

The problems of philosophy

[Philosophy](#)



What is a philosophy? What does a philosopher do? Viewing the work in a general way of such philosophers as Russell, Descartes, Ayer, Wittgenstein, and James can provide good ideas on what philosophy is and its work. In *The Problems of Philosophy* Chapter XV: The Value of Philosophy, Bertrand Russell implies that philosophy may be difficult to understand in the material world. He presents the idea that if all of one's material needs were satisfied, if poverty and disease had been met, there are still some things for which one looks. These things are 'goods of the mind' and they are reached by the 'self' that is not limited to the prison of materiality. It is possible for the self to escape and to know things outside itself. The self can reach for a unity of knowledge which may constitute the highest good. It can find basic materials of the universe that do not need to be further analyzed and it is the goal of the philosopher to conduct such a search. Rene Descartes conducted this very search and he did it inside his mind. Outside the mind is the reality of the world, or so it seems. This reality is full of conflicts and contradictions. The role of the philosopher for Descartes was to use principles offered by mathematical reasoning to go inside the mind and to find or develop a system of knowledge that demonstrated, from within the mind, a unity from which all other knowledge could come. The way in which truth was derived from mathematics could also be applied to the world. What Descartes sought, as a philosopher, was no different from what Bertrand Russell sought hundreds of years later, a system of true knowledge from which basic principles underlying all knowledge could be logically derived. Descartes, the rationalist, and Russell, the empiricist, both believed that the way mathematics derived proof could offer a unity in knowledge. Descartes believed in a spiritual truth or a system of metaphysics which Russell denied.

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William James felt that the task of philosophy was to develop pragmatism. Pragmatism involved accepting beliefs if they rationally proved to be effective in one's experience. If the belief led to actions that functioned practically in the world, if they were instrumental in obtaining satisfactory relations with experience, then such beliefs were reasonable. In this way philosophy is a method that could support religion even if there were no objective or empirical truths. But this intent was denied by the analytic philosopher T. J. Ayer. For Ayer the purpose of philosophy was to analyze language and to verify the truths of it by a verification principle. If a sentence could not offer proof of its own verification then it was not true. This meant that sentences concerning religion or metaphysics could not be proven true and hence were meaningless. For Ayer philosophy becomes the method to disprove religion and to determine what is true. The question then becomes is there a need for philosophy, since many people normally accept religion as useful and fulfilling. Philosophy seeks to explain what is true and what the word or concept of 'true' means. Wittgenstein first accepted this question in the way of Bertrand Russell, which led him to deny the truth of metaphysics or religion in the way of Ayer. But Wittgenstein later changed his views and added psychology to this thought. For Wittgenstein philosophy demonstrated how words and language were used. Philosophy did not provide a road to ultimate or absolute truths, as would be desired in metaphysics or religion. What is philosophy? Philosophy explains the way in which words and language are used. This view could be added to expand the pragmatist of William James' idea by using philosophy to defend the practical use of and beliefs of religion, and as well, of science. Russell, B. 1912. *The Problems of Philosophy*. Teddington, Middlesex: Echo Library, 2007.

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