

KEY IDEAS OF RUSSELL'S *THE PROBLEMS OF PHILOSOPHY* [OUP EDN]

Item	Idea	Page
1.	Is any knowledge so certain as be beyond reasonable doubt?	1
2.	Philosophy attempts to answer "ultimate questions", by approaching them critically	1
3.	Our present experiences seem the obvious starting point for enquiry	1
4.	But immediate experience <i>can</i> be doubted, unless it is described with great precision	1-2
5.	For example, my table appears to vary in colour, because of angles of reflected light	2
6.	Painters study <i>appearances</i> , which may therefore differ from reality	2
7.	The colour of a table varies with viewing conditions, and depends on the observer	2
8.	Colour is defined for 'normal' conditions and observers, but this is "favouritism"	2-3
9.	Texture varies from 'smooth' (with the naked eye) to 'rough' (with a microscope)	3
10.	Even shape is not directly seen, but is inferred from multiple angles of viewing	3
11.	The hardness and sound of a table depend on the object touching it, and the pressure	3
12.	We are left unsure whether there <i>is</i> a real table, and (if there is) <i>what</i> it really is	4
13.	We experience <i>sensations</i>, and these arise from the <i>sense-data</i> that reach us	4
14.	The problem is the relationship between sense-data and supposedly real objects (or 'matter')	4
15.	Berkeley showed that it is not absurd to entirely deny that matter exists	4
16.	Berkeley denies grounds for belief in extended unconscious matter (which must be <i>mental</i> in character)	4-5
17.	For matter to exist (it is said) it must be experienced, by God or by a universal mind	5
18.	Russell denies such 'idealism', which claims that matter is ideas (Berkeley) or minds (Leibniz)	5
19.	Most philosophers, even idealists, agree that tables exist, but <i>why</i> is this?	6
20.	Philosophy increases our sense of wonder by its questions (even when they are unanswerable)	6
21.	If matter is uncertain, then external reality could be a dream (and solipsism true)	7
22.	Descartes applied systematic doubt and a deceitful demon, and said reality was uncertain	8
23.	Descartes' ' <i>cogito</i> ' showed that subjective experiences have the greatest certainty	8
24.	'I think therefore I am' goes too far, because the Self is uncertain, and might lack continuity	8
25.	We can only say that thoughts and feelings have a "primitive certainty", which is a starting point	8
26.	A table ceasing to exist if covered by cloth seems absurd (but philosophers must confront absurdities)	9
27.	Sense-data are private, but objects must exist in order to be public and neutral	9
28.	Objects seem to exist because tables give similar sense-data to individuals and over time	9
29.	But this begs the question, because I can only know others' experiences through sense-data	9-10
30.	Thoughts in dreams needn't match a reality, so pure solipsism is not absurd	10
31.	But there is no reason to think we are dreaming, and common sense is a simpler view	10
32.	If the cat exists, that explains why it changes between one observation and another	10
33.	Similarly, unobserved thoughts are the best explanation of other humans' behaviour	11
34.	We also have an instinctive belief in reality, especially where sight is concerned	11
35.	We conclude that the external world <i>does</i> exist, but with a slight element of doubt	11
36.	Knowledge is built on instinctive beliefs, but philosophy examines their hierarchy and consistency	11-12
37.	Science suggests that real tables (behind the sense-data) consist of motions	13
38.	But a blind man could understand wave-motions, but not light itself	14
39.	Similarly space is an experience through sight or touch, though scientific space is neutral	14
40.	Coins look oval in our private space, but are round in 'real public space'	14
41.	So private and public space (and reality) are different but connected things	14
42.	We must assume we are in the same physical (public) space in order to experience them	15
43.	Physical space must match private space, and we know the private end of this match-up	15
44.	We can know more about <i>relationships</i> in reality (e.g. space) than its true nature	16
45.	We can also know the true order of things in time, despite the subjective way time seems to fluctuate	16
46.	Of course real time-order may differ from sense-data order (thunder/lightning, and the sun's light)	16
47.	Similarly our sense-data of colour are not identical to the inferred physical events	17
48.	Experienced colour isn't even <i>like</i> the object, as reflections and air affect the waves	17-18
49.	Idealists like Leibniz and Berkeley say the true nature of reality is mental	18
50.	Berkeley argued that sense-data are mental, so only mental events can be known	20
51.	Everything consists of ideas, such as sense-data, memories, or imagined things	20
52.	'To be is to be perceived', and the continuity of existence depends on God's perceptions	20
53.	In fact, our perceptions are participations in God's, which explains the similarity between individuals	20
54.	Berkeley seems to have (simply!) confused <i>things</i> being in minds with <i>ideas</i> of them in minds	21
55.	We have shown that colours depend on minds, but they needn't exist <i>in</i> them	21-2
56.	Berkeley seems confused by the ambiguity of 'idea' (as both an act and a thing)	22
57.	Saying knowledge is 'in the mind' is either tautological, or absurdly limiting	22
58.	It is claimed that anything beyond our acquaintance is unimportant and even unreal	22

59. But matter affects us even if we only suspect its existence	23
60. We can know the truth of something while lacking knowledge of it by acquaintance	23
61. If I know a thing by description it may be that <i>nobody</i> is acquainted with it	23
62. This indirect knowledge is reached by inference from general principles	24
63. Knowledge is of truths, or of things (either by acquaintance or by description)	25
64. Knowledge by acquaintance is direct awareness (e.g. of sense-data like colours)	25
65. A table is known by description, built up from truths connected to acquaintance	26
66. Our acquaintance is not limited to sense-data, but extends to the past, and to truths	26
67. We are acquainted with our memories , which appear to us as being the past	26
68. We are acquainted with experiences and feelings, by introspection or self-consciousness	26-7
69. We deduce self-consciousness in other people (not animals) by analogy with ourselves	27
70. We may lack permanent personal identity, but seem to know our selves as observers by introspection	28
71. We are also acquainted with universals (general ideas), which we are aware of as concepts	28
72. We are not acquainted with physical objects or other minds, which need descriptions	28
73. We know things by 'definite' description, in the singular form of 'the so-and-so'	28-9
74. We have merely descriptive knowledge if there is no acquaintance (e.g. the man in the iron mask)	29
75. Reference to 'the so-and-so' also says that it is unique and it exists	29
76. Many common words (even proper names) have the logical form of definite descriptions	29
77. The same thought may require different descriptions for different people	29
78. Bismarck is acquainted with himself, but his body and mind are known to others by description	29
79. The bundle of descriptions by which we know Bismarck will reduce to particular acquaintances	30
80. All particular judgements reduce to acquaintance, though we also know universals	30-1
81. References to what actually exists reduce to acquaintance (but not what might or could be)	31
82. We can communicate because we believe in the propositions the descriptions support	31
83. There are stages of closeness in our acquaintance with particulars (and universals)	31-2
84. Every understandable proposition containing descriptions is reducible to acquaintance	32
85. The meaning of all our language must involve acquaintance to be significant (even 'Julius Caesar')	32
86. Descriptions can extend our knowledge beyond immediate experience	32
87. How can we make inferences beyond acquaintance with our selves and our sense-data?	32
88. What general beliefs could justify our claim that the sun will rise tomorrow?	33
89. We think the laws of motion will keep the earth rotating, but why?	34
90. Without past experiences guaranteeing future probabilities, we can't be sure of anything	34
91. Expectations result from habits (even in chickens being fattened) but is this rational?	34-5
92. Is it true that there are no exceptions to the uniform laws of nature?	35
93. Most of our expectations <i>do</i> have exceptions, but what of the laws of motion and gravitation?	35
94. Physical laws seem to lack exceptions so far, but what about the future?	35
95. So far each future time has resembled past time, but what about future futures?	36
96. We have the same uncertainty with the remote past and remote space	36
97. The best we can hope for is increasingly high probability with repetition (but remember the chicken!)	36
98. We can't even be sure there are laws (or whether a law fits a particular case)	36
99. We hope for the increased probability of both events <i>and</i> the laws behind them	37
100. A thing can remain probable even if exceptions <i>are</i> found (so induction can't be disproved this way)	37-8
101. Experience can't prove induction right, because knowledge of experience depends on induction	38
102. Ordinary life, as well as scientific causation and laws, must depend on unproved induction	38
103. An even more basic assumption than induction is logical inference or implication	39-40
104. Among self-evident laws those of identity, contradiction and excluded middle are traditionally basic	40
105. The Rationalists were right that logic is self-evident, unprovable and takes us beyond direct experience	41
106. The Rationalist belief in innate knowledge is wrong , but logic is a priori (independent of experience)	41
107. The Empiricists are right that knowledge of existence must depend on experience	41
108. Nothing logically has to exist ; experience (perhaps with additional a priori inferences) is needed	42
109. Knowledge of what has value is known a priori (though it is not logical)	42
110. Experience elicits the unprovable belief that happiness, knowledge and goodwill are desirable	42
111. Empiricists are wrong to base maths on experience, because general principles go beyond it	43
112. Our sense of necessity about maths is not increased by fresh examples from experience	43
113. We can easily imagine a possible world containing immortals, but not where $2 + 2 = 5$	44
114. Deduction starts from general principles, and induction from particulars	44
115. Deduction does give new knowledge , as when arithmetic applies to particular objects	44
116. The traditional 'Socrates' syllogism should be inductive, and omit 'all men are mortal'	44-5
117. Thus empirical generalisations should be based on induction, not deduction	45
118. Before Kant it was held that all a priori knowledge must be analytic (true by mere analysis)	46
119. Hume discovered many cases (especially causation) which were synthetic, not a priori analytic	47

120. Kant claimed that even arithmetic is synthetic, as 7+5=12 adds new knowledge	47
121. Clearly maths is not empirical as that would rely on induction, and experience would reinforce it	47
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123. Kant sees 'sense-data' as part of the world, with the mind supplying space, time, comparison and cause	48
124. Kant says we have a priori knowledge, but it is part of us, not of the world	48-9
125. But Kant is wrong , because we ourselves might change, so knowledge would change with us	49
126. Kant also fails to show how arithmetic has universal truth, beyond experience	49
127. The law of contradiction is a belief about things , not about our own minds (<i>that beech isn't a tree</i>)	50
128. Similarly arithmetic and relations like 'in' assert something separate from our own minds	50-1
129. Entities such as relations are universals , not mental or physical (like Plato's 'forms')	52-3
130. A universal is shared by many particulars and is their essence or common nature	52-3
131. Most words denote universals, and every sentence (and truth) must contain at least one	53
132. Universals denoted by verbs and prepositions are overlooked, and cause confusion	54
133. Spinoza, Leibniz and others denied relations, and ended in monism or monadism	9. Relations 54
134. Relations are more basic than qualities, as we can't identify qualities without them	54-5
135. Berkeley and Hume rejected 'abstract ideas' (qualities), but overlooked the problem of relations	55
136. Relations (e.g. 'is north of') are part of the world , not part of our minds	55-6
137. A relation is timeless and spaceless, and not material or mental (although we do think of it)	56
138. If a universal was an act of thought, it would lose its universality	57
139. Since universals are timeless they 'subsist' or 'have being', rather than 'exist'	57
140. There are two worlds (equally important in philosophy), of 'being', and of 'existence'	57
141. 'Sensible qualities' are universals known to us by direct acquaintance with sense-data	58
142. Relations in space and time, and resemblance, are universals taken from acquaintance with sense-data	58-9
143. We can also abstract universals ('greater than') from acquaintance with other universals	59
144. All a priori knowledge (e.g. arithmetic) deals with relations of universals	59
145. Numbers may seem to refer to particulars, but this is unnecessary for understanding	10. Universals 60
146. We can <i>not</i> know anything about experience a priori, only about the universals involved	60
147. The meaning of 'all men are mortal' involves universals, but the evidence for it is particular	61
148. Evidence might establish a general inductive relation between 'all men' and 'mortals' (not an a priori one)	61
149. We may reach a priori knowledge via inductive generalisations (e.g. observing geometrical figures)	61
150. We can also reach a priori knowledge where no instances have been experienced ($x*y>100$)	62
151. Knowledge of the physical world (and other minds) consists of a priori inferences without acquaintance	62
152. Intuition takes us beyond acquaintance to knowledge of truths, but where does error arise?	63
153. Reason and proof rest on self-evident principles of induction and deduction	64
154. Some self-evident principles (e.g. arithmetic) can be deduced from others (e.g. logic)	65
155. Particular examples (e.g. of contradiction) are more self-evident than general principles	65
156. There are self-evident truths in perception (but they are not the actual sense-data)	65
157. We judge the existence of sense-data, and analyse their properties and relations	65-6
158. We also intuitively judge memories, not as images, but as objects seen as past	11. Self-evidence 66
159. False memories show how easily intuitive self-evident judgement leads to error	66
160. The reliability of memory seems to vary with its vividness and closeness in time	66-7
161. Cases of firm belief in a wholly false memory are probably not real memories (<i>George IV at Waterloo</i>)	67
162. Memory shows that all self-evidence and intuition has degrees of certainty	67
163. Perception and logic seem highly self-evident, but induction, memory and complex maths less so	67
164. Although judgements of ethical and aesthetic value seem self-evident, they are weak	67-8
165. There may be a mixture of infallible self-evidence, and a variable intuition	68
166. Truth must be distinguished from its opposite, error, but first they need definition	69
167. A theory of truth must refer to falsehood, belief, and external criteria	70
168. External criteria encourage a correspondence theory, but truth then seems unattainable	70
169. The alternative coherence theory might allow two completely coherent rival sets of truths	71
170. Also coherence depends on laws of logic (e.g. contradiction) which can't take the coherence test	71
171. The correspondence theory is preferable; coherence is a test of truth, not its meaning	71
172. Belief isn't a relation of mind to object, as false beliefs lack objects	72
173. False beliefs can't relate the mind to objective falsehoods, so they must be more complex	72
174. Belief relates a mind to <i>several</i> things other than itself	12. Truth and belief 73
175. The belief relates to the 'sense' or 'direction' of the objects which it is judging	73
176. Beliefs refer to complex wholes of groups of objects, which must include a relation	74
177. Beliefs are bound by 'believing'; truths are bound by the ordered relationship of the objects	74
178. If a belief is false then the complex unity of bound objects does not exist	74
179. Truth is correspondence between a complex unity of mind, and a matching order of objects	74
180. Beliefs are true if there is a corresponding fact (which is not in the mind)	75

181. Can we ever really know anything, or only have lucky true beliefs ?	76
182. A true belief is not knowledge if it is deduced illogically, or from a false belief	76
183. 'Derivative knowledge' is validly deduced from premises known intuitively	77
184. In practice most derivative knowledge is not logically deduced (e.g. knowledge derived from reading)	77
185. Such 'psychological inference' is admissible if an unperceived logical link exists	78
186. The biggest uncertainties surround 'intuitive knowledge', which has to remain a bit vague	78
187. Knowledge by acquaintance comes close to infallible, though, by observing objects and their order	78-9
188. Judgement of truths is less secure, because the ordering is not observed	79
189. Facts about mental life (e.g. Desdemona's love) are private and not directly observable	79
190. We can be acquainted with universals, and achieve self-evident guaranteed truth	79
191. Error becomes possible as soon as the simplest judgement comes into it	80
192. In hearing sounds or comparing colours there are continual gradations of self-evidence	80
193. Similar gradations are found between very simple and highly complex reasonings	80-1
194. Intuitive knowledge loses reliability as it departs from basic sense-data and logic	81
195. 'Knowledge' is firm belief based on strong intuition or inference from intuition	81
196. Most knowledge is actually 'probable opinion' , based on lower degrees of self-evidence	81
197. Probability is greatly increased by coherence , notably in science and philosophy	81
198. Thus dreams are best disbelieved because they are not coherent like waking life	81
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199. Metaphysical reasoning to prove many grand theories and facts is largely in vain	82
200. Hegel says we can logically progress from incompleteness in the world, via antitheses and syntheses	82-3
201. This process converges on the 'Absolute Idea', and a vision of a unified spiritual 'Absolute Reality'	83
202. Hegel assumes we can deduce all the truths about a thing's intrinsic nature	83
203. But acquaintance with a thing does not include its relations, or its 'nature' (e.g. a toothache)	84
204. Thus Hegel cannot deduce from incomplete things the unreality of space, time, matter and evil	84
205. Philosophers try to prove space and time unreal (as their infinite natures seems to contradict logic)	85
206. But mathematicians (e.g. Cantor) have now proved that infinity is perfectly possible in reality	85
207. They have also shown that non-Euclidean space is possible, and reality is simply strange, not unreal	85-6
208. Where logic formerly restricted reality, it now presents huge possibilities to experience	86
209. A priori knowledge can't reveal reality, unless it offers universals to link experiences	86
210. Philosophy, like science, needs experiences, but it also offers criticism of principles	87
211. Principles on their own don't bring knowledge, but philosophy endorses most empirical science	87
212. Extreme scepticism steps outside of all knowledge, and can't get back in	87
213. Descartes is not an extreme sceptic, just a very careful and sensible critic	87
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214. While science benefits society, philosophy seems to benefit the minds of those who study it	89
215. Philosophical knowledge unifies science , and examines the grounds of beliefs	90
216. Philosophy seems not to advance, and its few real advances get taken over by science (e.g. astronomy)	90
217. The biggest philosophical questions (purpose, mind, morality) will probably <i>never</i> be answered	90
218. Philosophy keeps the big issues alive, and examines all approaches to them	90-1
219. Philosophical investigation suggests that proofs of religion cannot be found	91
220. The very uncertainty of philosophy enlarges our thoughts and frees us mentally	91
221. Philosophy can free us from our strong desires and weak wills	92
222. Philosophy studies objective truths outside the Self, and so it enlarges the Self	92
223. Relativism says truth is man-made and limited to the mind, which devalues philosophy	92
224. Philosophy brings a God-like impersonal view, and impartiality in practical life	93
225. This impartiality is desire for truth, justice in actions, and love of other people	93

GUIDE TO RUSSELL'S *THE PROBLEMS OF PHILOSOPHY*

[THE NUMBERS REFER TO ITEMS ON THE 'KEY IDEAS' SUMMARY SHEET]

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KEY TERMS IN 'THE PROBLEMS OF PHILOSOPHY'

A priori knowledge: knowledge acquired by pure thought, without reference to direct experience

Acquaintance: the direct relationship of a mind with either a 'sense-datum' or a universal

Coherence: internal consistency among a group of ideas and experiences, such that they are held to be *true* as a group

Correspondence: a relationship between groups of ideas in the mind and groups of objects in the world, such that they are *true*

Deduction: following consistent rules of reasoning to move from a group of assumptions to a conclusion (pure reason)

Description: language which links truths to build new knowledge from a basis of acquaintance

Idealism: the view of Berkeley and Leibniz that only ideas can be said to have real existence, as 'reality' is unknown

Induction: arriving at general rules by observing regularity in sequences of events (practical reason)

Inference: a step in deductive reasoning, in which the laws of logic lead from one truth to another

Intuition: our capacity to decide that some things are self-evidently true, without any further experience or reasoning

Metaphysics: a process of a priori reasoning which is thought to deduce the true nature of reality, irrespective of experiences

Monad: Leibniz's concept of a basic unit of mental reality, out of which all experience and our idea of the world is constructed

Other minds: minds apart from our own, whose existence is difficult to verify, and therefore open to scepticism

Public space: the idea of reality which we believe is shared by everyone, deduced from our private experiences

Self: the idea of a single unified entity at the heart of a conscious mind, which controls and experiences all its thoughts

Sense-data: the information coming from the physical world, which our minds experience and turn into knowledge

Solipsism: the idea that we are trapped in a world of ideas or experiences, and can know nothing except our own minds

Universal: based on Plato's *Forms*, they are ideas which explain similarities in experience and provide basic ideas for thought

POSSIBLE CRITICISMS OF RUSSELL

- He should be more ruthlessly empirical, and reject universals and a priori synthetic knowledge
- Or, he should accept innate ideas, a priori synthetic metaphysics, and the rationality of induction
- Sense-data do not exist (e.g. light is just photons, not 'data'), and the idea leads to an infinite regress in explaining perception
- He is too pessimistic about induction, which might be rationally based on empirical falsification (Popper)
- He bases his realism on 'common sense', but he should accept that there is no escape from scepticism
- He treats Berkeley as if he is stupid (pt 54), but Berkeley is *right* in his phenomenalist/anti-realist/idealist theory
- Russell's *logicism* (maths based on logic, pt 154) has been shown to be false (by Gödel, because arithmetic can't be proved)
- His theory is ultimately based on intuition, self-evidence and common sense, and these are highly relative
- His idea of truth as correspondence between a mental unity and an order of objects (pt 179) has problems...
- You can't dismiss metaphysics (which relates a priori ideas together) just because Hegel makes some mistakes