

Russell (2020 fall) Course Description and Tentative Syllabus

Russell was among the most prolific philosophers that ever lived. In 1969 McMaster University launched an ambitious project of publishing all the collective works of Bertrand Russell (including posthumous works from diaries and letters). By now 25 volumes have been published and 10 additional volumes are in progress. It is estimated that there will be about 3000 titles (of papers) and about 27 books. The finished project will also include an index volume. Russell's writings also display one of the broadest scopes. It suffices to mention that in 1911 and 1912 he and Whitehead published the monumental two volumes of *Principia Mathematica*, which established Russell's status as the main mathematical logician of his time.¹ Yet in 1950 he was awarded the Nobel Prize in literature. As far as scope is concerned he is comparable to Aristotle. His biography is full of twists and turns, from being arrested during the First World War, for demonstrating against the war, being expelled from several colleges for advocating immoral views (free love, against the sanctity of marriage), to obtaining in 1949 the Order of Merit from king George VI.

The course aims at giving the students some perspective on Russell's rich life, and at the same time a philosophical understanding of some of his philosophical works in his most fruitful period, 1900 – 1924. I shall not enter into the more technical or philosophically difficult parts but will discuss, at depth appropriate to a 4000 level course, the following topics in the following order:

1. An overview of Russell's life and achievements.
2. Russell's Logicism (mentioning Frege and Kant) and his project of POM *Principles of Mathematics*.
3. Russell's Concept of the *Proposition*
4. Meinong's position and Russell earlier pro-Meinong views
5. Excerpts from the Russell-Frege exchange of letters.
6. Russell's Paradox (and the difference between Russell's and Frege's reactions to the contradiction in their initial systems)
7. Russell's revolutionary step of "On Denoting" (without the notoriously difficult "Gray's Elegy" passage)
8. "Knowledge By Acquaintance and Knowledge by Description" Chapter 5 in Russell's *Problems of Philosophy*
9. Russell's project concerning human knowledge of the external world

Some of this topic will require more than one meeting, they will probably be 1, 3, 7, and 9. Altogether this is a plan for 13 or 14 meetings. Students will get the class material in the form of PDF in a shared folder

Grades will be determined mostly by a take home exam, which consists of one or more papers

¹ Whitehead was ten years older than Russell; he was one of Russell teachers and academically more senior. It has been well known, however, that the *Principia* was mostly written by Russell, who has gotten the credit (or the criticism) for it.

and there will be choice. Students may suggest additional topics to write on, which will have to be approved by me. During the course very short papers (a page or two) might be given occasionally on a weekly basis. At this stage the percentage allotted to class participation remains unclear.