



The Analysis of Mind

Bertrand Russell

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"A most brilliant essay in psychology."—*New Statesman*

"A delightful experience."—Joseph Conrad

Philosopher, mathematician and social critic, Bertrand Russell was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1950. In *The Analysis of Mind*, one of his most influential and exciting books, Russell presents an intriguing reconciliation of the materialism of psychology with the antimaterialism of physics.

This book established a new conception of the mind and provided one of the most original and interesting externalist accounts of knowledge. Drawing upon the writings of psychologists such as William James and John Watson, Russell offers a comprehensive treatment of such considerations as belief, desire, habit, memory, meaning, and causal law. His reasoning formed the foundation for many subsequent theories of mind, as well as a framework for his own later philosophical writings. It remains one of the most important works on the philosophy of the mind.

The Analysis of Mind Details

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Author : Bertrand Russell

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From Reader Review The Analysis of Mind for online ebook

Sam Motes says

A bit dry at times but full of deep thoughts on the workings of the mind. Favorite quote on evolving every day was "Any of us confronted by a forgotten letter written some years ago will be astonished to find how much more foolish our opinions were than we had remembered them as being".

Elena says

dude would have creamed himself if brain imaging had been a thing in 1921. a good analysis, very concerned with the reconciliation of philosophy and physics. historically, mostly wrong, but his analysis of language is interesting.

Peter Mcloughlin says

Our understanding of the material world is a logical construction of a highly mathematical nature to explain our understanding of experience in regard to objects in the world. Psychology is also a theoretical construction of our experience. We often assume that the theoretical constructs of physics are prior to our theoretical constructs of mental life the idealist believes the reverse our the mind and its psychology is prior to the materialism of the world. Dualist claims both are independent of each other. Russell takes William James idea that the mental and the physical are just rearrangements of the same neutral stuff arranged differently and gives no metaphysical priority to which pole of subjective or objective or mind and matter is prior. I like it as a neat solution to the hard problem by dissolving the problem of consciousness as not something different than the material but merely an arrangement that one way is consciousness and another way is physical objects. I think Russell was born too soon. I think he would have liked to see developments of physics and psychology of recent decades he would have fleshed out his ideas more fully.

Dominika says

Nothing like the joy of Public Domain books.

I'll admit that I haven't read too much philosophy, but this was probably a good choice for me considering my background. I especially enjoyed the lecture on language and will probably look into more linguistic theory in the future. I am familiar with both Behaviorism and Introspection (being more of a Behaviorism fan due to its pragmatic uses), so I appreciate how he builds on, discusses, and refutes certain parts of their theories. I will say that for a book published in 2002, he is a bit more behind than what I would have expected. And I do enjoy the logical approach he has towards these things (which have more specific terms in cognitive psychology).

I also have to give props to Russell because he seems like a genuinely cool guy whose beliefs seem to coincide with mine. He seems to talk about every subject, and I like this quote from his Wikipedia "When Brand Blanshard asked Russell why he did not write on aesthetics, Russell replied that he did not know anything about it, "but that is not a very good excuse, for my friends tell me it has not deterred me from

writing on other subjects"

Ali says

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Jan says

A great one!

Comptes Rendus de René Guénon says

Bertrand Russell. – Analyse de l’Esprit ; traduit de l’anglais par M. Lefèvre.

Ce livre, nous dit l’auteur, est né d’une tentative de concilier deux tendances différentes, celle de la psychologie qui devient de plus en plus dépendante de la physiologie, et celle de la physique qui, de son côté, rend la matière de moins en moins « matérielle ». On pourrait croire, à première vue, qu’il s’agit là d’un retour aux conceptions anciennes, dans lesquelles l’esprit et la matière n’étaient point radicalement séparés l’un de l’autre comme ils le sont depuis Descartes ; mais, en fait, il n’en est rien, car il s’agit d’un point de vue « empiriste » et « évolutionniste » qui est purement moderne, au plus fâcheux sens de ce mot, et dans lequel ce qui est appelé « esprit » nous apparaît comme quelque chose de peu « spirituel » en réalité, toute faculté supérieure à l’ordre sensible étant niée ou passée sous silence. Parmi les récentes théories psychologiques, « behaviouriste » ou autres, que M. Russell examine avec le plus grand sérieux, il en est d’ailleurs de fort divertissantes pour quiconque peut les envisager avec un complet désintéressement ; ne se rencontrera-t-il pas un Molière pour mettre à la scène ces pédantesques inepties ?
Vient de paraître, sept.-oct. 1928

Nika Mansouri Ghiasi says

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Chandrashekar BC says

The book is mind blowing. It gives you insight of how mind works. You will know the more about how we understand, remember, dream, recollect and worry. You can't read fast as it is a mind stretching subject !!!

Tom says

This is an excellent book that, as it claims, works to reconcile physics with psychology. I only have two complaints: a.) as with anything written concerning psychology prior to the advent of neuroscience, some of the content is severely dated--the sections on memory and emotion, for instance, and b.) the length, coming in at about 190 pages, seems a bit sparse to justify its high-reaching goal. That is not to say that Russell fails here in his attempt, because I believe he succeeds wholeheartedly, but it is clear that this is not his area of expertise (as he carefully notes more than once), and I don't think he was quite well-read enough in the current psychological literature of the day to allow him to flesh out some of the chapters.

Roy Lotz says

When you drop a weight on your toe, and you say what you do say, the habit has been caused by imitation of your undesirable associates, whereas it is brought into play by the dropping of the weight.

It is a puzzle of our modern scientific worldview that we have been extremely successful in explaining things remote from our experience, and yet have made comparatively little headway in explaining our experience itself.

We begin with physics, the king of the sciences. Here we are dealing with things like force, time, mass, charge—abstract qualities which we can define precisely and measure accurately. Using these variables we can, and have, constructed theoretical edifices which continue to astound me and the rest of the world with their surpassing precision and elegance. Yet it is in physics that we have found that our everyday notions are most flawed. Seemingly solid objects like tables and people are, it turns out, mostly empty space. Under certain circumstances, time slows down, objects become foreshortened. Space itself is not wholly distinct from time, but forms a four-dimensional fabric that bends in response to matter. And even our basic logical notions, like that of identity, fail miserably when confronted with the probabilistic world of quantum mechanics.

Things get a bit more orderly when we move up the scale of complexity from physics to chemistry. No longer are we dealing with matter in the abstract, but specific types of matter, with their own specific, recognizable qualities—smell, hardness, color. Here we can at least picture specks of matter, arranged into three-dimensional structures, changing and rearranging like grains of sand on a storm-tossed shore. Our ability to predict and explain the universe on this scale is less precise, and perhaps less elegant, than in physics, but it is nonetheless impressive. Yet as we climb the rungs of complexity from hydrogen to organic chemistry, up through biochemistry, we somewhere reach the frontier that separates life from inanimate matter.

Where we draw the line is, in part, merely a question of semantics; but it is also a scientific question, since

we are interested in explaining the origins of life—and we can't decide when life arose without deciding what life is. Viruses seem to sit right on this troubling boundary; but let's put them to the side. We arrive, then, at bacteria, organisms too small to sense, but which still form the majority of life on earth, both in mass and variety. These little bitty dots of life float to and fro, performing their limited array of behaviors; and yet, simple as they are, do we have equations that could tell us exactly when a specific bacteria will divide, or exactly what direction it will turn next? And is not our knowledge of what life is even now so limited that we are still surprised, year after year, at the strange and inhospitable places we find bacteria happily residing?

Once we arrive at things like trees, mushrooms, bison, and baboons, all bets are off as far as predictive precision is concerned. It is true, we do have Darwinian evolution, which admirably and elegantly unites all of these phenomena into an orderly framework. Nonetheless, our knowledge here is qualitative, not quantitative; and when dealing with something like, say, animal behavior, biology sometimes approaches what can be called "natural history"—the mere collection of facts. Unlike in physics and in chemistry, where nearly every new particle or element is predicted beforehand—not only its mere existence, but its precise qualities, too—in biology, every new species discovered is a surprise. And even when we have good evolutionary grounds for predicting an ancestral species, the exact qualities of said species cannot be simply deduced from a theory; they must be inferred from remains and analogs.

Finally, we get to our own behavior—and here things get really messy. Because we humans exhibit such behavioral flexibility, we can't quite decide where genetic influence ends and environmental influence begins. Nor can we even make definitive statements about the limits of our behavioral flexibility, as shown by the Westerners who were continually flabbergasted at the discoveries of cultural anthropologists. Moreover, our dominant theories of human behavior in the social sciences contradict one another. The premises of economics run counter to those of anthropologists; evolutionary psychologists and sociologists make different assumptions and operate within incompatible paradigms. Thus we are left with the ironic result that we can predict the behavior of an electron, which nobody has ever seen, with enormous precision, and yet cannot predict the behavior of our spouses, who we see every day, despite our most valiant efforts.

This isn't a pretty picture; but the next step in our journey is even uglier. When we arrive at the threshold between body and mind, we are stumped completely. How does consciousness arise from a blob of neural tissue? How do chemical signals and electric jolts, when arranged in a sufficiently complicated network, give rise to awareness? How on earth do we explain choice, will, fear, hope? We reach for science, but here our typical scientific approach encounters an obstacle. Science, which is a method for achieving objective results, is being asked to explain subjectivity; a technique for paring away our biases and partialities, leaving only the truth, is being applied to the very center of our biases and partialities. In short, the only indubitable evidence we have of our awareness is purely personal, and yet such evidence—namely, eyewitness testimony—is inadmissible in the scientific enterprise.

In these paradoxical territories, where we cannot yet achieve satisfactory results using empirical research, philosophy makes its home. And here is where Bertrand Russell enters. Published in 1921, *The Analysis of Mind* is Russell's attempt to muster the greatest science and philosophy of his day to explain the human mind. Relying not only on his own techniques of logical analysis, Russell draws on David Hume's empiricism, William James's psychology, Freud's psychoanalysis, and the recently-developed behaviorism, quoting scientific papers more often than other philosophers. It is a valiant effort, and I'm not sure how much better Russell could have done given the knowledge available at the time.

Nevertheless, from the perspective of our own day, this book is quite clearly outdated. The most general flaw is that Russell doesn't posit nearly enough complexity in the mind to account for the richness of mental activity. Again, this is as much the fault of Russell's influences as Russell himself. Hume thought the mind was merely a succession of sensations and images; William James mainly relied on habit to explain human behavior; Freud divided the mind into the conscious, the unconscious, and the censor, reducing all motivation to the sex drive; and behaviorism, of course, attempts to circumvent the mind completely,

explaining everything through observable actions.

Russell more or less attempts to put these theories together, fiddling with one here, another there, trying to find the right combination to account for the human mind. The result is, I'm sorry to say, supremely unconvincing. For example, a ubiquitous feature of human behavior is language, which certainly cannot be accounted for by mere stimulus-and-response, as Russell attempts to do here. Language is not a mere habit, the way that biting your nails is. This has been evinced by the extraordinary difficulty in constructing translating programs—something which, of course, was far in the future when Russell wrote this. Also flat-footed was Russell's attempt to built up all the contents of the mind with mere sensations and images (imagined sensations). For example, how could you build up something like happiness from sights, sounds, and tactile sensations? Could you construct despair out of moonlight, a minor chord, and the smell of mould?

Most troubling, though, was Russell's attempt at monism. Now, to backtrack a little, in philosophy two approaches have been offered to supplant the mind-body problem. The first is materialism, which considers everything supposedly mental to be, at most, the mere byproduct of something physical; and the second is idealism, which takes the opposite approach—namely, considering everything in the universe to be really mental. Spinoza famously tried to steer a middle course, and proposed that matter and mind were two forms of the same thing, a doctrine which has been called “neutral monism.” This idea was much later taken up by William James, and is put forward here by Russell, under James's influence. The problem, however, is that in positing something intermediary and more fundamental than matter and mind, Russell does violence to both.

Russell's solutions is essentially to reduce everything to sensations. Physics deals with the behavior of sensations from every possible perspective, whereas psychology deals with the behavior of sensations from only one perspective. Thus, a table in physics is just a table seen from every possible angle, under every possible light, and so on; and a single person's experience is a successions of sensations—a table, a chair, a pizza—seen from one vantage point. Note the advantage: if mind and matter are just two aspects of the same thing, the mind-body problem is solved. In keeping with this view, Russell suggests that matter is, in his words, a “logical fiction,” which physicists merely posit as the glue to hold the data of sensations together. In his words:

Instead of supposing that there is some unknown cause, the “real” table, behind the different sensations of those who are said to be looking at the table, we may take the whole set of these sensations (together possibly with certain other particulars) as actually being the table. That is to say, the table which is neutral as between different observers (actual and possible) is the set of all those particulars which would naturally be called “aspects” of the table from different point of view.

I have very little sympathy for this view, as perhaps do most other people nowadays. Making sensations fundamental puts humans at the very center of reality. The world was around a long time before life arose, and thus cannot be explained as a collection of sensations. Moreover, our current understanding of physics requires that certain things, far outside of our experience, be treated as fundamental; and even though these entities are merely deduced, never directly observed through our senses, by using them we can formulate predictions of extreme precision and accuracy, which is the goal of science.

Russell might respond that, in the interest of applying Occam's razor, we should ideally have a science that rests on directly observable data (i.e. sensations), since every microscopic particle we posit is an extra, hypothetical entity. Nevertheless, such a thing doesn't seem possible—which isn't surprising, considering that, so far as we know, the way we perceive the universe is accidental, limited, and imprecise, the result of the needs of an ape species living on a small planet orbiting an ordinary star. But Francis Bacon, writing 400 years ago, might have said it best:

But by far the greatest hindrance and aberration of the human understanding proceeds from the dullness, incompetency, and deceptions of the senses; in that things which strike the sense outweigh things which do not immediately strike it, though they be more important. Hence it is that speculation commonly ceases where sight ceases; insomuch that of things invisible there is little or no observation.

In fact, the relationship of what we actually sense to modern physics is fairly tenuous. When we are, for example, running an experiment and using a detecting device, what matters is the information the device displays, not the sensations we experience. For example, the detector might display its readings in neon green lettering, in roman numerals, in Chaucerian English, in Egyptian hieroglyphics—in whatever language you want. These would all be quite different sensations, but would all signify the same thing. In short, it is what we deduce from our experience, rather than our experience itself, which is significant.

This, of course, brings us back to our initial paradox—namely, that we can deduce the origins of the universe from our experience, but we cannot explain how our experience arises from our brains. Well, at least Russell cannot; and if he can't, what hope do I have?

Ranjeet says

You can say this book is a a treatise on the process of thought making. A psychological book that stimulates our minds to read it and understand the clumsy world of psychology deeply.

Carlos Alberto says

The first chapters are incredibly helpful in defining the causes of our behavior, instincts, habits, and desires. You can get a different perspective of your character and find patterns, whether good or bad, and, maybe, modify them. It is another view of one's Self, with simple concepts in a friendly writing. The second half of the book may be tedious, but useful, as well, to those involved in the study of psyche. In a sort of synthesis, Russell states that reality yields not in matter nor in mind, but in a mixture of both. The study of that mix would allow us to see the true correlations (e.g. causal relations) between mind and matter. Russell appeals for a multidisciplinary approach in all sciences.

Sriram Sankaranarayanan says

Building from the scratch on what is mind, thought, memory, perception etc he has gone in great detail in establishing the truth in various definitions of the same. a very heavy read, but worth its philosophical content.

Grace says

I'm honestly fascinated with this book. I recall having read bits of it for a psychology class and more bits for

a philosophy class. However, I never read the entire thing ? even though I actually have the book on my shelf.

I need to read the book, not listen to it, and take notes. This seems like it could be a great starting point for understanding metacognition and other neuroscience things that often relate to teaching, leadership, and working with people in any capacity.
