

Filosofins problem

B.Russell

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I got the book while I still was a high-school student (probably as a Christmas present from my father sensitive to my budding philosophical interest) and I must have read it back then. Over thirty years later I reread it again in connection with a revival of my old interest in Russell (having reread his autobiography and maybe also having finished the two volume biography by Monk). This was clearly an act of nostalgia. Now I read it a third time having been provoked by a certain philosopher correspondent to read the basics before I expound on philosophical subjects myself. Maybe I have missed something in my previous readings. Is the book worth such attention over a forty year period? Clearly I must have absorbed a lot during my first reading, probably instilling many basic philosophical ideas and attitudes in my own philosophy without being aware of it, to the extent that many things that I believe is part of my own original thinking may have simply been absorbed from reading Russell. This is of course nothing to be really ashamed of, true originality is very hard to achieve in philosophy more than perhaps in most other endeavors, it only shows successful digestion. Reading a book like this at a mature age will have less of an impact, even if the very maturity allows you to appreciate the material much better. Reading it a third time with the intention of writing an essay on it, detaches yourself further from the book, in your ambition to try and present a definitive statement.

The book is meant as a lively introduction to philosophy in the only way this is possible, namely by presenting to the reader a central philosophical problem. The problem Russell addresses is the one of epistemology, how can we know anything about the outside world. This is of course not the only philosophical problem there is, but in some sense the most central, and the one which we all as humans have to encounter. It is a problem asked and articulated out of impelling curiosity and thus congruent with the general drive that leads to our extension of scientific knowledge. The difference between science and philosophy is not sharp, in fact philosophy is the father of all sciences. As soon as some field of philosophical inquiry starts to make real progress and generate a body of knowledge it is set off on its own as a scientific discipline. Thus philosophy is about questions we cannot help asking, but whose answers lie (just) beyond our (present) abilities. Thus the task of philosophy is to criticize the other sciences, questioning their methods, their conclusions and interpreting the same. But above all philosophy is about a certain attitude of mind, one geared towards the extension of your world and your identity, thus a purely spiritual enterprise indifferent to the material applications of its pursuits. This extension of yourself, Russell emphasizes, should be unintentional, as deliberation would be counter-productive by forcing the universe to comply to the pre-conceptions of your limited 'I'. Of course a true philosophical attitude cultivated, will spill over in other walks of life, lending to them a serenity and impartialness that can only be beneficial.

What immediately strikes our consciousness are sensory perceptions. (In fact consciousness is made up of perceptions.) Those make up a very varied and confusing

medley of impressions, which we somehow manage to make some coherent sense of. But how do we know that they correspond to a material reality out there? How do we know that everything is not just a figment of our imagination? A wild dream, and that nothing outside ourselves exists? This assumption of solipsism cannot be refuted, at least not by authority outside of yourself, as such does not even exist. Still the assumption is not very fertile and coherent and we do well in following common sense and believe in an outside objective reality¹. Still the conclusion that we cannot really be sure of existence beyond our consciousness, and that material objects may be construction out of consciousness and have no real existence outside, is a serious one. In Berkely it reaches its most articulate expression. Things exist because we people are conscious of them, and things which escape such human sensory scrutiny are anchored to reality by the untiring gaze of God. (Thus if you are an idealist and also believe in the objective existence of things outside human consciousness, you need to postulate a 'God' to retain coherency. A God of course that might be still abstract and whose consciousness may differ from human in kind not only in power and extent.

Now Russell's contention that different human beings have different perceptions of reality is not as radically expressed as it really ought to be. (Maybe Russell stayed away from the really radical expression lest he confuse and bewilder the innocent reader). In his presentation, the difference of perception is mostly due to differences in spatial position (and such things)². This if of course superficial. What Russell seems to maintain implicitly, is that say the impression of the color red is the 'same' for all people (except the congenitally blind, to whom the notion of seeing and light is incommunicable). Crucial though is his distinction between sense-data and perceptions of the same. With this distinction he proposes that one may invalidate Berkeleys idealism as being based on a confusion between what is perceived (the sense-data) and the perception itself. The fact that the latter is part of consciousness does not mean that the former is. I suspect that this distinction and the argument which ensues is due to G.E.Moore. Nevertheless I am not persuaded by its force, as it seems to me to be somewhat circular. How can we make such a distinction? In dreams we surely cannot distinguish between the perceptions we have and the perceptions themselves, both being part of our consciousness. To postulate an objective nature to sense-data presupposes a material world, in which sense-data are the ways that matter makes an impact on the mind, and as such objective and shared by everyone. (The blind lack the sense-data conveyed by light, and can hence form no perceptions of such nature.)

Our sensory perceptions are the only thing we have direct acquaintance with and are as such neither true nor false just are. Memory is another kind of sensory deception which is tricky, it varies from the immediately vivid to the faint and uncertain, and after all there are such things as false memories. Our perception of an 'I' is also a border-case. Animals, Russell muses, clearly have sensory perceptions, but do they have a sense of

¹ Dreams are disjointed and incoherent and change every night. This is why we consider them as dreams, i.e. not real but fictional apparitions. But imagine if dreams would be coherent, and waking loife confusing, would we then believe the other way around?

² Mathematically this has a simple presentation. Giving the coordinates for all things in 3-space, we can easily associate to those corresponding points on the visuals 2-spheres of any observer given the position of their centers, simply by projection from the same

individual identity? Russell thinks not. But how do we go beyond our limited universe of the directly knowable?

We learn from experience. But how can we really learn from experience? Most of the things we take for granted are really just things we are habituated to. Because they have occurred before they surely will occur again. If A always occurs with B, surely it will occur again next time B occurs? Maybe it is even a law, and it will always be the case? To assume something else would go against common sense be unreasonable. We are clearly talking about induction. To derive a general law from particulars. But how do we know that this principle of induction is legitimate? By experience? But that is circular. Induction tells us about the future and we have no experience of the future. We cannot derive the future from past experience. Thus the belief in the regularity of nature is in the nature of a faith and not something we can know from experience, but a principle we assume and use in order to learn from experience. This is of course all Hume, but Russell does not mention this, at least not explicitly. The questioning of induction puts us in a dilemma, because how can we ever get knowledge of the world outside us without this principle. Also it is a vague principle, there clearly is a kind of hierarchy in what we expect. The fact that the sun will rise every morning is based on something deeper than the mere fact that we and our ancestors have observed it regularly in the past, namely the laws of inertia. The earth will keep on rotating (until its rotation is synchronized with its orbiting of the sun, or some celestial body interferes). But how do we know the laws of inertia? Is not the fact that the sun always rises and sets an inductive confirmation of this, and the law itself is on no firmer ground than our expectations? The law is believed because 1) this law is simple and elegant and 2) explains why no instances of its incorrectness has so far been observed, although it has so many diverse implications. But why should simple and elegant laws which afford humans understanding be true? Clearly we have another principle here going. Russell does not exactly put it this way. There are other means of going beyond ourselves than experience and induction. Russell now refers to *a priori* principles. Our private sensory worlds cannot be known directly by others, in particular not directly communicated. What can be communicated are more abstract principles and concepts. Thus ironically what we can share is not the intimate and the concrete, but the abstract. Abstract principles are directly knowable by the mind. Here Russell is an unabashed Platonist. Of all philosophers thinking of the matter, the solution of Plato is the most successful according to Russell. Abstract entities do exist, and without them we would be unable to go beyond ourselves. Platonism with its conception of abstract essences being not part of space and time lends itself easily to mysticism, as Russell admits, but we are not concerned with that but with the pure logical aspects of Platonism. The universe is governed by logic necessity, and it is our ability to reason logically, to deduce particulars from generalities, to combine empirical facts into logical structures, which allows us to achieve knowledge. The fact that $2 + 2 = 4$ is not an empirical fact, it is, according to Russell an *a priori* fact, out of which we can deduce particulars such as two chickens plus two chickens make up four chickens, as soon as we encounter chickens (without the experience of which the above particular statement would not make sense, but as soon sense is made of chicken, the sentence becomes automatically meaningful and true).

We talked about abstract entities. Relations (in the language implicit in verbs) are

inescapable abstract entities which become facts, true or not (i.e. existing or not) , when relating to particular objects. A relation such as the left side, cannot be located in space and time. You take a piece of plywood and cut off the left part, the remaining part will still have one left left. There is nothing mysterious about being beyond space and time.

Russells definition of what is truth is a bit technical and involved basically it has to do with compliance with facts, which seems but a reformulation. More interesting though is his definition of knowledge. The possession of a true statement is not enough for knowledge, also an understanding of why it is true is needed, in principle a complete deductive derivation from basic premisses is required, something usually only attempted in the study of mathematics.

Russell is a realist. The idea that our conceptions of the universe are what the universe is, is abhorrent to him. That a statement cannot both be true and false is not a convention we use to make sense of the world to us, this is simply an inescapable aspect of the world, how it really is, and independent of us. We can formulate a belief, this belief as a statement is of course of our making, but not at all whether it refers to something out there or not. The same with mathematics, one is tempted to add. The various statements are produced by humans, but whether they are true, or harmonize with the other statements, that is something objective.

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