Whitehead's 1911 criticism of
The Problems of Philosophy

The Problems of Philosophy was first published in London on January 24, 1912 as a volume in the Home University Library. Russell had gladly responded to the urging of one of the editors, his friend Gilbert Murray, who had written on September 19, 1910 that he certainly could produce a splendid "message to the shop-assistants about philosophy." Its typescript was in Murray's hands by early August 1911; Russell sent another copy of the typescript (probably a few days later) to Whitehead, with whom he was then reading proofs of Volume II of *Principia Mathematica*. Whitehead wrote his comments on *The Problems* in two letters and fourteen pages of critical notes, sent to Russell August 23-26. These, now in the Bertrand Russell Archives, exhibit an aspect of the personal relation between the two men and, more important, throw in sharp relief basic philosophical differences between them. They provide the chronologically first evidence of this which I have discovered in years of hunting for biographical materials on Whitehead - evidence which directly contradicts a statement of Russell's, made in a letter to me on 24 July 1960, that he could say "definitely and with certainty" that "before 1918, he had no definite opinions in philosophy and did not actively combat mine." Protective memory?

Being authorized by Whitehead's heirs to publish his letters, I now publish these, with explanations and a few comments, in the belief that, whether one's primary interest is in Russell's philosophy at that time or in Whitehead, the letters are too illuminating to remain private any longer. Whatever Russell wrote to Whitehead just before or after receiving these letters is not extant, for he did not then make copies of such letters, and Whitehead was not a keeper; in any case, all but a tiny fraction of his papers was destroyed in 1948 shortly after his death.[1] The destruction is especially unfortunate in the present case because, with one exception (to be noted later) there is no passage in *The Problems* which looks like a response to an objection raised by Whitehead.

In August 1911 the Whiteheads were at their Lockeridge cottage in Wiltshire. Whitehead had on his hands *Principia* proofsheets of Part IV, Relation-Arithmetic, a topic which had been Russell's primary responsibility, as cardinal arithmetic had been Whitehead's.[2] Two other matters were much

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[1]Whitehead was especially anxious that his unpublished manuscripts be done away with; he had hated seeing young philosophers toil on Peirce's instead of developing their own ideas.

[2]Bertrand Russell, "Whitehead and *Principia Mathematica*," *Mind*, 57 (April 1948), 137.

on his mind: the extension of *Principia* to geometry in Vol. IV, which was to be his work, and an onerous academic post which he had just accepted after spending a year in London as an unemployed Sc.D. (The Department of Applied Mathematics and Mechanics at University College, London, had suddenly been left without a single lecturer, let alone a professor, and Whitehead, who had hopes for the professorship, agreed to do all the lecturing (including astronomy) in 1911-12.) It was in these circumstances that he wrote to Russell as follows:

Lockeridge Farm
Lockeridge
Nr Marlborough
Aug. 23rd [1911][3]

Dear Bertie

Thanks for the typed copy of your book. May we keep it for a week or two? It is really excellent. As I read it, the extreme difficulty of condensing such a disputable subject as philosophy and the lucidity of your exposition strike me more and more.

There are some arguments in it which do not convince me. Just at present I am rather seedy, but in a few days I will write at length.

The Relation-Arithmetic is wonderful. The triumphs of symbolism cannot go further.

I will return the last proof-sheets in two days. Really the subject is too complicated to be done quickly. I am not nearly at the end of *174. No serious changes, but a few minor things.

Throughout September I am at Cambridge, working at the Observatory and putting together notes for lectures....

Yrs affect.
A.N.W.

On the 25th Whitehead mailed the proof-sheets from Lockeridge as promised, and in the last paragraph of his covering letter wrote, "I will now devote the next hour or two to some notes on your shilling shocker."

The notes were sent with the following letter, the first paragraph of which I omit because it concerns only the transmission of proof-sheets of *Principia* between Whitehead, Russell, and the Cambridge University Press.

Lockeridge
August 26th. [1911]

Dear Bertie

I enclose my notes on your 'Message'. My general view of your philosophy is that it is in the same state of transition as that in which Kant unfortunately wrote his Critique. What I recognize as distinctively yours, seems to me to be excellent. But where (in my ignorance) I guess that you are repeating received ideas, I cannot follow. You seem to me to lack self-confidence (or rather, time) to systematize philosophy afresh, in accordance with your own views.

[3]The year, omitted by Whitehead here and on August 26, was supplied much later by Russell, but is not open to doubt.

From the point of view of the 'Message' only superficial alterations seem to me desirable, and a making apparent of the ragged ends and difficulties. As a 'Message', I cannot praise too highly.

Yrs affectly
A.N.W.

Whitehead's habit of giving his former pupil high praise and the encouragement which he often needed is evident here, as in most of his collaboration letters. And the implicit acknowledgment that he lacks Russell's knowledge of current philosophical literature will not surprise anyone who has seen those letters. What is distinctive is Whitehead's encouraging Russell to philosophize in a different way, more original and systematic, of which he wants Russell to believe himself capable. (It is not obvious how anything of the sort could have been done in this popular book which is centered around theory of knowledge.) That Whitehead's hope was vain, appears from Russell's pleasure in the publication of *The Problems*. For example, when writing about its favorable reception in America to his friend Lucy Donnelly on December 19, 1912, he said, "I feel myself that it is rather an achievement! I attained a simplicity beyond what I had thought possible"; and "I feel as if I had just discovered what philosophy is and how it ought to be studied."

Whitehead, having given unstinting praise and encouragement, pulls no punches in his critical notes - he could not have thought of doing so with his intimate friend and collaborator. In effect, he says that Russell's simplicity is deceptive.

Unfortunately, there is no evidence that the typescript which Whitehead read still exists. I have accordingly replaced his page references to it by the numbers of the pages on which Whitehead's quotations and other identifiying references can be found in the edition of *The Problems* which is now in widest use - the Oxford University Press re-setting of 1946 and the photographic reprint by Galaxy Books first published in 1959. Of course, Whitehead's notes on Russell's typescript were written by hand (like all his correspondence), and in the original (but not in the preceding letters) Whitehead as he wrote - probably under time pressure and at one sitting - frequently crossed out letters, words and phrases. Most of them can be deciphered, but my examination has not turned up any case of Whitehead changing his mind as he wrote along. All the deletions are therefore ignored, and the notes printed as Whitehead meant Russell to read them.

Chapter I [Appearance and Reality]

Here we start with perception of a *table*. The question is asked, What properties does the table really have?

As to the 'shape of the table'. Why assume that our perception of space is two-dimensional? Perhaps you don't. I can't get a decisive instance just now. But the general impression on my mind is that you do. Surely such an assumption is false psychology.

Real table (if it exist) = a Physical Object (p. 9). Senses *immediately* tell us, not the truth about the object as it is apart from us, but only the truth about certain sense-data which, as far as we can see, depend on relations between us and the object - (p. 12 also cf. pp. 8, 9).

Here in pages 8, 9 and 12 you seem by a sleight of hand to take away the table which I (= the plain man) perceive. I see a 'yellow *table*' and I feel a 'hard *table*' and I infer that I feel what I see. You (rather obscurely) tell me that I see yellowness and feel hardness, and *infer* a real table. Such inferences are quite beyond plain people like myself. I perceive *objects*, and want to know about the reality of the objects I perceive. You ignore this object (or rather smuggle it away) and proceed to talk about sensations of yellowness and hardness and of an *inferred* object which causes them. This criticism naturally affects later chapters also.

Chapter II [The Existence of Matter]

Your confutation of the solipsist on p. 23 seems to me to be entirely fallacious. First the reality of space seems assumed e.g. "... it cannot ever have been in any place where I did not see it;". There *is* no such place.

Secondly - Why talk of the cat 'being hungry', thereby suggesting that the cat really exists while I look at it.

As far as I can see all your objections are arrived at by making tacit presuppostions inconsistent with the position.

I suggest that the strongest ground to take is to appeal to our judgments as to the worth of our affections and of our moral intuitions. These judgments must be wrong, if the solipsist is right. [In the margin beside this paragraph Whitehead pencilled, "Probably nothing in this".]

Chapter III [and Chapter IV] [Idealism; Knowledge by Acquaintance and Knowledge by Description]

(p. 29) "The real space is public, the apparent space is private to the percipient."

(p. 30) 'These physical objects are in the space of science, which we may call "physical" space.'

(p. 35) "Thus it is quite gratuitous to suppose that physical objects have colours, and therefore there is no justification for making such a supposition. Exactly similar arguments apply to other sense-data."

(p. 41) "Our previous arguments concerning the colour did not prove it to be mental; they only proved that its existence depends upon the relation of our sense organs to the physical object - in our case the table".

But the 'table' has been smuggled away by you long ago - you have only left us sensations of colour etc. and an imagined physical world which causes it. Note that particular physical objects as causes of our sensations suffer from the usual defect of all particular causation. If you trace it down far enough, all our sensations (on the scientific hypothesis) come from the relation of ourselves to the whole physical universe. Was not Berkeley talking of the 'table' which the plain man perceives?

[Chapter VIII] [How "A Priori" Knowledge is Possible]

(p. 86) Surely you are wrong in making Kant identify the "physical object" with the "thing-in-itself". All the notions associated with time, space, number, causation apply to the physical object and none of them to Kant's thing-in-itself.

I venture to summarize Kant thus - I (Ego) am in relation to a reality-other-than-myself. This relation as known to me is to be found in my sensations, where alone are marks of an activity other than my own. I, by a self-activity which can be analyzed into an application of the pure forms of time and space and a synthetic unity of apperception [to me mysterious (ANW)], etc., etc. weld these relations (expressed in sensation) into perceptions of *objects*, the *phenomenal objects*. All my ordinary ideas apply to these phenomenal objects *necessarily*, because they are merely expressive of an analysis of the process of formation by me. The molecules of science are conceived phenomenal objects which have merely the properties of being in time and place, but have a permanence of existence and of mutual relation superior to that of the perceived phenomenal objects, and thus satisfy the intellectual demand that all change is a change of something itself permanent. [He lays down this principle somewhere, but I have not read him for more than 20 years, so cannot quote]. I can say nothing of the real-other-than-myself which is indicated by my sensations. I infer its existence from the lack of necessity in the occurrence of sensations, so that sensations do not express myself -

Now if this is anything like Kant, you do not touch him. 1*st* you muddle the physical object (= scientific molecule?) in 'public space' with his thing-in-itself. 2*nd* you have smuggled away and ignored the phenomenal object with which he starts. Thus the whole point of the 'phenomenon' mentioned by you on p. 86 is lost. 3*rdly* Your 'main objection' on p. 87 is that our nature is a fact of the 'existing world'. Apparently something in time, for 'tomorrow' applies to it. Kant would certainly have denied this. This would be the 'phenomenal ego'. The 'transcendental ego' is not in time - rather conversely. What Kant has to face according to your argument is that he has not proved that the certainties of today are those of tomorrow. This is exactly what he has been trying to prove - namely that only those things are certainties which are *necessary* to [i.e. involved in] the perception of a phenomenal object. His argument is 'apart from them, no object'. Your argument is 'Objects may tomorrow have different properties'. His reply is 'Then there will not be any objects to have any properties'.

Similarly your second objection (p. 87) that 2+2 physical objects *must* make 4 physical objects does not apply. Of course I admit that he gives himself away by talking of 'things-in-themselves' thus admitting the idea of plurality to apply. But a discoverer must be allowed some lapses - substitute 'Reality-in-itself' and your argument collapses. For if you say 'reality-in-itself is one' or 'reality-in-itself is many' or 'reality-in-itself is five' he answers 'None of these numerical ideas apply'.

Similarly all your remarks about the beech tree fall.

Finally you might say, 'at least Reality-in-itself is something'. He replies 'Yes, but now I am conceiving reality-in-itself as a phenomenal object, namely the counterpart of my phenomenal self'.

It seems to me that Chapter VIII is not within a hundred miles of Kant's position.

Chapter IX [The World of Universals]

You have entirely failed to convince me that there is such an universal as "whiteness". Your only argument is that a lot of bother will be created in reconstructing the existing philosophical terminology and explanation. To a plain man this is very unconvincing - all philosophy is unplausible to us.

I admit your proof as to 'relations'. As to your proof that Universals are not merely mental (p. 99), I wish you had taken a

simpler instance than 'Edinburgh is north of London'. I am in such doubt as to the status of 'Edinburgh' and 'north' and 'London' in the physical world, and of the status of the physical world as left by you, that your argument doesn't carry much weight.

To repeat you *define* 'physical objects' as 'real' - cf. p. 1 of my notes. And all your subsequent arguments seem to me to be that, if we now assume some physical objects [e.g. cats] to be unreal [? = non-existent], the result is very paradoxical. Of course it is.

But of course, if you sweep away Kant's position and Berkeley's of course you are left with a real world of interrelated parts, or with *one* thing [which brings one back to 'Berkeley - God', ?doesn't it]. On the first alternative there are relations not in the mind. What I am objecting to is that one cannot see what you are assuming in the 'London-Edinburgh' illustration.

From the correspondence with Gilbert Murray about the text of *The Problems* it seems very likely that Russell sent his final typescript to the publisher before he received Whitehead's objections. We cannot say with certainty that he took no account of them when he read proof in November, since the proof-sheets no longer exist; but we can give a negative answer with high probability. Russell would have had to notice and judge positions opposed to his own, whereas in the book as published all the passages that Whitehead quoted from the typescript as targets of his criticism appear unchanged, and those to which he referred correspond to what is on the pages I have named.

On p. 86 of the Oxford/Galaxy edition there is this footnote:

Kant's 'thing in itself' is identical *in definition* with the physical object, namely, it is the cause of sensations. In the properties deduced from the definition it is not identical, since Kant held (in spite of some inconsistency as regards cause) that we can know that none of the categories are applicable to the 'thing in itself'.

I have learned from the Russell Archives that this footnote first appeared in the second printing of the book (on p. 134), which according to the publishers occurred in September 1913. I read the note as providing what Russell thought a sufficient short answer to Whitehead's defense of Kant.

In none of the book's printings is an answer offered to any of Whitehead's other objections. In the original Preface, never changed, Russell wrote that he had "derived valuable assistance from unpublished writings of G.E. Moore[4] and J.M. Keynes" - from Moore, on "the relations of sense-data to physical objects"; and he thanked Murray for "criticisms and suggestions." He did not mention Whitehead.

Many comments on Whitehead's criticisms that could be useful in various ways come to mind. I limit myself to the ones which I think most important to keep in mind.

Although Whitehead left it to Russell to attack the philosophical

[4]Lectures which Moore gave in the autumn of 1910 and published in 1953 as the first ten chapters of *Some Main Problems of Philosophy*.

problems that arose in their *Principia* project, his criticisms are an essential part of that story. For example, as Jager has reported,[5] in 1904 Russell wrote a long manuscript, "On Meaning and Denotation," and abandoned it in view of Whitehead's criticisms. But *The Problems* concerns the relation of human knowledge to experience and thought. Though Russell had published many papers on philosophical issues, and books on philosophies *of* - of geometry, Leibniz, mathematics - it was his first book on *general* philosophy. I see the emphatic objections to six of its chapters as an omen of rejections of Russell's later work as Whitehead became more engaged in philosophy.

As a rough identification of the "received ideas" which Whitehead (in his covering letter) says he "cannot follow" (a mild way of saying that the ideas strike him as artificial and the arguments as not cogent), I suggest the tradition of Berkeley and Hume on sense perception, and the recent ideas of Moore.

Russell was a sense-datum theorist for only six years; the significance of Whitehead's objections to Chapter I should not be thus limited, for he identifies his own conviction with that of "the plain man," whom Russell continued to regard as mistaken. The conversational phrase, "the plain man," is much too rough to fit the real Whitehead, and he does not make it prominent in his writings. Instead he says such things as (in 1915) that science is rooted in common-sense thought, and (1925) that in philosophy the ultimate appeal is to naive experience. His distaste for logical atomism must have been extreme.

For a short time, in essays published between 1915 and 1917, Whitehead presented the perceived table as an unconscious construction out of actual and hypothetical perceptions, which he sometimes called "sense-objects". He never gave up his opposition to Russell's 1911 view that belief in the public table is an *inference* from sense-data. How much Russell's substitution of constructions for inferences, announced in 1914, owed to Whitehead is hard to say, so far as tables are concerned; I am sure only that Russell always attributed to Whitehead the idea of applying this method to reach the space and time of mathematical physics. Whitehead's criticism of *The Problems* does not mention the principle of substituting constructions for inferences, and I doubt that he had yet shown this use of it to Russell.

Perhaps Whitehead read the second chapter too hastily, and not all that Russell wrote against solipsism begs the question, but his critic has at least raised a possibility that occurs to few readers of the chapter. I have no evidence that Whitehead ever thought solipsism needed to be argued against; if, being Russell, you desire an argument, the

[5]Ronald Jager, *The Development of Bertrand Russell's Philosophy* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1972), pp. 271, 273.

one Whitehead suggests *is* stronger than arguments that turn on easier understanding of sense perceptions, and its character should have appealed to Russell as moralist and lover. As to what was in Whitehead's mind when he added his cryptic marginal note, I can suggest only this, that there is probably no compelling reason for placing the person one loves and the cat in different categories, so far as belief in external reality is concerned.

Concern over tacit assumptions about space comes in here, and prominently in Whitehead's criticism of the next two chapters. His own complex analysis was not to be elaborated for the public until 1914,[6] but he is already sure that initial disjunction of apparent space from physical space creates an insoluble problem. Whitehead is not yet saying, as he did in 1915, that the true position is that "in the act of experience we perceive a whole [apparent nature] formed of related differentiated parts"[7]; but I think that this position is at least coming into Whitehead's mind; Russell always rejected it. In the sentence which follows Whitehead's quotation from p. 41 he is accusing Russell of "bifurcating nature," if I may use the words that he made famous a few years later.

Whitehead's opening paragraph about Chapter IX is bound to surprise us. I think that in fact he no more disbelieved in universals such as whiteness than in an external world. In both cases, the argument from considerations of simplicity is not what convinces the plain man. It may be, however, that Whitehead at this time was resisting the addition of white*ness* to the white-here and white-there which we discern in apparent nature.

I take "all philosophy is unplausible to us" as a dramatic overstatement, of a kind which Whitehead would make in talk with friends but never in print. Whitehead himself, who joined the Aristotelian Society in 1915, soon developed a philosophy of natural science, then a metaphysics which was incomprehensible to Russell. His criticism of *The Problems of Philosophy* is fair evidence that the two men could not have collaborated on any subject other than *Principia Mathematica*.

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[6]In "La Théorie Relationniste de l'Espace," read at Le Premier Congrès de Philosophie mathématique, Paris, on April 8, 1914. The war delayed publication to May 1916 (*Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale*, 23: 423-454). As I write, Dr. I. Grattan-Guinness is making arrangements with a well-known University Press to publish his English translation with comments.

[7]*The Organisation of Thought* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1917), p. 216; from a paper, "Space, Time, and Relativity," read to the British Association and the Aristotelian Society in 1915, and currently reprinted in *The Aims of Education and Other Essays* (the passage is four pages from the end of that volume).