The Problems of Philosophy Study Guide

The Problems of Philosophy by Bertrand Russell

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BOOKRAGS

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Plot Summary

Bertrand Russell, among the greatest philosophers of the 20th century, was among the most prolific public intellectuals of the same. He wrote many books and some of them tried to introduce the discipline of philosophy to the public. The aim of The Problems of Philosophy is just that: introduce the basic problems of philosophy to the interested layman.

Russell does not address all of the problems of philosophy; instead, he focuses on those fundamental questions on which Russell believed he could say something positive and constructive. Thus, he gives his own views and criticizes others. The result of this strategy means that Russell focuses more on epistemology, the study of knowledge, and less on metaphysics, the theory of what exists.

Russell's writings extend over seven decades and The Problems of Philosophy was originally written in 1912; however, it was reprinted throughout Russell's life and thereafter. It contains, as a result, his system of logical atomism, which follows his allegiance to British Hegelianism and pre-dates his future influences, such as his infamous encounters with Ludwig Wittgenstein. Russell changed his views on many matters, and quite often. Thus, it is important for the reader to understand that the views Russell defends here are only a snapshot of his philosophical views.

The book is divided into fifteen chapters. The first chapter, "Appearance and Reality" distinguishes between what appears to us, sensations, and reality, the furniture of the world and the sense-data that is produced by them. Chapter II, "The Existence of Matter" gives an argument for the existence of matter from the evidence presented to us of it by the senses. Chapter III, "The Nature of Matter" tries to describe the nature of matter as opposed to the realm of mental entities and the realm of abstract ideas.

Chapter IV addresses and criticizes the previously dominant philosophy of Idealism and Chapter V makes the—crucial for Russell—distinction between knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge by description. Chapter VI explains the nature of induction and Chapter VII gives a theory for how we come to know general principles. Chapter VIII explains how a priori knowledge—or knowledge derived apart from experience—is possible.

Chapter IX explains the world of universals—or the abstract objects that correspond to our "type" terms in language, such as whiteness, horsehood, and so on. Chapter X explains how we can know about universals and Chapter XI analyzes the notion of "intuitive" knowledge or knowledge that is self-evidently known. Chapter XII addresses Russell's correspondence theory of truth, while Chapter XIII distinguishes between knowledge, error and probable opinion.

Chapter XIV argues that philosophical knowledge has limits and that without experience, it cannot say much about the nature of the world. Chapter XV argues that philosophy is, despite its inability to produce certainty about its subject matter, still of

profound value. Thus Russell spends most of his book introducing perennial philosophical questions, criticizing popular answers and giving his own view. The penultimate chapter explains the limits of this practice and the final chapter explains its benefits.

Chapter 1, Appearance and Reality

Chapter 1, Appearance and Reality Summary and Analysis

An age-old philosophical problem is whether there is any knowledge in the world so certain that a reasonable man cannot doubt it. Philosophy must proceed critically, not dogmatically, in answering these questions. In daily life, we often assume things to be true that are really full of contradictions. When we look for certainty, therefore, we often think it is appropriate to doubt broadly, particularly our immediate experiences. For instance, considering a table, to the eye it has one appearance but physics describes its reality quite differently.

These differences may seem unimportant but they are not, for instance, they are not unimportant to the painter. The painter finds the table brown but the physicist says that there is no real color in the table, but is rather just the way certain atoms appear to us. Texture functions similarly, and shapes as well. All the senses are subject to these problems, not just sight. So the real table seems to be beyond the senses. This leads us to ask whether there is a real table and if there is, what sort of object it is.

Russell calls "sense-data" those things known immediately to sensation, such as colors, sounds, and smells. However, "sensations" are the experience of being immediately aware of things. When we see color, we have a sensation of the color, but the color is sense-data. To know about the table, we must know it by means of the sense-data, but the table is not the sense-data nor is the sense-data a direct property of the table.

Real tables then, are "physical objects," so how does sense-data relate to physical objects? All physical objects are "matter," so we must now ask, "Is there any such thing as matter and if so, what is it?" Bishop Berkeley first brought out these questions and sought to prove that matter does not exist but merely minds and their ideas. He shows that the existence of matter can be denied without absurdity.

When we ask whether matter exists, we sometimes ask only whether matter exists as opposed to mind and in this way Berkeley asks the question. Berkeley believes that all is mind, and nothing matter. However, he thinks that objects persist beyond human awareness such that there must be some mind that thinks them all into being that is omnipresent. For Berkeley, that being is God.

"Idealists" think that there is nothing real except minds and their ideas; some see matter as a series of ideas itself and others, like Leibniz, see matter as composed of more rudimentary minds. However, in Russell's opinion, idealists deny matter and admit it at once. Both Berkeley and Leibniz believe in a real table but only deviate from common sense in explaining what the nature of the object is.

What we have seen so far is that if we take a common object known by the senses, the senses do not immediately tell us the truth about it. Thus, "appearance" and "reality" are not the same thing. However, if reality is not what appears, then how can we know what is real? Doubt suggests that there might be no table. Philosophy may not be able to answer these questions but at least it can suggest that the answer is difficult.

Chapter 2, The Existence of Matter

Chapter 2, The Existence of Matter Summary and Analysis

We must now ask whether there is matter in the world. Objects can only exist independently of minds if there is matter. Before beginning, Russell tries to find a starting point. What we do not doubt is the existence of sense-data, so the psychological is not being questioned. Descartes, the founder of modern philosophy, invented the method of systematic doubt to see what he knew for certain. He said famous, "I think therefore I am" and found his existence absolutely certain. He then tried to build up knowledge all over again.

Russell cautions against the argument, because we are not sure we are the same person over time. The real Self is as hard to arrive at as the table. It seems only certain that there is a momentary self. Only particular thoughts and feelings have primitive certainty. However, can we regard these sense-data as signs of the existence of physical objects? Common sense says yes but philosophy suggests the question is not so easy.

Sense-data alone presents a problem because it differs between people but presumably physical objects do not. Sense-data are private, and physical objects are thought to be public. Some will say the sense-data between persons is similar enough, but the problem of sense-data arises again with respect to believing in other people. If sense-data were enough, why should I believe in others? So we cannot appeal to them either. We really cannot prove the existence of things other than ourselves and our experience but it is a common-sense hypothesis for which there can be evidence.

The best hypothesis is the simplest and the simplest hypothesis is that there really are physical objects; that there are physical objects explains our experience and avoids other odd problems.

We do not come to belief in the external world by argument but find the belief in ourselves once we reflect. The belief is instinctive. The belief does not admit of difficulty, so we can continue believing it. We might want a stronger conclusion but philosophy often shows that there is none to be had.

Knowledge must be built up from instinctive beliefs. Philosophy merely shows us the hierarchy of our instinctive beliefs and then harmonizes them into one system. Perhaps all of our beliefs are mistaken but we could not have a reason to reject such a belief except by means of another belief. So if we organize our instinctive beliefs in the right way, we will have done all we can. Philosophy can at least help us make our beliefs coherent.

Chapter 3, The Nature of Matter

Chapter 3, The Nature of Matter Summary and Analysis

Supposing matter exists, what is its nature? Physical science gives an incomplete but respectable answer. It seems to assume that everything material can be reduced to motions and wave-motions specifically. Although, wave-motions and things like light are not identical, the latter can be explained in terms of the former. When we save that light is a wave, we mean that waves cause the physical sensation of life. This is true not only of colors and sounds but of space as well.

Physical objects and sense-data are not the same thing; instead, the former cause the latter. The physical objects in science are those that cause such sensations. Physical science and common sense assume that there is one public physical space where all physical objects are located. However, what can we know about it? We know only what is required to secure the correspondence between objects and the sense-data they produce. What we learn about the physical world is about the relations between parts of physical objects and sense-data. However, we do not penetrate to the intrinsic nature of sense-data.

We also discover relations between how things seem to be and how they are; sometimes the two correspond and other times they do not. Again, we are not acquainted directly with qualities in physical objects but rather with the quality in the object that makes it look blue or red. The most natural hypothesis given visual sense-data will be that while physical objects exist, they are not exactly like sense-data but often similar. Other theories cannot be refuted but can be shown to be groundless.

There are probably no decisive arguments which show that if matter is real it must have a certain nature. Many see matter as mental but they cannot be decisively refuted. All we can do is refute their reasons.

Chapter 4, Idealism

Chapter 4, Idealism Summary and Analysis

"Idealism" holds that whatever exists or can be known to exist is mental. There are several forms of the view. Some may see the view as silly but we have already seen that sense-data and reality differ and only mostly correspond. Idealism is usually defended by pushing on this distinction. It is hard to know about anything other than ideas, so maybe ideas are the basis of reality. Berkeley made an argument of this sort.

However, the reader should understand that Berkeley calls anything that is immediately known an "idea." If the world is composed of ideas, then to exist is to be perceived. Berkeley admits objects persist when no human is aware of it, that God is aware of it in any event. All our perceptions are partial participation in God's perceptions.

The argument has some difficulties. First, the word "idea" usually produces confusions. We often think of ideas as essentially in the mind of another. However, Berkeley should really just say therefore that all that is in our mind is the idea of a tree, not that the tree is an idea in our mind.

Berkeley was right to treat sense-data as subjective and mind-dependent, but Berkeley wanted to prove that anything immediately knowable must be in a mind and the arguments about the dependence of sense-data does not speak to this question. We must distinguish between what we experience and the object of our experience. Russell suggests that the reader distinguish between the act of apprehension through sense-data and the object of apprehension. Confusing the two is what leads to Berkeleyian idealism.

Russell ends by carefully distinguishing between knowledge of truths and knowledge of things, and the two can come apart. I can know that the Emperor of China exists without having met him.

Chapter 5, Knowledge by Acquaintance and Knowledge by Description

Chapter 5, Knowledge by Acquaintance and Knowledge by Description Summary and Analysis

Russell now examines the distinction between knowledge of things and knowledge of truths. He calls knowledge of things knowledge by acquaintance, and is simpler than knowledge of truths and independent of it. Knowledge by description is knowledge of truths. We have acquaintance with anything we are directly aware of without inference or knowledge of truths mediating. Knowledge of the table as a physical object is not direct knowledge but derived by acquaintance with the sense-data composing the appearance of the table. Acquaintance generates all knowledge of things and truths.

We are acquainted with sense-data but they are not the only things we are acquainted with, for otherwise we would know nothing about the past. Instead, we sometime are acquainted with abstract ideas or "universals." We sometimes extend sense-data to memory and we also extend it to introspection, or being aware of what we are aware of, self-consciousness. In this way, we know about mental things. Self-consciousness is not consciousness of self, but of thoughts and feelings. So when we are acquainted with seeing the sun, we are acquainted with our seeing the sun.

Universals are general ideas or types, such as whiteness, diversity, and brotherhood. Every complete sentence must have at least one universal term, since all verbs have a universal meaning. Awareness of universals is called conceiving, and the universal we are aware of is a concept.

Some of the things we are acquainted with are descriptions, phrases of the form "a so-and-so" or "the so-and-so." A "definite" description is of the first sort, not merely of "a man" but of "the man with the iron mask" which picks out a definite person. We know something by description when we know that "the so-and-so" has such and such a property. We can know these things without direct sense-data, such as that "Mr. A is a Unionist candidate for this constituency, and no one else is." Common words, even proper names, are usually descriptions. Then Russell gives some examples. Names of places are included, even faraway places.

Much of our knowledge of these descriptions starts with particulars but moves away from them gradually. Those who knew Bismarck were acquainted with him, and then there are those who know of him only through history, and so on. Thus, knowledge by description is ultimately reducible to knowledge by acquaintance. Thus Russell argues that any proposition we understand is composed of parts with which we are acquainted. Russell thinks he can meet the objections to this view.

Knowledge by description allows us to move beyond our private experience. We can only know truths wholly composed of terms we experience in acquaintance, but from this narrow realm, we can move very far.

Chapter 6, On Induction

Chapter 6, On Induction Summary and Analysis

We are directly acquainted with sense-data and ourselves. However, we can go beyond our sense data by drawing inferences. To do this properly, we must have knowledge of general principles of proper inference. Russell illustrates one valid case with the belief that the sun will rise tomorrow. None of us doubts it because it is validly inferred from past experience. However, the conclusion that the sun will rise is not proved by past experience; after all, the sun could explode. Instead, we proceed by "induction." We see that it is probable that the sun will rise.

We often use induction to infer causation. When we see that factors are associated, we often think that one is caused by another. Animals make such inferences as well. Sometimes the ties are misleading but many ties in fact indicate causes. However, for any belief in stable causation, we must acknowledge the belief in the uniformity of nature, that causation proceeds stably from time to time and across space. Science habitually assumes it as a working hypothesis, but why should we hold this principle?

We cannot prove that nature is uniform, but instead simply assume it and learn to live with near certainty. So we must rely on probability. Probability can often generate knowledge; if it did not, we would have practically no knowledge at all. Thus, Russell generates a principle of induction, which holds that when A and B are associated we can validly infer that they will probably be associated in the future and that when we see one we will probably see the other. As the cases of association increase, our certainty can increase. We can make similar inferences with respect to general laws.

The principle of induction cannot be disproved by experience. Since it specifies when we can have probabilistic beliefs, counterexamples via improbable events do not refute it. However, experience cannot prove the principle either. The general principles of science are believed because of their explanatory power and on not much more than this. Thus, all knowledge is rooted in experience but also requires the assumption of some a priori principles.

Chapter 7, On Our Knowledge of General Principles

Chapter 7, On Our Knowledge of General Principles Summary and Analysis

Induction is required for most of our beliefs but it is not proved by experience. It turns out that there are other such general principles that have the same statue. There are other principles of inference that cannot be similarly proved.

Sometimes we arrive at knowledge of general principles by seeing some particular application of the principle, seeing the particularity is irrelevant and then seeing the general proof. We might learn that two and two are four in this way. The fact that two apples and two apples are four apples is not true because the objects in question are apples. Some laws are deductive; if the premises are true, then the conclusion follows immediately.

These include the "Laws of Thought", Identity: "Whatever is, is", Contradiction: "Nothing can both be and not be", and Excluded Middle: "Everything must either be or not be." These principles are self-evident. They are not really laws of thought but ways the world are that our thinking most follow if it is to be good thinking. There are probabilistic laws of the same sort.

It appears that the rationalists of old were correct to think that there are principles known not by experience at least in these cases. However, our learning of the principles still comes from experience. We infer the principles from our experience, and so we probably do not have innate ideas. The empiricists, who believed that all knowledge came from experience, were right to say that we cannot know that something exists save by experience.

Although "a priori" knowledge—knowledge not derived from experience—is not all of the purely logical sort. For instance, we have knowledge of ethical value, whether something is good or not. Though it is not known empirically, we say that pain is bad. These facts cannot be proved by experience. All mathematics is a priori as well, including geometry. Russell contrasts this with empirical generalizations, such as that all men are mortal. We infer this from the fact that all men die that we know of.

In many cases, we can infer general truths from others without knowing the particulars. Thus, this reasoning, called "deduction" is quite useful. Some think that deduction never yields new knowledge but it appears to do so. However, only a priori facts can be known deductively, and general empirical facts can only be known inductively.

So in conclusions, some facts are known a priori but not others. Yet it seems odd to think there can be a priori knowledge. Kant brought up this question and it is difficult and historically important.

Chapter 8, How A Priori Knowledge is Possible

Chapter 8, How A Priori Knowledge is Possible Summary and Analysis

Kant is thought to be one of the greatest modern philosophers. He was interested in how a priori knowledge was possible and how we could know things about the world. He also wanted to know whether we could have a priori knowledge of the world rather than just empty "analytic" definitional truths about it. Some prior to Kant thought all a priori knowledge was knowledge by definition. Hume, one of Kant's predecessors, thought this.

Kant wondered how pure mathematics was possible. Empiricists say that it comes from observation, but that seems wrong because we cannot learn exceptionless truths from nature. We can also know the truths of the ideas from a single case. All experience is particular but some knowledge is general.

Kant thought we should distinguish between features of objects in themselves and sense-data, or the "noumenal" and "phenomenal" realms. Kant thought we had no true knowledge of things in themselves. He thought that a priori categories were mere categories of thought and that experience was structured by these categories of thought. True reality is essentially unknowable. In this way, Kant tried to reconcile rationalists and empiricists.

Kant faces a problem though. It looks as though he thinks that the truths of logic and mathematics are truths of thought and not of the world, but they seem to be truths about the world. They apply to things whether we think of them or not. However, many still see the a priori as in some sense mental and as laws of thought.

However, it seems that these laws of thought are not mere ways the mind works but laws the mind must follow to know things about the world. The same argument applies to a priori judgment in general; when we judge that two and two are four, we are not making judgments about our thoughts. Some, following Kant, have even thought that relations were mere mental entities, but this seems wrong as well.

Chapter 9, The World of Universals

Chapter 9, The World of Universals Summary and Analysis

Relations between objects and beings appear to differ from themselves and yet we have knowledge of them. How can this be? Plato had a theory of this; if we think of justice, it is a relation between persons. Since we think that relations of justice sometimes obtain between persons, there must be an objective, abstract fact about what justice is. Plato calls this pure essence a "Form." However, the Form of Justice is not identical with an instance of justice. The Form is also eternal, immutable and cannot be destroyed.

Plato accordingly believed in a eternal world beyond the sensible one that was the most real world, not a mere shadow of the true world as this one is. Plato's philosophy then sometimes passes into mysticism, but Russell wishes to avoid this. A Form is a universal, not a particular but it seems to be an external object. Language requires such universals, as Russell has earlier claims. Sometimes we miss this.

Many have thought that relations like Forms cannot exist (forms are relations because they relate the members of a class of things, like just acts, and makes them all just). Some drew from this that only one thing exists in the universe; this view is called monism and was believed by Spinoza, among others. However, it seems absurd to deny that there are universals, since we could not even make sense of qualities, like "being red" without them, since many particulars can share in being red at the same time.

Russell continues to resist understanding universals as properties of the mind, since we think there really are genuine relations. That all triangles are triangles is not a mere fact about the mind. Russell points out that Berkeley and Hume could not understand this because of their empiricism. Propositions like "Edinburgh is north of London" relate to places and so requires a relation, "North" which is a universal. We think the proposition is true and so we implicitly assume that there must be an abstract entity which aides in making it true.

However, the relation "North" seems to exist in a different way than Edinburgh and London. It does not exist in any place, for instance. It is not in space, or time, and not mental or material, yet it exists. This peculiarity is why many have assumed that universals are mental. Some of us only think that things exist when they are in space and time. However, the world of universals seems to exist. Russell suggests that it may be described as the world of "being" as opposed to the world of existence where everything in space and time exists. However, if we distinguish between these realms we must consider how they are related to one another and how universals are known.

Chapter 10, On Our Knowledge of Universals

Chapter 10, On Our Knowledge of Universals Summary and Analysis

Our knowledge of universals can be divided into knowledge by acquaintance and description. Knowledge of universals by acquaintance are represented by universals like white, red, sweet, and sour. They are derived from sense-data and can be called "sensible qualities."

However, there are also relations not exemplified by sense data, such as those which hold between parts of a complex sense-datum. We derive this knowledge from abstract and then acquaint ourselves with the universal relation. "Past and "present" function similarly. Some relations are ones we are immediately aware of, such as the "greater than" relation that we can immediately see.

Russell argues that all a priori knowledge deals exclusively with the relations of universals. This proposition will help us understand how we learn a priori facts. Russell suggests that this principle may appear to have counterexamples, such as when all members of a class are related to other classes, but thinks that we can know the truth of the relations between the classes without the particulars. In fact, it could not be otherwise since we could not learn the relation holds from experience alone.

Let us contrast a genuine a priori judgment with an empirical generalization like "all men are mortals." We understand the meaning of the proposition once we understand the universals of "man" and "mortal" but we must be acquainted with the human race to know the meaning of the term.

The difference between a prior propositions and empirical generalizations comes not in the meaning of the proposition but the evidence for it. We learn "all men are mortal" from experience, but not a priori truths. Some a priori truths we can grasp without knowing a single instance of it, such as that the number of integers is infinite. The truth is certain but we cannot give an instance.

Some say this knowledge is impossible but knowing general propositions is vital to knowing much of what we know. It is required, for instance, to believe in the minds of others. Now we can survey our sources of knowledge. We distinguish knowledge of things and knowledge of truths. In each, there are two types, one immediate and one derivative. Knowledge of things is acquaintance and can be of particulars and universals. We are acquainted with particulars through sense-data but not universals.

Our derivative knowledge of things is known through description but reduces to acquaintance and knowledge of truths. Knowledge of truths is intuitive or self-evident

and these include abstract logical and mathematical principles and some ethical principles. Derivative knowledge comes from everything that can be deduced from self-evident truths and self-evident principles of deduction.

All our knowledge of truths depends on intuition and so we must consider the nature of intuitive knowledge in the next chapter. Intuitive knowledge faces the challenge of error: sometimes our intuitions seem in error. So there is a deep problem.

Chapter 11, On Intuitive Knowledge

Chapter 11, On Intuitive Knowledge Summary and Analysis

Many believe that everything we believe we should be able to prove or show to be probable. This view is largely reasonable, since many of our common beliefs can be inferred from other beliefs. However, often the original reason is forgotten. After a long string of questions, we will be driven to a point where there are no further reasons. Something will be the ground and will be obvious.

Self-evidence is not limited to only those principles that can be proved, however, such as ethical principles. There are also general principles and sensations, and sensations seem obvious in two ways—in the existence of a sense-datum and its general features. Memory judgments are also intuitive, although it is often fallacious. Some worry that memory's fallible nature threatens the reliability of intuitive evidence but it need not, as it can come in degrees. So self-evidence has degrees. Those propositions known with the highest degree of self-evidence are infallible.

Chapter 12, Truth and Falsehood

Chapter 12, Truth and Falsehood Summary and Analysis

Our knowledge of truth has an opposite—error. We cannot have erroneous knowledge of things, since whatever we are acquainted with must be actually something. Knowledge by description therefore admits of a dualism. However, often false beliefs are held as strongly as true ones, so how are we to know whether our beliefs are in error? There is no totally satisfactory answer, but let us first understand what we mean by truth and falsehood.

Three conditions must be met by any good theory of truth: (1) the theory of truth must admit of falsehood; (2) if there were no beliefs, there would be no falsehood or truth; (3) the truth or falsehood of a belief always depends on something outside the belief itself. Thus, if we say that "Charles I died in his bed" is true, we admit that it can be false, that it could be believed to be true and that the truth of the belief depends on facts external to the belief.

Many hold then that truth consists in correspondence between belief and fact. This is the correspondence theory of truth. Some worry about this definition because thought can never escape itself and see for sure whether the correspondence holds. Thus, some have defined truth as coherence, and so falsehood occurs when a body of belief s fails to cohere.

The coherent theory has two problems. First, there may be more than one coherent body of beliefs, that are incompatible with each other, and truth cannot be this way. Second, it looks like the meaning of "coherence" presupposes that the laws of logic are true, but if the law of non-contradiction was subjected to coherence, we would find that supposing it false would show that nothing is incoherent with anything else. The laws of logic provide a framework within which coherence is applied and cannot be proved by the test.

Coherence is a good test of truth, but not the meaning and so we must adopt the correspondence theory.

Allowing falsehood makes it impossible to see belief as a relation of the mind to a single object. Relations of minds to objects cannot be false. Instead, beliefs must be beliefs about objects via propositions, which can be true or false. Some relations need three terms and believing seems to be such a relation. If X believes that Y is Z, then X affirms the proposition "Y is Z" and relates his mind to the fact that "Y is Z" by means of the proposition.

Thus subjects (those that believe) and objects (those believed about) are knit together in this way. A belief is true when it corresponds to a certain complex of this sort and

false otherwise. If X believes the proposition that Y is Z and there is no fact that Y is Z, then X believes a false proposition, that Y is Z. Truth and falsehood are properties of beliefs but also are extrinsic to beliefs. Truth and falsehood are relations between beliefs, propositions, and facts.

Minds do not create truth or falsehood, but beliefs. When beliefs are created, the mind cannot make them true or false, on the main. Facts make beliefs true.

Chapter 13, Knowledge, Error and Probable Opinion

Chapter 13, Knowledge, Error and Probable Opinion Summary and Analysis

We must now ask how we know what is true and false, and so we must understand what "knowing" means and this is quite difficult. We might think that knowledge is true belief, but this seems wrong, since we can believe true things without evidence or at random. I could believe that there are thirty-two thousand hairs on my head at random, but I would not know it even if I guessed correctly.

We also cannot call true beliefs knowledge when they are deduced through bad reasoning processes. So if I come to believe a true fact about the future from a fortune teller, I do not thereby know that the fact obtains because the fortune teller uses poor reasoning processes.

We must know more than what is deduced from true premises, since we have non-inferential knowledge, such as intuitive knowledge. So there will be intuitive and derivate knowledge. However, even derivative knowledge is not all known deductively, such as beliefs proved by reading. Derivate knowledge can result from intuitive knowledge even by mere association so long as there is a valid logical connection that we could make ourselves aware of by reflection.

Intuitive knowledge poses a problem. Knowledge seems infected with doubt. The correspondence theory of truth allows self-evident truths. We might have knowledge of self-evident truth through a complex judgment or by acquaintance, such as perception. The two types of self-evident—absolute and partial—can be distinguished.

A truth is absolutely self-evident when we are fully acquainted with the fact that corresponds to the truth; however, while this self-evidence guarantees truth, we cannot be absolutely certain since we know that we might be wrong or commit an error.

Partial self-evidence belongs to judgment and does not come from direct perception of a complex whole; it has degrees, instead. We should trust higher degrees more than lower. Derivative knowledge contains premises that require some degree of self-evidence. So, intuitive knowledge seems trustworthy to the degree of its self-evidence.

When we firmly believe propositions and they are true, we have knowledge, intuitive or inferred. Believing otherwise is error. Sometimes we have beliefs that are neither knowledge nor error, and this is probable opinion. Most of what we think is knowledge is in fact probable opinion.

Probable opinion is aided by coherence, which is a nice criterion. Individual probable opinions can be harmonized such that as a whole they are more probable than any one individually. Scientific hypotheses become probable in this way. However, organizing probable opinions can never, by itself, produce knowledge.

Chapter 14, The Limits of Philosophical Knowledge

Chapter 14, The Limits of Philosophical Knowledge Summary and Analysis

Many philosophers believe that they can show, a priori, that, for instance, the fundamental doctrines of religious or the rationality of the universe are true. Russell thinks this is in vain. Philosophical knowledge has limits.

The great representative of the view Russell wishes to critique is that of G.W.F. Hegel. On Russell's interpretation, Hegel believes that everything short of the Whole is fragmentary and cannot exist without the rest of the world. From any part of reality, Hegel thought he could see what reality itself must be. The whole is a coherent whole such that one part can be inference from another.

When we forget that all ideas are incomplete or excessively abstract, we will be led to contradiction. Hegel therefore believes in the truest representation of the world, currently beyond us, known as the "Absolute Idea". It is complete, has no opposite and needs no further development. The Absolute Idea describes Absolute Reality. Absolute Reality forms a single harmonious system that is perfectly good and both wholly rational and wholly spiritual.

Russell notes that Hegelianism contains something sublime but when the arguments for the view are examined, they display great confusion and many unsupported assumptions. For instance, Hegelianism holds that what is incomplete cannot be self-subsistent. Those that have relations to things outside of themselves must reference things outside its nature. Man is one of these creatures. Thus, the Hegelian understanding of the nature of all things is that they are relations. However, this is confused. We can know much about a thing without knowing its nature and we can understand its nature apart from other things. We need not know a thing to know its relations. This is one way in which the Hegelian system falls apart.

Other examples of philosophical systems proposing to deduce the nature of the world have similar errors; Russell discusses Kant's proof that space and time were impossible and so must be subjective. His argument followed from his conception of infinity but mathematicians have shown his view to be false.

Attempts to understand the universe through the a priori have broken down. Logic has not become the great liberator of the imagination. Logic has shown how many unknown possibilities that go beyond common sense exist. However, knowledge is still limited to experience. We understand the universe through scientific deduction. Philosophical knowledge is not essentially distinct from scientific knowledge; it also grounds the sciences and makes sense of its root principles.

Philosophy is a criticism of knowledge but we need not be total skeptics and place ourselves outside all knowledge to do so. Instead, we start from small disputes and work out way outward. Philosophical criticism does not require suspension of belief altogether. However, it will lead to the rejection of some cherished truths. Philosophy ultimately can do many things but one must be aware of its limits.

Chapter 15, The Value of Philosophy

Chapter 15, The Value of Philosophy Summary and Analysis

Russell has reviewed, briefly, some of the major problems of philosophy; he now wants to consider what philosophy's value is and why it should be studied. For some consider philosophy "useless trifling" and involving argument about matters that no one can know about.

To understand philosophy's value we must first free ourselves from the prejudices of the "practical man" who only sees his material needs and not the needs of the mind. Philosophy only generates goods of the mind. It aims primarily at knowledge, although it cannot really maintain that it has provided definite answers to certain questions. As soon as any definite knowledge is to be had in a branch of philosophy, it becomes science. Physics was once part of natural philosophy, for instance.

Philosophy may not definitively answer its core questions, but it keeps alive the hope of discovering such answers and makes those who practice philosophy aware of the importance of the questions. However, philosophy's value comes from this uncertainty. It liberates men from the prejudice of common sense and the habitual beliefs of his time. Philosophy allows us to transcend the narrow confines of our time, and so we trade certainty for knowledge of more possibility of what might be true.

Philosophy also has value because it contemplates great objects. It goes beyond private interests and instinct. Philosophy provides a kind of peaceful contemplation that escapes the business of the world. It adapts the Self to its objects and not the other way around. Philosophy does not see the world as a means to its end and thereby can produce greatness of soul.

Philosophy ultimately unifies the Self with the not-Self. True philosophical contemplation finds satisfaction in enlarging the not-Self and again, moves beyond the personal and private.

The free intellect hopes to see as God might see, beyond the here and now, hopes and fears, and so on. It will value the abstract and universal knowledge in the world. The freedom that derives from this contemplation will help to preserve freedom and impartiality in the world. Philosophy makes us citizens of the universe. We are truly free in this citizenship.

Philosophy should be studied not for definite answers, since they cannot be known, but because of the value of the questions themselves and the fact that they enlarge our conception of the possible and increase intellectual imagination. The mind is rendered greater and can become one with the universe that is the mind's highest good.

Characters

Bertrand Russell

Bertrand Arthur William Russell (1872-1970) was one of the most important philosophers of the 20th century. Russell was a British philosopher, social critic, logician and essays; his most important philosophical work was in logic and analytical logic. He is well-known for his assertion that mathematics is reducible to logic, his philosophy of language (particularly his theory of definite descriptions) and logical atomism.

Russell is widely regarded, along with his colleague, G.E. Moore, as a primary founder of analytic philosophy. He is second only to Kurt Gödel in his status as a great 20th century logician. He wrote an enormous number of books and his subject matters were not confined to philosophy and logic; he wrote on education, history, political theory and religion and won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1950. He lived to be 97 years old, and was a famous intellectual for over seventy years.

The Problems of Philosophy is one of Russell's most important popular works. Written in 1912, it outlines Russell's approach to epistemology, particularly his position on the famous dispute between empiricists, who believed that all knowledge derives from experience, and rationalists, who hold that some knowledge derives from reason alone. He also laces the book with clear, logical prose characteristic of his legendary status as a logician. Russell also emphasizes the important of employing scientific knowledge and scientific methodology in philosophy, an emphasis that remains influential to this day.

Immanuel Kant

The Problems of Philosophy is not about any one person. Instead, it is about the great philosophical problems. However, by way of introducing these problems, Russell discusses a variety of important philosophers. He seems most influenced by Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), an 18th-century German philosopher. Kant is perhaps the most influential philosopher of the modern period, whose works continue to be deeply influential to this day.

Kant is important in large part because of his attempt in The Critique of Pure Reason to reconcile rationalism, the view that there is substantive a priori knowledge of the world innate within us and empiricism, the view that all knowledge is founded in experience. Kant argued that a priori knowledge was formed through the categories of the mind organizing sense-data in a particular way. Empirical knowledge is impossible without the rational categories of thought and vice versa.

Russell makes great use of Kantian methodology in The Problems of Philosophy. Kant thought it was very important to understand how we think and how we use terms, and wanted to reconcile a priori knowledge and empirical knowledge. Russell is interested in the same questions. However, Russell resists the view that our knowledge of universals

is knowledge of categories of thought. He thinks that universals are mind-independent facts. However, he believes that universals and particulars (the latter which always comes through experience and the former which cannot be learned from experience alone) are always combined in full-blown experience and language.

G. W. F. Hegel

19th century philosopher who taught that all that exists is ideas that are all part of a single Absolute whole. Hegelianism was popular in England in Russell's youth and he had once held to the position but in The Problems of Philosophy, he argues against it.

Empiricists

Those philosophers who argued that all knowledge begins in experience. Russell partly agrees, but still thinks that we have knowledge of universals that are not themselves empirical facts.

Descartes

Famous 17th century early modern philosopher who invented the radical method of "critical doubt" where one doubted everything one could know and then built knowledge up from indubitable foundations. Russell does not think we need to doubt so radically but he does think that all knowledge should be built up from indubitable foundations.

Rationalists

Those philosophers who argued that much could be known about reality from pure reason alone. Russell thinks that there is a priori knowledge but he thinks it is ultimately inferred from experience.

Plato

The ancient Greek philosophers who believed that abstract entities known as "Forms" existed independently of the mind. Russell believes in a related idea—universals, which exist mind-independently.

The Philosophical Man

The philosophical man transcends his particular time and place and unifies himself with the universe as a whole.

The Practical Man

The practical man is entirely confined by his private and historically conditioned interests and concerns.

Leibniz

Famous 17th and 18th century philosopher who invented calculus and remains among history's most important philosophers. His book, the Monadology, outlined a complex philosophical system that is still well-known but has few adherents. Russell often mentions his view to contrast it with more widely held views.

Bishop Berkeley

Berkeley was a 17th and 18th century Irish philosopher who argued that everything that exists other than God is a perception. All that exists is an idea in the mind of God.

Objects/Places

Sense-Data

Sense-data is Russell's term that denotes that which we are directly aware of in perception.

Sensation

The mental process of receiving and processing sense-data.

Knowledge by Acquaintance

Knowledge derived from sense-data, be it mental or physical.

Knowledge by Description

Knowledge derived from propositions not known through acquaintance directly.

Induction

The process of inferring knowledge or probable opinion from evidence that is not absolutely certain.

A Priori Knowledge

Knowledge known independently of experience.

Universals

General facts that correspond to types in language. For instance, the term "whiteness" denotes the universal "whiteness" that all white things take part in.

Intuitive Knowledge

Knowledge known directly through intuition or self-evidence.

Truth

The relation that obtains when a proposition is believed and corresponds to facts.

Knowledge

True belief believed for the right reasons.

Philosophy

The practice of inquiring into the most fundamental questions about the nature of existence, knowledge, and the like.

The World of Universals

The realm of all universal facts, which is independent of the physical world.

The Universe

The realm of all physical particulars and mental entities.

Science

Russell believes that philosophical methodology should model the methodology of mathematics and the sciences.

Themes

Knowledge

Russell claims in the beginning of The Problems of Philosophy that he has chosen to focus on issues on which he has something constructive to contribute, alongside his criticisms. For this reason, he says, the book has more to say about epistemology, the theory of knowledge, than metaphysics, the theory of being. The book's structure is built around the question of how different classes of facts and things are known.

For instance, the first chapter distinguishes between appearance and reality. We are only directly acquainted with appearances and must know reality through appearances. Russell will go on to argue that knowledge is divided into two general categories: knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge by description.

Knowledge by acquaintance is any knowledge gained from sense-data of material or mental things or of intuitions about universals or other indubitable facts. Knowledge by description is knowledge of the truth of propositions that either represent facts known by acquaintance or are derived from them.

Russell also distinguishes between knowledge of particulars and knowledge of universals. Knowledge of particulars is knowledge of the empirical world and must be derived or at least built upon experience, whereas knowledge of universals is a priori; it cannot be wholly derived from experience, but must be intuited from it via mental contact with the world of universals.

Russell is also concerned to account for intuitive knowledge, or how we can know things by intuition. Thus, he needs an account of self-evident truths.

The A Priori and the Empirical

One of the oldest conflicts in philosophy concerns the nature of knowledge and whether all of it derives from experience or whether some knowledge is in-born and derives from pure reason. An empiricist is one who holds that all non-trivial knowledge derives from experience, or all substantive knowledge of the world, not merely of definitions. A rationalist holds that some knowledge is innate and derives from pure reason; thus, reason itself can give us knowledge about the nature of the world.

Kantian approaches try to reconcile the two views. Kant argued that the truths of pure reason were truths about the categories of thought and as such were a sort of processing framework for otherwise unconceptualized data derived from the senses. However, pure reason could not be made substantive unless it was applied to experience and experience had no conceptual structure without the categories of the mind.

Russell is influenced by the Kantian approach. He rejects the view that all knowledge is empirical; we in fact have some knowledge of conceptual truths. However, this knowledge structures and orders otherwise unorganized sense-data. However, Russell rejects the view that our knowledge of concepts is knowledge of how the mind works, instead following the Platonic view that knowledge of concepts is knowledge of mind-independent facts.

He still, like Kant, believes that we are only directly acquainted with sense-data and can only make inferences about the nature of the real world.

Philosophy

The Problems of Philosophy is a popular introduction to the main philosophical problems. Russell addresses whether the world is composed of matter or ideas, how we have knowledge about objects in the world, how we know there exists an external world, how we have knowledge, and particularly knowledge through intuition and so on. The method of philosophical inquiry is to analyze the deep structure of thought and the rules of reasoning in order to discern what we can know about the world and what we can say truly about its fundamental structure.

However, towards the end of the book Russell admits that the major philosophical questions have not been answered. In fact, whenever a once philosophical question comes to be thought to have a definite answer, it becomes a science. Thus, physics was once "natural philosophy" even into Newton's day, but after Newton systematized physics, it became clear that physics would separate from philosophy at least to a large degree.

The questions left seem insuperable; no certain knowledge of the answers seems possible. Yet Russell strongly believes that philosophy has value. For the philosopher, he is not only interested in answering the big questions but in asking them. The point of philosophy is to unify the mind with the universe and to transcend the petty concerns of private life and historically conditioned modes of thinking. Philosophy thus becomes a kind of holy discipline, generating its own sort of peace and set of aspirations.

Style

Perspective

Bertrand Russell is entirely responsible for the perspective of The Problems of Philosophy. His perspective is reflected both in his style of writing, in the questions he asks and in the answers he gives.

First, the reader would do well to be aware that Russell's writing style is not only informed by his education as a logician. He is reacting to an earlier British philosophical tradition known as British Hegelianism, which the reader will see addressed indirectly and directly in the text. British Hegelian writing was notoriously obscure and wholly uninformed by the sciences. Russell became impatient with Hegelian methods as he matured as a philosopher. Russell is also impressed by early twentieth century science and logic, particularly physics as it was being developed by famous physicists such as Einstein.

Second, Russell's perspective is reflected in his questions. His primary questions are epistemological, or concern how we can come to know things and have justified beliefs. He follows many of the questions as asked by rationalists, empiricists and Kantians, harkening back to some philosophical traditions that pre-existed Hegelianism. However, his method of asking questions is also informed by his respect for disciplines like physics, as his writing was.

Finally, Russell's perspective is reflected in his answers. In The Problems of Philosophy, the reader will encounter a variety of Russell's unique answers to questions, such as his theory of definite descriptions, and his logical atomism.

Tone

The tone of The Problems of Philosophy is what you would expect from a master logician and philosopher who believes his craft and subject matter are of great value. Russell's writing style is calm, rigorously logical, yet lucidly written and sharp, concise and persuasive. Russell is famous for his measured style of writing. He never seems too emotional but his writing is rarely dry. Some might initially perceive it as dry because of its subject matter and clear, unembellished sentence structure, but a fuller read will prove this impression false.

Russell also makes his arguments in compact forms and yet his reasoning process is always clear. One might think that a logician would be a dense writer and in many cases this judgment would be correct. Russell is among the best writers in philosophical history. However, given his skills as a logician, Russell's argumentative style is sharp and bereft of superfluous flourishes and extra steps. As such, he is often quite persuasive.

It is also important to understand that Russell's tone results from his reaction to the forms of British philosophy he encountered during his education and early career. Britain spent the late 19th and early 20th centuries awash in British Hegelianism, which was notorious for its incredibly turgid and confusing prose. Hegelians often made obscure distinctions and spoke in mystical terms.

Russell and some of his colleagues eventually got fed up with such an enormous philosophical system that seemed disconnected from science and were profoundly impressed with progress made in logic, mathematics and physics, both at the quantum level and with Einstein's recent work. Thus, Russell's tone is shaped as a reaction to a former method and tone of philosophical writing.

Structure

As an "analytic" philosopher, Russell believes that the methods of the sciences, mathematics and logic should be applied to philosophy. Russell is among the greatest logicians in history and as such is capable of approaching philosophical issues with incredible precision. Thus, the structure of The Problems of Philosophy is clear and careful, much like a logic textbook. The book proceeds in fifteen short chapters that have concise subject matters. Each chapter builds on the last such that the entire book is tied together.

Chapter I, "Appearance and Reality," separates sensations and sense-data on the one hand, from reality on the other. Chapter II, "The Existence of Matter," argues that we are justified in believing that matter exists based on the evidence of the senses. Chapter III, "The Nature of Matter," argues that matter has a particular nature that can be known in a way separate from mental entities and abstract ideas.

Chapter IV introduces the reader to the philosophy of idealism that was still dominant in Britain when the book was first written (1912). He gives various criticisms of idealism, as he was once an adherent of the view. Chapter V distinguishes between knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge by description. Chapter VI covers induction; Chapter VII explains how general principles are known, and Chapter VIII discusses what makes a priori knowledge possible.

Chapter IX introduces the reader to universals and the "world" where they exist. Chapter X gives a theory of how universals are known. Chapter XI argues in favor of a theory of intuitive knowledge. Chapter XII defends a correspondence theory of truth and Chapter XIII defines knowledge, error and probable opinion.

Chapter XIV defends limits to philosophical knowledge, and Chapter XV argues that, limits notwithstanding, philosophy has great value.

Quotes

"Is there any knowledge in the world which is so certain that no reasonable man could doubt it?" (Chapter 1, Appearance and Reality, 7)

"All knowledge, we find, must be built up upon our instinctive beliefs, and if these are rejected, nothing is left." (Chapter 2, The Existence of Matter, 25)

"The most natural, though not ultimately the most defensible, hypothesis to adopt in the first instance, at any rate as regards visual sense-data, would be that, though physical objects cannot, for the reasons we have been considering, be exactly like sense-data, yet they may be more or less like." (Chapter 3, The Nature of Matter, 34)

"This question of the distinction between act and object in our apprehending of things is vitally important, since our whole power of acquiring knowledge is bound up with it." (Chapter 4, Idealism, 42)

"Every proposition which we can understand must be composed wholly of constituents with which we are acquainted." (Chapter 5, Acquaintance and Description, 58)

"Thus our inductive principle is at any rate not capable of being disproved by an appeal to experience. The inductive principle, however, is equally incapable of being proved by an appeal to experience." (Chapter 6, On Induction, 68)

"One of the great historic controversies in philosophy is the controversy between the two schools called respectively 'empiricists' and 'rationalists'." (Chapter 7, On Our Knowledge of General Principles, 73)

"What we believe, when we believe the law of contradiction, is not that the mind is so made that it must believe the law of contradiction." (Chapter 8, How A Priori Knowledge Is Possible, 88)

"The world of being is unchangeable, rigid, exact, delightful to the mathematician, the logician, the builder of metaphysical systems, and all who love perfection more than life." (Chapter 9, The World of Universals, 100)

"All a priori knowledge deals exclusively with the relations of universals." (Chapter 10, On Our Knowledge of Universals, 103)

"We must sooner or later, and probably before very long, be driven to a point where we cannot find any further reason, and where it becomes almost certain that no further reason is even theoretically discoverable." (Chapter 11, On Intuitive Knowledge, 111)

"The third of the above requisites leads us to adopt the view—which has on the whole been commonest among philosophers—that truth consists in some form of correspondence between belief and fact." (Chapter 12, Truth and Falsehood, 121)

"Logic, instead of being, as formerly, the bar to possibilities, has become the great liberator of the imagination ..." (Chapter 14, The Limits of Philosophical Knowledge, 148)

"In this citizenship of the universe consists man's true freedom, and his liberation from the thralldom of narrow hopes and fears." (Chapter 15, The Value of Philosophy, 161)

"Philosophy is to be studied, not for the sake of any definite answers to its questions, since no definite answers can, as a rule, be known to be true, but rather for the sake of the questions themselves." (Chapter 15, The Value of Philosophy, 161)

Topics for Discussion

Why is philosophy of value, on Russell's view?

What is Russell's distinction between appearance and reality?

Why does Russell reject idealism?

What justifies induction, in Russell's view?

What are universals? What is the nature of universals for Russell? How do we know about universals?

What is intuitive knowledge? Why should we believe in intuitive knowledge? How is it possible?

What is Russell's theory of truth and falsehood?

What does Russell think knowledge is?

What are the limits of philosophical knowledge for Russell?

Given these questions: what do you think of Russell's answers? Do you agree? Why or why not?