

## Philosophical Problems – A Collective Book Review

Nagel, Thomas: *Mortal Questions*, Cambridge: University Press, (1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1979)

Russell, Bertrand: *The Problems of Philosophy*, London: Williams & Norgate, (1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1912)

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Philosophical problems and questions play without any doubt an important part in the teaching of philosophy. They are very useful means to bringing students to grasp the meaning of philosophizing, teaching them the use of philosophical methods, and getting them to continue to reason about philosophical problems by themselves. This is especially true when the problems and questions are properly presented together with possible answers, objections to these, and replies to the objections. However, it is not straightforward to find philosophical problems in the philosophical literature, which are both representative of the philosophical tradition and useful for teaching. So, where can teachers find philosophical problems suited to their teaching purposes?

Therefore, I have decided to choose two books, which could be helpful or at least inspiring to answer the issue above. These books contain several philosophical problems and present ways of dealing with them. However, the choice might seem surprising, since many readers will already be familiar with one or both of the books. But my aim is to draw attention to both of them from a didactical point of view. They both offer examples of philosophical problems, but their approaches in dealing with them are quite different.

### I. Russell: *The Problems of Philosophy*

Russell's "The Problems of Philosophy" is a classic from 1912 with countless new editions till today.<sup>1</sup> It is very likely, that many students of philosophy will encounter it in their studies. Russell addresses academic students (cf. Russell's bibliographical note at the end of the book). The book is meant to offer them a problem-centered introduction into the issues and tasks of philosophical inquiry, thereby also explaining the epistemological positions of major philosophers of the modern age (e.g., Berkeley, Hume, Kant). Russell explicitly does not give a historical or doxographic introduction to philosophy, but offers a reasoning which can only be understood by the reader who is ready to closely follow it. It seems that to Russell, questions, problems, and ways of dealing with them are the resource of philosophical tradition (cf. Chapter 15).

However, the title of the book is somehow misleading: Russell is not concerned with the whole of philosophy but is dealing with theoretical philosophy only and especially with epistemological questions (theory of knowledge, metaphysics) (cf. preface). In the beginning, the author does not start from a definition of the nature of philosophical problems but chooses

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<sup>1</sup> Today Russell's work is in the public domain and therefore freely accessible:  
[https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The\\_Problems\\_of\\_Philosophy](https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_Problems_of_Philosophy), 01.03.2021.

some of them “to which it seemed to me [Russell] possible to say something positive and constructive” (ibid.). He does not argue for the claim that problems in the philosophical theory of knowledge or truth are important problems at the core of philosophy and simply assumes that they are and that the reader will accept this. We should keep in mind, that Russell’s reasoning on philosophical issues is guided by two specific aims:

- (1.) Developing the outline of a full theory of theoretical knowledge by dealing with its problems.
- (2.) Presenting a paradigmatical way of reasoning on epistemological questions to academic students. Thereby also providing them with exemplary knowledge about the contents, methods, topics of academic philosophy.

In the book, the philosophical problems are derived from one another in the attempts of answering them. They are discussed in a continual stream of thought throughout the book. Therefore, the book could be considered to be of a similar genre to Descartes’ *Meditationes*: Similar to Descartes, Russell is searching for philosophical answers, whilst challenging the provisionally achieved intermediate conclusions. Russell thereby invites the reader to follow him in his reasoning, facing argumentative obstacles and overcoming them.

The reasoning is sound and most of the time strikingly compelling, however, sometimes it seems – especially if we consider common views of philosophical beginners – that there is something missing. The tone of writing is scientific and impersonal, strongly abstracting from feelings and facts of personal life. On the one hand, this is the philosophical approach, since the reasons should be convincing not only to myself but to everyone who follows them. On the other hand, to students, discussing a similar problem in class, it could seem that the chosen examples and answers may be too suggestive and somehow artificial compared to the complexity of ‘real life’ problems.

For example, Russell says, if subjective idealism would be true, this would mean: “we alone exist. This is an uncomfortable possibility.” (Chapter 2) Considering this possibility theoretically, as Russell does, it would be uncomfortable because we would have to live with only a fragmentation of knowledge or an incomplete understanding of what is really going on around us. But students might ask more existential or practical questions such as: Does it really make sense to consider other people, our relations to them or the economic or political structure of human life as a mere illusion, if daily we are forced to interact with all of these? In teaching, it would be necessary to distinguish between the sceptic scenario as a thought experiment on one hand, which is used by Russell to critically explore “the vagueness and confusion that underlie our ordinary ideas” (Chapter 1), and on the other hand the discussion of assumptions and consequences in particular cases. Findings from case-discussions could then challenge a thought experiment’s assumptions. For example, the sceptic scenario does not challenge practical knowledge: If we are aiming to achieve something in life, we have to attribute to ourselves the assumption of being free and able to effect events in the world, as Kant has famously pointed out. So, the sceptic scenario does not challenge practical assumptions or knowledge.

Sometimes it does not seem necessary to follow exactly the path Russell takes in his argumentation. When Russell for example asks, if there is anything that can't reasonably be doubted (Chapter 1), he claims that usually, we would take the existence of three-dimensional objects around us for certain ("it is natural to begin with our present experiences", *ibid.*). Thereby, he leads the reasoning in a certain direction (to the question 'how to know of the existence of physical objects'), which makes sense in a well-structured introduction to epistemological questions. But in teaching, we should be prepared that students might not mention first the existence of objects as the most certain assumption. They could claim, for example, that it is sure that all parents love their children, or that it is certain they have no talent for music and will never develop any musical skills, or that they know for sure that only true friendship gives life meaning. This would change the path of philosophical reasoning and the findings of philosophical problems.

Lots of examples from real-life outside academia are presented in the book. But, the use of examples functions always as an illustration for a given theoretical concept or claim: e.g., table as a physical object, whiteness as a universal, or sentences like "We know that the man with the iron mask existed, and many propositions are known about him; but we do not know who he was", "Charles I.'s head was cut off", "For example, I can see at a glance the whole of the page on which I am writing". To Russell, the content of the examples is of secondary interest, they are not explored further. At school, the ways to find a proper description of concepts, phenomena, or cases are also an important aspect of the dealing with a philosophical problem.

The strength of the book is the presentation of a coherent argumentation and the explanation of how the epistemological-philosophical problems are connected to each other. Russell is able to present philosophy as a problem-centered discipline without missing to present philosophical tradition as a resource for attempts to answer the questions (often for example he comes back to the differences between rationalists and empiricists). However, Russell does not continue his introduction to include normative questions (a few of them are very briefly touched in Chapter 15, but questions of ethics and political philosophy are missing).

There is no doubt: Russell's book is full of interesting philosophical questions. I will name some of them for possible extraction for teaching purposes (but the book offers more) and to indicate the steps of progress in Russell's reasoning:

- "Is there any knowledge in the world which is so certain that no reasonable man could doubt it?" (1)<sup>2</sup>
- Since for humans, it is impossible to see "the 'real' shape of things at once", is there even any real object besides its multi-perspective appearance?
  
- Could everything besides the existence of me and my sense data be doubted? (2)
- Could it be possible that everything what appears to me is a mere dream or illusion?

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<sup>2</sup> The numbers in brackets refer to the chapters of Russell's book.

- How, if at all, do objects exist in time- and space-order? (3)
- What is the intrinsic nature of physical objects?
  
- Is everything what exists mental or must “at any rate whatever can be known to exist, [...] be in some sense mental”? (4)
- What does it mean to “know something”?
- Can we “never truly judge that something with which we are not acquainted exists”?
  
- [Russell’s own account on knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge by description as an answer to problems in Chapter 4. (5)]
  
- “We are all convinced that the sun will rise tomorrow. Why?” (6)
- How is the principle of inductive reasoning justified without being able to be justified by logical deduction or by experience? (Hume’s problem of induction)
  
- Are there innate principles or is all knowledge derived from experience? (7)
- In what way are mathematics and logic independent from experience?
  
- Is there any knowledge a priori and how is it possible? (8)
- How is general knowledge without inductive inferences from experience possible?
- “How is pure mathematics possible?”
  
- In what way do abstract ideas, like relations, exist? (9)
- Are universals only acts of thought?
  
- How do we gain knowledge about universals? (10)
- What is the difference between general a priori propositions and propositions derived from empirical generalization?
  
- Are there self-evident truths? (11)
  
- “How are we to know, in a given case, that our belief is not erroneous?” (12)
- “What do we mean by truth and falsehood?”
  
- How “can [we] know what is true and what is false”? (13)
- If it doesn’t make sense to consider all knowledge to be derivative knowledge, is there intuitive knowledge?
  
- Can philosophy grant us total knowledge of the universe as a whole? (14)
  
- What is the value of philosophy and why should it be studied? (15)

## **II. Nagel: Mortal Questions**

“Mortal Questions” by Thomas Nagel is a collection of papers, which was first published in 1979 and was re-edited many times ever since. The book is about philosophical problems in a big variety of topics. The collection contains 14 stand-alone-essays, which are connected, as the author states, by “an interest in the point of view of individual human life and the problem of its relation to more impersonal conceptions of reality” (xii)<sup>3</sup>. There are 2 original articles (*Panpsychism; Subjective and Objective*) and 12 reprints – among those is the well-known *What is it like to be a bat?* The papers differ in length in range from 5 to 25 pages.

It should be mentioned that the author’s “problem-centered approach to philosophy” was explicitly recently honored with the Nicholas Rescher Prize for Systematic Philosophy 2021.<sup>4</sup>

Maybe, the best approach to Nagel’s book is to first read the preface, to jump from there to the last essay (Subjective and Objective), which is reflecting on the ways why certain philosophical problems occur and with which basic problems they are connected, and to then read the other essays with this background.

In the preface, Nagel gives a short account of philosophical problems in general, but also on the importance of questions of “mortal life”. These problems, as Nagel claims, “have not received much attention from analytic philosophers, because it is hard to be clear and precise about them” (ix). In dealing with such life-questions in a philosophical way there is always the challenge to get clear about the facts and feelings with which they are connected. Nagel states that we should keep in mind that “in philosophy our methods are themselves in question” (xi). Therefore, it is necessary to stay sceptical about seemingly good or final answers. Engaging with philosophical problems should, according to Nagel, involve reflection on philosophical methods and approaches. One quote might offer an insight into Nagel’s meta-philosophical views and his approach to philosophical problems: “I believe one should trust problems over solutions, intuition over arguments, and pluralistic discord over systematic harmony” (x).

In the book, Nagel does not take up problems from (academic) philosophy but focuses on questions that may arise in everyday life. In contrast to Russell, Nagel does not specialize or constrain himself to problems of one philosophical discipline. The reader will follow Nagel through – what I would like to call – *open-ended case-studies* on philosophical questions arising in a mortal’s life. The difficulties and shortcomings of a given answer are always kept in view. Many of the case-studies do not explicitly end in aporia, but the provisional findings are considered by the author to be only more or less satisfying or convincing.

While Russell gives reasons for a final answer to a philosophical problem (e.g., idealism is wrong), Nagel often does not give any final positive answer. Nagel makes us see what the proper description or formulation of a philosophical problem is and introduces us to the controversy in attempts to deal with them based on cases drawn from mortal life, which is a difficult task. Nagel gives many illustrative examples from public life, world history, and literature. They serve as “intuitions pumps” to enrich the spectrum of intuitions, positions, or objections. Nagel discusses classical and recent positions in a pragmatic problem-centered

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<sup>3</sup> I am quoting the pages from the 14th edition of Nagel’s book (2012).

<sup>4</sup> <https://dailynous.com/2021/02/11/rescher-prize-awarded-thomas-nagel>, 10.03.2021. Rescher devoted lots of his philosophical works to meta-philosophical questions, in particular to the nature of philosophical problems.

way. The range of authors discussed is wide. To name only a few of them: Aristotle, Camus, Hume, Kant, Kripke, Nozick, Parfit, Rawls, Sartre, Williams and Wittgenstein.

Some of the philosophical problems discussed are closer to teaching purposes than others. For example, to properly understand the philosophical problems discussed in *Brain Bisection and the Unity of Consciousness*(11) and *Panpsychism* (13) it is necessary to already be familiar with terminology and isms from recent discussions in the philosophy of mind. In these cases, it becomes obvious that Nagel's book is not addressing beginning students – as Russell did.

According to Nagel, one of the main problems of philosophy, which “emerges in several areas of philosophy”, is the “problem of the opposition between subjective and objective points of view” (14: Subjective and Objective, 196). Nagel develops this core problem by examining examples of other problems drawn from different philosophical disciplines: The meaning of life, the problem of free will, the concept of personal identity, the mind-body-problem, and the conflicting concepts of consequentialism and more agent-centered views in ethics. In these problems, there is lasting controversy, which Nagel explains by naming the wicked core problem: there is always a conflict between more subjective, phenomenon-centered, and more objective, impersonal views, while both sides claim “dominance over the other, by virtue of inclusion” (ibid.: 205). This means that both sides seem to be able to explain its object, but also to be able to reduce the opposite theory as a case of its own general assumptions, while none of the two approaches could be abandoned. For example (subjective) thinking and thought are philosophy's means and object, but mere subjective thought needs always to be transcended to impersonal reasons to find anything to be called knowledge about the (objective) world. The mind-body-problem arises because, on the one hand, in a scientific approach “subjectively apparent facts about the self, seem to vanish as one ascends to a more objective standpoint” (ibid.: 210), while on the other hand, the subjective facts are not private but public events in a more or less impersonal way. Nagel then goes on to name three unsuccessful types of intermediating the subjective and the objective, to conclude:

The problem is to explain why objectivity is inadequate as a comprehensive ideal of understanding, without faulting it for not including subjective elements it could not include. There is always room for improvement in our objective understanding of things, naturally, but the proposal I am considering is not that the objective picture is incomplete, but rather that it is in essence only partial. (ibid.: 211f.)

To grasp the meaning and to draw the consequences from this picture would be too much to ask from students. But for teachers, it could function as important meta-philosophical background knowledge, which is worth to be considered, while dealing with more relatable philosophical problems in class (these can be found in papers 1-11). Since Nagel's claim asks us to accept the challenge of living a life in a world with a fragmentation of knowledge and incomplete theory of this world, while not giving up the search for objective understanding with impersonal reasons.

I will name some of the philosophical problems discussed by Nagel for possible extraction

to teaching purposes (but the book offers more):

- Is it really a bad thing to die? (1)
  
- Is it possible to achieve something meaningful and long-lasting in our life, which will not later turn out to be small or unimportant from another point of view? (2)
- Are all our actions, activities, and efforts in life absurd?
  
- Can, if at all, externally induced failures in immoral intended activity or circumstantial immoral outcomes of a morally intended action exculpate from moral responsibility or guilt? (3)
- How is it possible to identify the circumstantial scope of control and responsibility of our actions without having to excuse everything by determinism?
- In what sense could agents be said to be more or less morally culpable in complex situations?
  
- What does sexual perversion distinguish from normal sexuality? (4)
- Are there natural and unnatural ways of human sexuality?
  
- Is there, if any, a moral basis for rules of war, when war already is in itself most of the time morally wrong? (5)
- Is it a morally acceptable means of war to attack civilians to induce an enemy to surrender, to damage his morale, or to end a war faster?
  
- Is it acceptable or sometimes even necessary for politicians and institutions to act ruthlessly or in morally dubious ways to achieve a higher good? (6)
- Are there two moral worlds with different standards: A Person being a private citizen and another one for the person in its roles, job positions, or public offices?
  
- Is it just to promote someone to an office because he or she represents a minority that fell often victim to discrimination in the past? (7)
- Should there be lower standards for the achieving of certain positions for individuals or groups to compensate for their less fortunate starting situation in life?
- Do we do justice to a person, her identity or skills, if she is appointed to an office by preferential policy?
  
- In which sense is “equality” an intrinsic value to a society and in which ways should equality be socially promoted? (8)
- How should we treat people equally?
  
- Are values comparable and is there a unitary meta-value to scale all values? (9)

- Do all decisions need to be justified by a (final, single) reason?
- Given that for the time being, we have to live with only a fragmentation of practical knowledge, can we still arrive at good decisions?
- In what way, if any, can ethical theory help to live a good life or to make the right decisions?
  
- How are the rational level and the behavioral level in ethical reasoning connected? (10)
  
- How many minds do people with bisected left and right hemisphere of the brain have? (11)
- Does conscious mental activity require the existence of a single mental subject?
- Is thinking without consciousness possible?
  
- Is it possible to fully describe what consciousness is by reduction to physical processes in the brain and body? (12)
- How does the subjective character of experience differ from an objective description of mental states?
  
- What are the basic entities in the universe – mental or physical or other? (13)
- Are there proto-mental elements (pan-psychism), which could not be reduced to physical objects?

### **Conclusion**

Both books offer a variety of interesting and challenging philosophical problems. The variety of topics is wider and also covering normative questions in Nagel's. Sometimes it is possible to directly extract passages from the texts for teaching purposes. In this case, students or philosophical beginners might find Russell's writings easier to digest. Both books offer philosophical problems which are useful for teaching purposes.

Reading these two books from a didactical point of view, one should carefully check what both philosophers consider to be common sense, intuitively right, or sound illustrative examples. Usually, these are announced by phrases about e. g. what "we", most of the people, or the common human normally would think. The choices by the authors are not necessarily coherent with what students, especially philosophical beginners, would think or say. At these points, teachers will maybe automatically be aware and derive from their experience of common preconceptions alternative assumptions by students. Yet, the important task remains to find in meta-philosophy and didactics of philosophy means to take into account common intuitions or preconceptions in philosophical reasoning, without constructing them arbitrarily or reducing them to an illustrative function.