

PHILO 380.81: Bertrand Russell

Hunter College | Spring 2014 | Taught by Daniel Harris

Bertrand Russell is the only philosopher both to have won the nobel prize and to have been fired by the City University of New York because of his controversial philosophical views.¹

Russell published an incredible amount of work on a huge number of topics, and this presents a depth-vs.-breadth problem for a single-semester course. We'll attempt to get a bit of both.

We'll dive deep into Russell's influential contributions to the philosophy of language, metaphysics, and epistemology. We'll be especially concerned with the following issues, how they fit together for Russell, and how debates about them have played out in the subsequent century of analytic philosophy:

- the idea that the the structure of our language can be a guide to the meta-physical structure of reality, but only if we learn to parse sentences' underlying structures—their *logical forms*
- the idea that there are two fundamentally different ways in which language and thought can make contact with the world—*by description* and *by acquaintance*
- the idea that everyday objects are either inferred on the basis of, or logically constructed from, the immediate objects of our senses (our *sense-data*)

Although these ideas will be our primary focus, we'll also spend some time getting to know Russell's thought on other topics. Our trick for achieving breadth will be to distribute the task among ourselves. Each student will be responsible for giving a brief presentation on a piece of Russell's writing that isn't required for the course. Russell's interests were wide-ranging, and the topics of these presentations should be similarly wide-ranging. Russell was a fascinating person with a lot to say; the short talks will give us a chance to get to know him.

¹ Strictly speaking, he was never hired in the first place. City College's attempt to hire him was blocked by administrators in 1940 after, in Russell's words, "a typical American witch-hunt was waged against" him over his controversial views on marriage and sexuality. His 1950 Nobel Prize was awarded "in recognition of his varied and significant writings in which he champions humanitarian ideals and freedom of thought." Apparently, some New Yorkers a decade earlier felt that his thought was a bit *too* free.