

August 26th, 1911

Dear Bertie,

Are there any proofs subsequent to sheet 29 which I have sent you by last night's post? If you received any earlier than Friday, please (to save time) send a P.C. to Press to send me direct another copy. For the Chelsea P.O. must have delivered it in Carlyle Square. But don't give general directions, since on Thursday I go to Cambridge.

I enclose my notes on your 'Message'¹. My general view of your philosophy is that it is in the same state of transition as that in which Kant unfortunately wrote his *Critique*. What I recognize as distinctively yours, seems to me to be excellent. But where (in my ignorance) I guess that you are repeating received ideas, I cannot follow. You seem to me to lack self-confidence (or rather, time) to systematize philosophy afresh, in accordance with your own views.

From the point of view of the 'Message' only superficial alterations seem to me desirable, and a making apparent of the ragged ends and difficulties. As a 'Message', I cannot praise too highly.

Yours affectionately,
A.N.W.

|1|

Chapter I

Here we start with perception of a table. The question is asked, What properties does the table really have?

As to the 'shape of the table'. Why assume that our perception of space is two-dimensional? Perhaps you don't. I can't get a decisive instance just now. But the general impression on my mind is that you do. Surely such an assumption is false psychology. Real table (if it exist) = a Physical Object [po]. Senses immediately tell us, not the truth about the object is it is apart from us, but only the truth about certain sense-data which, as far as we can see, depend on relations between us and the object. [p.10 also pp 5,6]

|2| Here in pages 5, 6 and 10 you seem by a sleight of hand to take away the table which I (= the plain man) perceive. I see a 'yellow table' and I feel a 'hard table' and I infer that I feel what I see. You (rather obscurely) tell me that I see yellowness and feel hardness, and infer a real table. Such inferences are quite beyond plain people like myself. I perceive objects, and want to know about the reality of the objects I perceive. You ignore this object (or rather smuggle it away) and proceed to talk about sensations of yellowness and hardness and of an inferred object which causes them. This criticism naturally affects later chapters also.

|3|

Chapter II

Your confrontation of the solipsist on p. 17 seems to me to be entirely fallacious.

First the reality of space seems assumed, e.g. "it cannot ever have been in any place where I did not see it". There is no such place.

Secondly. Why talk of the cat 'being hungry', thereby suggesting that the cat really exists while I look at it.

As far as I can see all your objections are arrived at by making tacit presuppositions inconsistent with the position.

¹ Whitehead is here referring to Russell's manuscript of *The Problems of Philosophy*, which would be published a year later (1912). Available online: <https://archive.org/details/problemsofphilo00russuoft>

I suggest that the strongest ground to take is to appeal to our judgments as to the worth of our affections and of our moral intuitions. These judgments must be wrong, if the solipsist is right.²

[4]

Chapter III

p 23 “The real space is public, the apparent space is private to the percipient.”

p24 ‘These physical objects are in the space of science, which we may call “physical” space’

p29 “Thus it is quite gratuitous to suppose that physical objects have colours, and therefore there is no justification for making such a supposition. Exactly similar arguments apply to other sense-data”

p36 “Our previous arguments concerning the colour did not prove it to be mental; they only proved that its existence depends upon the relation of our sense organs to the physical object – in our case the table”.

But the ‘table’ has been smuggled away by you long ago. You have only left us [5] sensations of colour etc. and an imagined physical world which causes it. Note that particular √physical objects as √causes of our sensations suffer from the usual defect of all particular causation. If you trace it down far enough, all our sensations (on the scientific hypothesis) come from the relation of ourselves to the whole √physical √universe. Was not Berkeley talking of the ‘table’ which the plain man perceives?

p28 Surely you are wrong in making Kant identify the “physical object” with the “thing-in-itself”. All the notions associated √with √time, space, number, causation apply to the physical object, and none of them [6] to Kant’s thing-in-itself.

I venture to summarize Kant thus – I (Ego) am in relation to a reality-other-than-myself. This relation as known to me is to be found in my sensations, where alone are marks of an activity other than my own. I, by a self-activity which can be analyzed into an application of the pure forms of time and space and a synthetic unity of apperception [to me mysterious (ANW) √etc. etc. √], weld these relations (expressed in sensation) into perceptions of objects, the phenomenal objects. All √my √ordinary ideas apply to these phenomenal objects necessarily, because they are merely expressive [7] of an analysis of the process of formation by me. These molecules of science are conceived phenomenal objects which have merely the properties of being in time and place, but have a permanence of existence and of mutual relation √superior √to √that of √the perceived phenomenal objects, and thus satisfy the intellectual demand that all change is a change of something itself permanent. [He lays down this principle somewhere, but I have not read him for more than 20 years, so cannot quote]. I can say nothing of the real-other-than-myself which is indicated by my sensations. I infer its existence from the lack of necessity in the [8] occurrence of sensations, so that sensations do not express myself ———

Now if this is anything like Kant, you do not touch him. First you muddle the physical object (= scientific molecule?) in ‘public space’ with his thing-in-itself. Second, you have smuggled away and ignored the phenomenal object with which he starts. Thus the whole point of the ‘phenomenon’ mentioned by you on p28 is lost. Thirdly, your ‘main objection’ on p29 is that our nature is a fact of the ‘existing world’. What do you mean by ‘existing world’? Apparently something in time, for ‘tomorrow’ applies to it. Kant would certainly have [9] denied this. This would be the ‘phenomenal ego’. The ‘transcendental ego’ is not in time – rather conversely. What Kant has to face √according to your argument √ is that he has not proved that the certainties of today are those of tomorrow. This is exactly what he has been trying to prove – namely that

² “(Probably?) nothing in this” is written next to this paragraph.

only those things are certainties which are necessary to √[i.e. involved in]√ the perception of a phenomenal object. His argument is ‘apart from them, no object’. Your argument is ‘Objects may tomorrow have different properties’. His reply is ‘Then there will not be any objects to have any properties’.

|10| Similarly your second objection √(p.29)√ that 2+2 physical objects must make 4 physical objects does not apply. Of course I admit that he gives himself away by talking of ‘things-in-themselves’ thus admitting the idea of plurality to apply. But a discoverer must be allowed some lapses – substitute ‘Reality-in-itself’ and your argument collapses. For if you say ‘reality-in-itself is one’ or ‘reality-in-itself is many’ or ‘reality-in-itself is five’ he answers ‘None of these numerical ideas apply’. |11| Similarly all your remarks about the beech tree fall.

Finally, you √might√ say, ‘At least ‘Reality-in-itself is something’. He replies ‘Yes, but now I am conceiving Reality-in-itself as a phenomenal object, namely the counterpart of my phenomenal self’.

It seems to me that Chapter VIII is not within a hundred miles of Kant’s position.

|12|

Chapter IX

You have entirely failed to convince me that there is such an universal as “whiteness”. Your only argument is that a lot of bother will be created in reconstructing the existing philosophical terminology and explanation. To a plain man this is very unconvincing – all philosophy is unpalatable to us.

I admit your proof as to ‘relations’.

As to your proof that Universals are not merely mental [your pages are not numbered here]. I wish you had taken a simpler instance than ‘Edinburgh is North of London’. I am in such doubt as to the status of |13| ‘Edinburgh’ and ‘North’ and ‘London’ in the physical world, and of the status of the physical world as left by you, that your argument doesn’t carry much weight.

To repeat you define ‘physical objects’ as ‘real’, cf p.1 of my notes. And all your subsequent arguments seem to me to be that, if we now assume some physical objects [e.g. cats] to be unreal √[?=non-existent]√, the result is very paradoxical. Of course it is.

But of course, if you sweep away Kant’s position and Berkeley: of course you are left with a real world of |14| interrelated parts, or with one thing √[which brings one back to ‘Berkeley–God’, doesn’t it?]√.

On the first alternative there are relations not in the mind. What I am objecting to is that one cannot see what you are assuming in the ‘London – Edinburgh’ illustration.