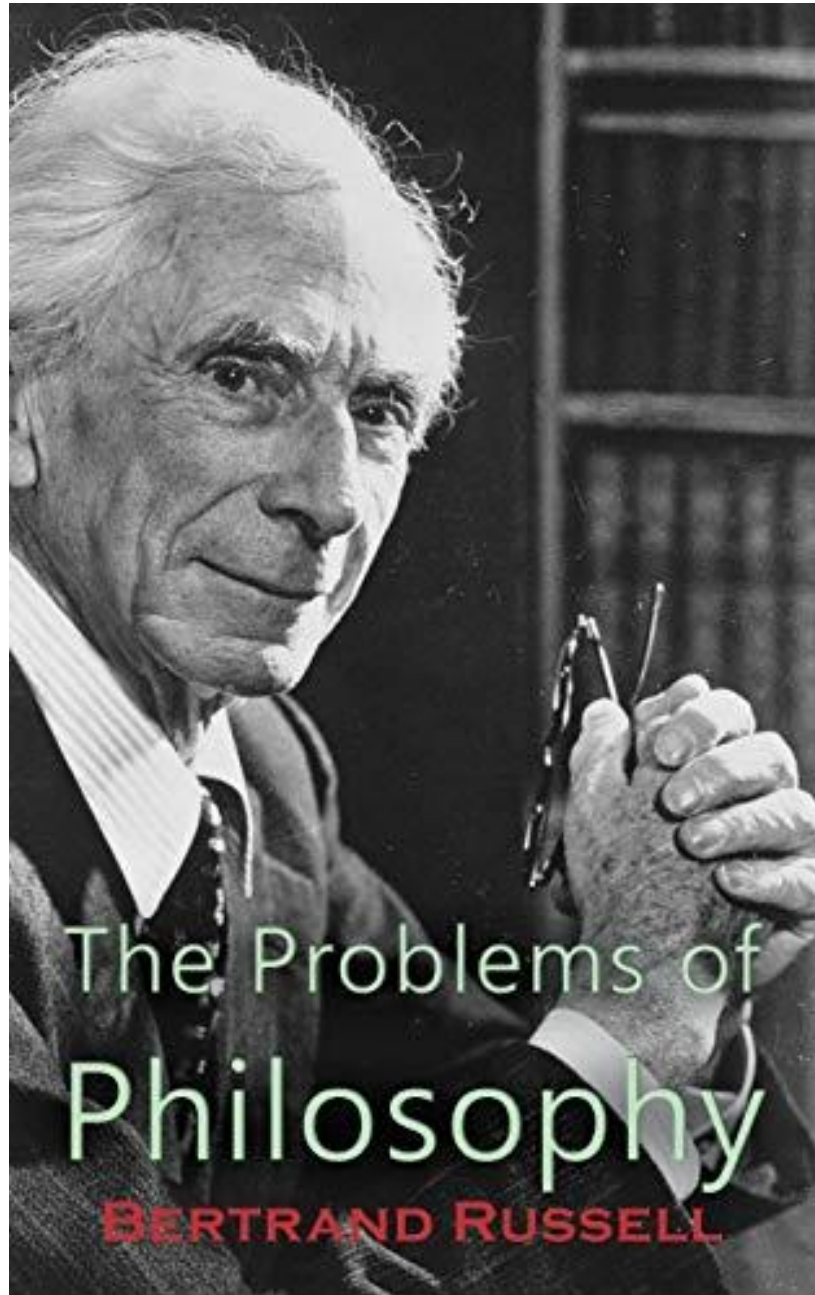


# The Fundamental Problems of Philosophy

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(Russell, 1912/2009)

In other essays or books, I've discussed the nature of philosophy (Hanna, 2024a). But in this essay, I want to raise the following closely-related question: what are the fundamental problems of philosophy? At the origins of Analytic philosophy, in his

enormously influential book, *The Problems of Philosophy*, Bertrand Russell identified fifteen problems, catalogued by chapter:

CHAPTER I.	APPEARANCE AND REALITY
CHAPTER II.	THE EXISTENCE OF MATTER
CHAPTER III.	THE NATURE OF MATTER
CHAPTER IV.	IDEALISM
CHAPTER V.	KNOWLEDGE BY ACQUAINTANCE AND KNOWLEDGE BY DESCRIPTION
CHAPTER VI.	ON INDUCTION
CHAPTER VII.	ON OUR KNOWLEDGE OF GENERAL PRINCIPLES
CHAPTER VIII.	HOW A PRIORI KNOWLEDGE IS POSSIBLE
CHAPTER IX.	THE WORLD OF UNIVERSALS
CHAPTER X.	ON OUR KNOWLEDGE OF UNIVERSALS
CHAPTER XI.	ON INTUITIVE KNOWLEDGE
CHAPTER XII.	TRUTH AND FALSEHOOD
CHAPTER XIII.	KNOWLEDGE, ERROR, AND PROBABLE OPINION
CHAPTER XIV.	THE LIMITS OF PHILOSOPHICAL KNOWLEDGE
CHAPTER XV.	THE VALUE OF PHILOSOPHY (Russell, 1912/2009)

Even just scanning the chapter titles, we can clearly and distinctly see that there are two striking features of Russell's list.

The **first** striking feature is Russell's focus on issues in and around the formal and natural sciences, and more generally concerning theoretical rationality. Indeed, no less than seven of Russell's fifteen chapters (V-VIII, X-XI, and XIII) deal with the nature of knowledge; five chapters (I-IV and IX) focus on related metaphysical or ontological issues; chapter XII focuses on issues in logic and semantics; and two chapters deal with meta-philosophy (XIV-XV). If we compress and re-sort those accordingly, that reduces Russell's list to five fundamental problems: (i) the nature of knowledge, (ii) the nature of appearance and reality, the different kinds of reality, and the possibility of subjective or objective idealism, (iii) the nature of the natural or physical universe, (iv) the nature of logic and semantic meaning, including the nature of truth and falsity, and (v) the nature of philosophy.

And the **second** striking feature is *what's missing* from from Russell's list, especially including anything having directly to do with the nature of the the mind, intentional agency, personhood, and normativity or value, except for the value of philosophy. Correspondingly, I think it's self-evident that a list of the fundamental problems of philosophy should also include these: (vi) the nature of the mind, the mind-body relation, and mental or intentional causation, (vii) the nature and existence of free will in a natural

or physical universe that our best contemporary natural science tells us is basically either deterministic or indeterministic, (viii) the nature of personhood and personal identity, (ix) the nature of human conduct and ethics or morality, social institutions, and politics, (x) the nature and existence or non-existence of God, and (xi) the nature of human nature and the meaning or purpose of human existence or life. So that adds up to eleven fundamental problems of philosophy.

Are any of these fundamental problems more basic than all or some of the others? Relevantly, Immanuel Kant thought that there are four fundamental problems of philosophy, and that one of them is more fundamental than the other three:

[P]hilosophy ... is in fact the science of the relation of all cognition and of all use of reason to the ultimate end of human reason, to which, as the highest, all other ends are subordinated, and in which they must all unite to form a unity.

The field of philosophy in this cosmopolitan sense can be brought down to the following questions:

1. *What can I know?*
2. *What ought I to do?*
3. *What may I hope?*
4. *What is the human being?*

Metaphysics answers the first question, morals the second, religion the third, and anthropology the fourth. Fundamentally, however, we could reckon all of this as anthropology, because the first three questions relate to the last one. The philosopher must be able to determine

1. the sources of human knowledge
2. the extent of the possible and profitable use of all knowledge, and finally
3. the limits of reason.

The last [question, What is the human being?] is the most necessary but also the hardest. (Kant, 1800/1992: p. 538, Ak 9: 25)

I agree with Kant about the hyper-fundamentality of the fourth fundamental problem of philosophy, which in turn corresponds to the eleventh fundamental problem in our working list of fundamental problems. Otherwise put, I think that the *most* fundamental problem of philosophy is what I'll call *the problem of rational anthropology*: what is the nature, meaning or purpose, and value of individual and collective rational human existence in a thoroughly non-ideal natural and social world?

What are my reasons for holding the thesis of the hyper-fundamentality of the eleventh fundamental problem of philosophy? Let me rehearse them, one by one. The problem of the nature of knowledge is the problem of the nature of *our* rational human knowledge. The problem of the nature of appearance and reality, the different kinds of reality, and the possibility of subjective or objective idealism, is the problem about what appears *to us*, what is real *for us*, what different types of reality there are *for us*, and whether all the kinds of reality are ultimately ideal in that they reduce to or are in some other way dependent on *our* minds. The problem of the nature of the natural or physical universe is the problem of the nature of the natural or physical universe in which *we* live, and move, and have our being. The problem of the nature of logic and semantic meaning, including the nature of truth and falsity, all flow from the problem of the nature of *our* capacities for logical cognition and reasoning, and mental and linguistic representation. The problem of the nature of philosophy is the problem of the nature of a critical, synoptic inquiry and practice carried out by specifically *rational human* animals. The problem of the nature of the mind, the mind-body relation, and mental or intentional causation, is a problem about the nature of our minds, the causal relation between *our* minds and *our* bodies, or the causal relation between *our* minds and larger natural or physical universe surrounding *us*, and of how it is that *our* minds cause our bodies to move and/or bring about other effects in the larger natural or physical universe. The problem of the nature and existence of free will in a natural or physical universe that our best contemporary natural science tells us is either deterministic or indeterministic, is a metaphysical problem about *our* free will in a natural or physical world that *our* best contemporary natural science tells us is either deterministic or indeterministic. The problem of the nature of personhood and personal identity is a metaphysical problem about *our* personhood and personal identity. The problem of the nature of human conduct and ethics or morality, social institutions, and politics, are problems about what *I, you, or we ought* to choose and do. And the problem of the nature nature and existence or non-existence of God, is a metaphysical problem about what *we* can know or prove about God. Therefore, the first ten of the fundamental problems of philosophy all boil down to the eleventh fundamental problem.

It should be especially noted, however, that even if I'm right about this list of eleven fundamental problems of philosophy, and also right that the problem of rational anthropology is the hyper-fundamental problem of philosophy, this doesn't rule out the existence or emergence of other extremely important non-fundamental problems. For example, the heretofore unrecognized *philosophy of reading* has a key role to play in solving the problems of knowledge and the nature of the nature of logic and semantic meaning, including the nature of truth and falsity (Hanna, 2024b); and the existentially threatening contemporary *problem of digital technology* flows from the combination of the fourth, sixth, seventh, eighth, and ninth fundamental problems (Hanna, 2024c).

Moreover, the problem of the nature of aesthetic experience, the beautiful, and fine art is another extremely important but also non-fundamental problem that's grounded in, and explicable in terms of, several of the eleven fundamental problems, especially the eleventh.

So I do think that if we could produce an adequate, comprehensive solution to the fundamental problem of rational anthropology, then we'd *also* thereby have adequate solutions to the other ten fundamental problems. Hence it's a goal that's worth wholeheartedly pursuing as a fulltime, lifetime project (see, e.g., Hanna and Maiese, 2009; Hanna and Paans, 2020, 2021, 2022; Hanna, 2001, 2006a, 2006b, 2006c, 2015, 2018a, 2018b, 2018c, 2024d; Maiese and Hanna, 2019).

Significantly, by virtue of his narrow focus on the first five fundamental problems and his being personally critically driven by Wittgenstein, Russell ran into a dead-end in 1912, and in effect gave up "fundamental work in philosophy":

I wrote a lot of stuff about Theory of Knowledge, which Wittgenstein criticised with the greatest severity.... His criticism . . . was an event of first-rate importance in my life, and affected everything I have done since. I saw he was right, and I saw that I could not hope ever again to do fundamental work in philosophy. My impulse was shattered, like a wave dashed to pieces against a breakwater. . . . I *had* to produce lectures for America, but I took a metaphysical subject although I was and am convinced that all fundamental work in philosophy is logical. My reason was that Wittgenstein persuaded me that what wanted doing in logic was too difficult for me. So there was really no vital satisfaction of my philosophical impulse in that work, and philosophy lost its hold on me. That was due to Wittgenstein more than to the war. (Russell, 1975: 282)

But perhaps, just perhaps, if Wittgenstein's criticisms had *instead* driven Russell to recognize the sixth through tenth fundamental problems, and the essential connections between human rationality, logic, and ethics (Hanna, 2006b, 2006c), then he might then have been able to soldier on to the recognition of the hyper-fundamentality of the eleventh problem.

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