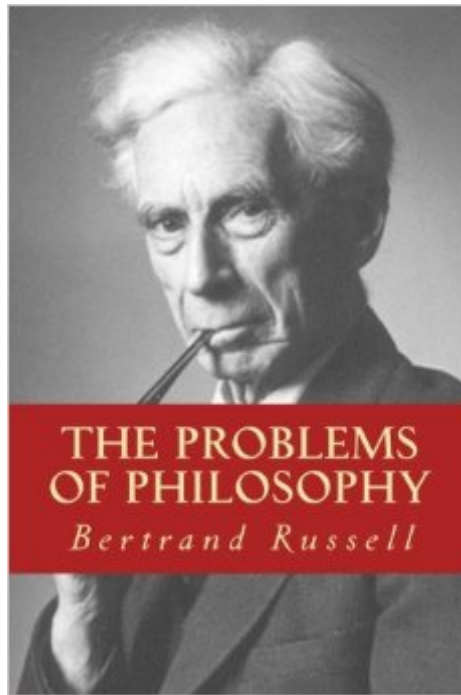


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The Problems Of Philosophy



Synopsis

The Problems of Philosophy (1912) is one of Bertrand Russell's attempts to create a brief and accessible guide to the problems of philosophy. Focusing on problems he believes will provoke positive and constructive discussion, Russell concentrates on knowledge rather than metaphysics: If it is uncertain that external objects exist, how can we then have knowledge of them but by probability. There is no reason to doubt the existence of external objects simply because of sense data. Russell guides the reader through his famous 1910 distinction between "knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge by description" and introduces important theories of Plato, Aristotle, René Descartes, David Hume, John Locke, Immanuel Kant, G. W. F. Hegel and others to lay the foundation for philosophical inquiry by general readers and scholars alike. --This text refers to the Kindle Edition edition.

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Customer Reviews

"Philosophy aims primarily at knowledge," says Bertrand Russell. "But it cannot be maintained that philosophy has had any very great measure of success in its attempts to provide definite answers to its questions." With that caveat, which comes in the last chapter of *The Problems of Philosophy*, Russell defines in part what philosophy is and what it can accomplish. The definition casts a rather dim light over the field of philosophy, calling into questions its value as a discipline worthy of our attention. But Russell goes on to say that philosophy's value won't be found in its ability to provide answers ("since no definite answers can, as a rule, be known to be true"). Instead, philosophy is valuable "for the sake of the questions themselves." "These questions enlarge our conception of what is possible, enrich our intellectual imagination and diminish the dogmatic assurance which closes the mind against speculation," notes Russell. He says our minds are "rendered great" when

we contemplate "the greatness of the universe." This enables our minds to form a "union with the universe which constitutes its highest good." In the pages that precede this final chapter on the value of philosophy, Russell highlights the questions he considers to be most "positive" and "constructive." In his view, philosophy's most important questions relate to epistemology, or the theory of knowledge. As a result, most of this book deals with questions like these: What is the difference between appearance and reality? What is a belief? What is the relationship between beliefs and facts? What, if anything, can we know for certain? What is the difference between deductive and inductive reasoning? What is intuitive knowledge? What is truth?

When one considers that the great philosophers of the twentieth century stand on the shoulders of Bertrand Russell, Alfred North Whitehead, A. J. Ayer, G. E. Moore, and Ludwig Wittgenstein, one has to place Russell in the foreground as the philosophers' philosopher. He writes with clarity and lucidity. His concerns are largely logical and epistemological. And this book centers around his principal concerns. I doubt that Russell would write this same book today, but I also doubt that he would fundamentally alter the positions he takes, if he were writing today. There is something neat, eloquent, and elegant about his epistemological premises that make this work (well beyond its 17th printing and more than eighty years old) such a venerable treasure trove. Could his positions be better articulated? Yes, but not by much. Would he delve more deeply into logic? Almost certainly. And he does, in other books written during his lifetime. This book is really for the novice. My only complaint is that the novice will probably remain lost if his readings did not encompass more logic and criticism of rational and empirical epistemology. What makes Russell a true "modern" in contemporary philosophy is his bridge to resolving both the rationalist and empiricist schools of thought. One not knowing these dichotomies might find Russell's resolution difficult to follow. Elsewhere in the book, Russell identifies "three" rules of thought, when these rules are no longer considered all that are extent. Generally, there are seven, sometimes nine, taught in most symbolic logic courses, and this discrepancy may needlessly cause confusion. So while the book is written for the novice, it bears re-reading after covering other contemporary writers.

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