

PHILO 380.81: Bertrand Russell

Hunter College | Spring 2017 | Taught by Daniel Harris (danielwharris@gmail.com)

Course website: danielwharris.com/teaching/380/

About the Course

The great American philosopher W. V. O. Quine wrote the following for a memorial symposium on Russell following his death in 1970:

Russell's life coincides with an era in the history of philosophy that detaches itself rather neatly, and can be defined in any of three almost equivalent ways: philosophy since John Stuart Mill; or, the past hundred years in philosophy; or, most significantly, the Age of Russell. We are now at the end of an era. *Eheu fugaces*.

Quine was wrong in saying that 1970 marked the end of the Age of Russell. A great deal of the best and most institutionally successful philosophy currently being done in the English-speaking world—and, increasingly, in Europe and Asia—still bears Russell's influence.

What makes Russell important is that philosophers are still obsessing over the topics that he placed at the center of philosophical discussion, and thinking about them in ways that Russell pioneered. Along with his close friend, G.E. Moore, his contemporary, Gottlob Frege, and his student, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Russell is one of the founding figures of analytic philosophy. Very many philosophers still identify themselves as analytic philosophers today. Understanding Russell's philosophical contributions can go a long way toward helping us to understand the preoccupations of analytic philosophers in general. That's what we're going to try to do in this course.

Office Hours

My office is 1446HW. My official office hours are Mondays and Thursdays, 4:15–5:15, or by appointment.

Grade Breakdown

- 40% Written Questions / Participation
- 10% First Essay
- 10% Your feedback on others' first essays
- 10% Second Essay
- 10% Feedback on others' second essays
- 20% Revised draft of Second Essay

Website and Readings

Electronic versions of the readings for this course are available via the course website. Please read all of the required readings listed under each day before that day's class. The readings, and the pace at which we read them, will depend somewhat on students' interests and how things are going in the class. So make sure to check the website regularly.

If you prefer to read paper books rather than PDFs downloaded from the website, you may want to get copies of the following books, which we'll read substantial portions of:

- Stewart Shapiro, *Thinking about Mathematics*
- Bertrand Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy*
- Gottlob Frege, *The Foundations of Arithmetic*
- Russell, *The Philosophy of Logical Atomism*
- Kripke, *Naming and Necessity*

Questions / Participation

This will mainly be a seminar-style discussion class, in which we all try to learn from each other as much as possible. This means that you have to come to class having made a serious attempt to understand the readings. You should also bring a copy of the day's reading with you, either on paper or some perusable electronic form, so that we can refer to it together.

As you read, take notes on anything that you find puzzling—either because you feel like you're not following something that seems important or because you think the author is being confusing or saying something that seems inconsistent or wrong. Before each class, turn these notes into at least a couple of questions to raise during class. At the end of class, after you've raised them in discussion (or perhaps not, if someone else raises the same question before you), you can either hand your questions in on paper or email them to me. This will jog my memory about your class participation and allow me to keep track of attendance.

I will give you a grade of either 0 (fail), 1 (pass), or 2 (nice work!) for your questions/participation each day, and calculate your participation grade from that. You can miss or fail to participate in up to five classes during the semester before it will count against your overall participation grade.

In grading your questions and participation, I will be looking for evidence that you have put a good amount of effort into understanding the required readings, and that you have also put some work into whatever it is about them that puzzles you or with which you disagree with. For example, this question is not very good because it suggests that you either haven't spent much time trying to understand the reading or that you haven't spent much time trying to articulate what you're finding puzzling:

What does Russell mean by 'sense data'?

Instead, try something more like one of these:

Are sense data supposed to be physical objects or are they all in the mind? On page X, Russell says "...", which made me think that they're physical objects. But on page Y, Russell says "...", which made me think that they're mental.

I find Russell's notion of sense data confusing because he talks about them as if they have a spatial location, and yet I can't think of where they could be located. For example, when I have a hallucination, there is nowhere in physical space where the relevant sense data can exist. And there is nothing in my brain that has the right colors, shapes, and so on. So where are they?

During class, I will attempt to organize our discussion in an order that makes sense, and you should raise your questions at the appropriate moments. Please keep asking pressing your question until you get an answer that satisfies you!

Although part of my role is to help everyone understand the readings as well as possible, I would also like students to try answering each other's questions. So, in general, I hope you will engage in class discussion as often as possible (while also giving everyone else a fair chance to get involved). You should jump in if you're having any of the following thoughts:

- **Russell is being confusing.** Believe me: I feel your pain. Russell says plenty of things that confuse me and even professional Russell scholars. We'll all learn more from this course if we make noise when something's not making sense.
- **Russell is saying something false.** There's plenty in Russell to disagree with, and understanding a philosophical position usually means recognizing the different ways to object to it.
- **Someone in the class (another student or I) says something false.** Philosophy thrives on debate. Be respectful, take turns, and give reasons, but don't be silent.
- **The point under discussion reminds you of another philosopher.** Part of understanding Russell is seeing how he fits into a broader philosophical tradition.
- **I have been running my mouth too much.** Sometimes I need to shut up and hear what someone else thinks. Help me out with that!

Obviously, it is easier to participate if you do the required readings (and maybe some of the optional ones) before class.

Essays

Your essays should be about 1500 and 2500 words long, respectively, and should argue for some position about Russell or about one of Russell's views. (You could also write about one of the other primary sources we'll study this semester.) This can take various forms, including these:

- **Here's how to understand Russell.** Make a case that we, or someone in the secondary literature, has been interpreting Russell wrongly, or not paying enough attention to one of his ideas. Back up your reading with arguments based in the text. This may involve reading parts of Russell that go beyond what we cover in class.
- **Russell is the source of a cool idea.** Show that Russell was the one who really had some idea that someone else later took credit for, or show that one of Russell's ideas has had a big influence in a way that hasn't been generally appreciated. This option will involve reading stuff that came after Russell.
- **Russell was wrong about something.** Give your best reasons for thinking that one of Russell's ideas was on the wrong track. Ideally, suggest a positive view that does a better job.
- **Russell was right about something.** Defend one of Russell's ideas that was later criticized, dismissed out of hand, or ignored. Show that it was a better idea than people generally tend to think.

If you would like to write a paper that doesn't fit one of these moulds, talk to me about it. In fact, I suggest talking to me about whatever you plan to write. I can probably help you to pick a topic, to hone a messy topic down to a manageable one, and to find relevant things to read.

Essay Feedback and Revision

Each student will be responsible for reading and writing constructive feedback about each other student's essays. These comments will be given back to the essay's writer, and to me for grading. The comments should begin with a 200-word summary of the essay's argument, and should then provide at least 300 words of constructive feedback about ways in which the essay could be improved.

The goal of this exercise is to improve each other's papers, and to become better at giving and receiving helpful feedback. Good philosophical writing is almost always the result of a slow and collaborative process involving several drafts. (If you don't believe me, look at how many people get thanked for their feedback at the start of most philosophy books and essays.)

I will grade the comments on the basis of how well you understand the paper being commented on, and on the helpfulness of your comments. Of course: criticisms and objections can make very helpful comments, if they show a gap in the author's argument. And mere compliments aren't very helpful. But good comments are always respectful and aimed at making the paper better in the long run.

After you receive comments on the second essay, you will use them to revise the essay and hand in a second draft. Although this revised draft is worth 20% of your grade, you can't get credit for it unless you complete the first draft and also submit comments on others' essays. And none of this will work unless your first draft and comments are submitted on time. So, both essays, and your feedback for others on the second one, will have to be submitted on time. I will deduct a full letter grade per day for late drafts and comments.

Rough Schedule

The class will be divided into roughly three units. All of this is approximate, and may vary depending on how fast our progress is, and what students' interests are.

Weeks 1-4: Logic and Philosophy of Mathematics

First, we'll try to get a sense of Russell's ideas in the philosophy of mathematics, including the logic that he developed along the way. Although this work can be quite difficult to understand, we need to get at least the central philosophical points out of it, because this early work is where Russell developed several of his key philosophical methods that he and other would seek to apply elsewhere later. Because of the difficulty of the primary texts, we'll read a lot by other authors in this unit. We'll read some excerpts from the following, as well as some other things:

- Russell, *The Principles of Mathematics*
- Russell, *Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy*
- Frege, *The Foundations of Arithmetic*
- Shapiro, *Thinking about Mathematics*
- Correspondence between Russell and Frege
- ...plus some notes on how to read logical notation by me

Weeks 5-10: Language, Metaphysics and Epistemology

After his early work on mathematics, Russell tried to apply his new ideas and techniques to some of the traditional topics in metaphysics and epistemology. Along the way, he made some founding contributions to contemporary philosophy of language. We'll spend the core of the course on this work, reading (among other things) parts of the following texts:

- Russell, 'On Denoting'
- Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy*
- Russell, 'The Relation of Sense-Data to Physics'
- Russell, *Our Knowledge of the External World*
- Russell, *The Philosophy of Logical Atomism*
- Bradley, *Appearance and Reality*
- Moore, 'Refutation of Idealism'

Weeks 11-15: Russell's Legacy

We'll spend the final third of the course looking at some of the ways in which Russell's influence played out in the rest of the 20th Century. This will necessarily involve only snapshots. Here are some of the texts that we can look at, depending on time and students' interests:

- Carnap, *The Logical Structure of the World*
- Ayer, *Language, Truth, and Logic*
- Carnap, 'Psychology in Physical Language'
- Carnap, 'Empiricism, Semantics, and Ontology'
- Quine, 'Two Dogmas of Empiricism'
- Quine, *Word and Object*
- Kripke, *Naming and Necessity*
- Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*
- Kripke, *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*
- Strawson, 'On Referring'
- Donnellan, 'Reference and Definite Descriptions'
- Kripke, 'Speaker's Reference and Semantic Reference'
- Neale, *Descriptions*
- Austin, *Sense and Sensibilia*
- Chisholm, *Perceiving*

Academic Dishonesty

Hunter College regards acts of academic dishonesty (e.g., plagiarism, cheating on examinations, obtaining unfair advantage, and falsification of records and official documents) as serious offenses against the values of intellectual honesty. The College is committed to enforcing the CUNY Policy on Academic Integrity and will pursue cases of academic dishonesty according to the Hunter College Academic Integrity Procedures.