

# Bertrand Russell



## 1 Philosophical Significance

Bertrand Russell is probably the most famous Western philosopher of the 20th century. He is known for his significant research in logic and the foundations of mathematics. In particular, he attempted to provide a basis for mathematics using logic. He is also known for his work in the philosophy of language. His paper “On Denoting” is considered a paradigm of analytic philosophy. In it, he performs an extensive analysis of the meaning of the word “the.” Russell was also the teacher of another author we will be reading: Ludwig Wittgenstein. The two ended up strongly disagreeing about nearly every philosophical issue. Russell thought philosophers should strive for clarity and precision in their written work. He came to think that ordinary language was sometimes too clumsy and vague to philosophize with, so he often invented new technical concepts to help make his writings clearer.

## 2 Writing Style

Russell’s writing style is very clear and straightforward. This is largely a result of how he thought philosophy should be done: the philosopher should be very careful, very deliberate, and very clear, in order to avoid causing confusions. The excerpts we will be reading are from his book, *The Problems of Philosophy*. This was intended to be accessible to non-philosophers, and it is thus a fairly easy read. However, as with all philosophy, you should not read it quickly. His ideas and arguments still require a lot of thought.

### 3 Reading Questions

These reading questions are intended to help you focus when doing the reading. You are not required to write up answers; this is purely for your benefit. This class tests you on how well you understand the authors that we cover, and these questions are intended to help promote that understanding.

- 1) Why does Russell say that the table does not have any particular color?
- 2) Why does Russell say that the 'real table' is not the one that appears to us? Do you agree?
- 3) What does Russell call the collection of all physical objects?
- 4) What two questions does Russell ask about the answer to question (3)? How would *you* (not Russell) go about answering those questions?