



The Problems of Philosophy

Bertrand Russell (1872 – 1970)

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The Problems of Philosophy by Bertrand Russell is a concise and accessible guide to the basic concepts and issues in the study of philosophy. The book is noted for its simplicity and clarity, and was intended to give general readers a foundation for philosophical inquiry as well as provoke constructive discussion. As such, it eschews metaphysics for the more concrete discipline of epistemology, or the theory of knowledge. The fundamental theories of Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, David Hume, Immanuel Kant, John Locke, Hegel and others are outlined and explained. Russell begins by delving into the subject of appearance versus reality. He postulates that knowledge is largely derived empirically from sensory perceptions and what he calls the

“sense-data” or mental images that we perceive and guides the reader through the famous distinction between “knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge by description”.

“In the following pages I have confined myself in the main to those problems of philosophy in regard to which I thought it possible to say something positive and constructive, since merely negative criticism seemed out of place. For this reason, theory of knowledge occupies a larger space than metaphysics in the present volume, and some topics much discussed by philosophers are treated very briefly, if at all.”

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

Bertrand Russell (May 18, 1872 – February 2, 1970) was a British philosopher and logician as well as a writer, historian, social critic and political activist. He is considered one of the founders of analytic philosophy, along with Gottlob Frege, G. E. Moore, and his protégé Ludwig Wittgenstein, and led the British “revolt against idealism”. His work in philosophy had a major impact on the philosophy of language, epistemology, and metaphysics, which, in turn, exerted a major influence on logic, mathematics, linguistics, artificial intelligence and computer science. He attempted to formulate a logical basis for mathematics in *Principia Mathematica*, which he wrote with Alfred North Whitehead.

Although he was born into one of the most prominent aristocratic British families, Russell was a vocal anti-war activist and was imprisoned for his pacifism during World War I. He was anti-imperialist, campaigned against Hitler, criticized Stalinism, opposed the United States involvement in Vietnam and advocated nuclear disarmament. He was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1950 for his writing to “champion humanitarian ideals and freedom of thought”.