstein’s “Tractatus”* is as follows: “6.51 a Scepticism: e.g. the scepticism of the solipsist, cf. 5.62 b.”

3. In his *Autobiography* Russell puts this very dramatically. Wittgenstein’s criticism was “an event of first-rate importance in my life, and affected everything I have done since. I saw he was right, and I saw that I could not hope ever again to do fundamental work in philosophy. My impulse was shattered, like a wave dashed to pieces against a breakwater” (57). Also see the letter to Lady Ottoline Morrell, #1467, 27 July 1917.

4. Nevertheless, Russell leaves the philosophical neophyte with an optimistic thought on the salutary effects of the pursuit of philosophical answers: “Philosophy, though unable to tell us with certainty what is the true answer to the doubts which it raises, is able to suggest many possibilities which enlarge our thoughts and free them from the tyranny of custom” (91). This must surely have bothered Wittgenstein. Would he not think that

Russell was trading on false pretenses here? Was Russell selling snake oil, from Wittgenstein's point of view?

5. I am not sure that we can reconcile in any consistent manner Russell's views here on science and philosophy. If scientific knowledge is not dissimilar to philosophical knowledge, and the latter is essentially characterized by a critical outlook, then surely science must itself be founded on, if not determined by, criticism as well? This apparent inconsistency needs further attention that I cannot provide here.

6. It is illustrative to compare these sentiments and the actual wording here from Russell's *The Problems of Philosophy* with Wittgenstein's assessment of scepticism in the *Tractatus*: "6.51 Scepticism is *not* irrefutable, but obviously nonsensical, when it tries to raise doubts where no questions can be asked." The language relied on by Wittgenstein to express his thoughts parallels that relied on by Russell to articulate his (admittedly) different ideas. The fact that similar words are used in these passages strongly suggests that Wittgenstein intended his to be viewed as a direct counter to the views presented on this issue in *The Problems of Philosophy*. Or is this mere coincidence? I doubt it.

7. Ray Monk, in his influential *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius*, suggests that in 1911 Russell was "far from being the strident rationalist . . . he later became. He was a man in the grip of romance, more appreciative that he had been before, or was to become, of the irrational and emotional side of human character" (38).

This strikes me as an exaggeration and far from the truth. Russell might have been deeply in love in 1911, but when the liaison reached its climax in the summer of that year—at the very time he was writing *The Problems of Philosophy*—Russell was issuing strong warnings against the irrationalism of the absolute sceptic and singing the praises of the moderate sceptic. If Russell was in "the grip of romance . . . appreciative of the irrational . . . side of human character," he would surely not explicitly embrace the methodology of the reasonable mitigated sceptic.

8. Are there other elements of this foundation that Russell has not explicitly referred to here? A more thorough treatment of the issues in this paper would need to consider this question in detail.

9. In *Theory of Knowledge* Russell embraces Descartes' methodological rule and advises his readers to "seek always for what is obvious, and accept nothing else except as the result of an inference from something obvious which has been found previously" (52).

10. This orientation to philosophy underlies Russell's opening sentence in *The Problems of Philosophy*: "Is there any knowledge in the world which is so certain that no reasonable man could doubt it?" (1).

11. The proposal that only philosophers rely on scepticism to discover the source of the bewitchment of the language that they are relying on is surprising, especially in light of the argument that Russell relies on to de-

fend his views. As my analysis below reveals, Russell uses an argument that relies on the close connection between philosophical and ordinary ideas. Yet here he is separating ordinary from philosophical questions/language and driving a wedge between them. Surely *both* philosophers and regular citizens can recognize the problems with ordinary language?

12. I must thank Ken Blackwell for drawing my attention to this possibility.

13. This proposal has wide implications for Russell's account of philosophy. I am unable to explore them here.

14. I am not concerned here with the validity of Russell's argument on this issue. The shift from remarks on the possibility of many statements about an object to the suggestion that they or that any one is "very likely to be wrong" appears unwarranted and could possibility undermine Russell's conclusion here on the accuracy of our perceptual reports. This issue is considered briefly in the conclusion.

15. Russell briefly runs through a few possible views on the interpretations of sense-data, invoking the views of Berkeley and Leibniz in the process.

16. What are sense-data? Russell reifies them as things, unlike sensations that are processes of our consciousness: "Let us give the name of 'sense-data' to the things that are immediately known in sensation: such things as colours, sounds, smells, hardness, roughness, and so on. We shall give the name 'sensation' to the experience of being immediately aware of these things. Thus whenever we see a colour, we have a sensation *of* the colour, but the colour itself is a sense-datum, not a sensation" (1971, 4).

17. The Platonism endemic to this argument is striking. As an enlightened philosopher Russell views his task as the search for a (higher) world of stable objects amenable to rigorous investigation: a world of pristine entities that can be described and reported on with the precision undreamt of in the (lower) ordinary world.

18. From roughly 24 June to 12 August 1911. See my article, "A Lady, Her Philosopher and a Contradiction" for more on this point.

19. Surely Russell is not attempting to say that we cannot use ordinary language correctly—that there is something fundamentally faulty about it? Notice that we could use the ordinary language to talk about its defects, and that we can specify some of the courses of action to take to rectify the defects in our ordinary language. So how problematic can it be? What has Russell to say on these important issues? Unfortunately, nothing in *The Problems of Philosophy*.

20. This account of the relationship between Russell and his naïve reader is reminiscent of that between the Bodhisattva and the unenlightened masses that have not committed to the four noble truths.

21. Of course, the naïve shop assistant would only realize this once he

or she had done a little philosophy and worked his or her way through Russell's arguments on sense-data and sensations. But then the assistant would no longer be philosophically naïve, having experienced at least a tincture of philosophy.

22. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, 51e.

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