

Philosophy Summer Task:

Read the extract from Bertrand Russell's *The Problems of Philosophy* all the way through.

1. Then read each paragraph slowly and write down for each one, what important question Russell is asking. What is his answer?
2. At the end: Which is the most important question? Explain why, giving reasons.

<p>Is there knowledge so certain that no one could doubt it? When we look for certainty, we normally start with our present experiences, and in some sense, knowledge is to be derived from them. But any statement based on our experiences is likely to be wrong. I seem to be sitting in a chair, at a table of a certain shape, on which I see sheets of paper. Out of the window I see buildings and clouds and the sun. I believe that the sun is a hot globe many times bigger than the earth; about 93 million miles away; which, owing to the earth's rotation, rises every morning. I believe that anyone else in the room will see the same chairs and tables and papers. All this seems obvious. Yet all this may be reasonably doubted.</p>	
<p>To show why, let's pay attention to the table. To the eye it is oblong, brown and shiny, to the touch it is smooth and cool and hard; when I tap it, it gives out a wooden sound. Any one else who sees and feels and hears the table will agree with this description; but as soon as we try to be more precise our troubles begin. Although I believe that the table is 'really' of the same colour all over, the parts that reflect the light look much brighter than the other parts, and some parts look white because of reflected light. I know that, if I move, the parts that reflect the light will be different, so that the pattern of colours on the table will change. If several people are looking at the table at the same moment, no two of them will see exactly the same pattern of colours, because any change in the point of view makes some change in the way the light is reflected.</p>	
<p>There is no one colour which permanently appears to be the colour of the table, or one part of the table -- it has different colours from different points of view, and no reason to see some of these as more real than others. And we know that even from a given point of view the colour will seem different by artificial light, or to a colour-blind man, or to a man wearing blue spectacles, while in the dark there will be no colour at all, though to touch and hearing the table will be unchanged. This colour is not something which is inherent in the table, but something depending upon the table and the spectator and the way the light falls on the table. When, in ordinary life, we speak of the colour of the table, we only mean the sort of colour which it will seem to have to a normal spectator from an ordinary point of view under usual conditions of light. But the other colours which appear under other conditions have just as good a right to be considered real; and therefore, to avoid favouritism, we are compelled to deny that, in itself, the table has any one particular colour.</p>	
<p>The same thing applies to the texture. With the naked eye one can see the grain, but otherwise the table looks smooth and even. If we looked at it through a microscope, we should see roughnesses and hills and valleys, imperceptible to the naked eye. Which of these is the 'real' table? We are tempted to say that what we see through the microscope is more real, but that in turn would be changed by a still more</p>	

<p>powerful microscope. If, then, we cannot trust what we see with the naked eye, why should we trust what we see through a microscope? Thus, again, the confidence in our senses with which we began deserts us.</p>	
<p>The shape of the table is no better. We are all in the habit of judging shapes unreflectingly, thinking that we see the real shapes. But, in fact, a given thing looks different in shape from every different point of view. If our table is 'really' rectangular, it will look, from almost all points of view, as if it had two acute angles and two obtuse angles. If opposite sides are parallel, they will look as if they converged to a point away from the spectator; if they are of equal length, they will look as if the nearer side were longer. We don't usually notice this because we habitually construct the 'real' shape from the apparent shape, and the 'real' shape is what interests us. But the 'real' shape is not what we see; it is inferred from what we see. And what we see is constantly changing in shape as we, move about the room; so the senses don't seem to give us the truth about the table itself, but only about the appearance of the table.</p>	
<p>Similar difficulties arise with touch. It is true that the table always gives us a sensation of hardness, and we feel that it resists pressure. But the sensation depends upon how hard we press and what part of the body we press with; so the sensations due to various pressures or various parts of the body don't reveal directly any definite property of the table. At most, they are signs of some property which perhaps causes all the sensations, but not actually apparent in any of them. And the same applies to sounds we can make by rapping the table.</p>	
<p>So, the real table, if there is one, is not the same as what we immediately experience by sight or touch or hearing. The real table, if there is one, is not immediately known to us at all, but must be an inference from what is immediately known. Hence, two very difficult questions at once arise; namely, (1) Is there a real table at all? (2) If so, what sort of object can it be?</p>	
<p>It will help to have the meaning of a few simple terms [definite and clear]. 'Sense-data' are the things that are immediately known in sensation: such things as colours, sounds, smells, hardnesses, roughnesses etc. 'Sensation' is the experience of being immediately aware of them. Whenever we see a colour, we have a sensation of the colour, but the colour itself is a sense-datum, not a sensation. The colour is that of which we are immediately aware, and the awareness itself is the sensation. What we know about the table starts with sense-data -- brown colour, oblong shape, smoothness, etc; but, for the above reasons, we cannot say that the table is the sense-data, or even that the sense-data are directly properties of the real table, supposing there is such a thing.</p>	
<p>The table, if it exists, we will call a 'physical object'. Thus we have to consider the relation of sense-data to physical objects. The collection of all physical objects is called 'matter'. Thus our two questions may be re-stated as follows: (1) Is there any such thing as matter? (2) If so, what is its nature?</p>	

<p>The philosopher who first brought prominently forward the reasons for regarding the immediate objects of our senses as not existing independently of us was Bishop Berkeley (1685-1753). His Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous, in Opposition to Sceptics and Atheists, undertake to prove that there is no such thing as matter at all, and that the world consists of nothing but minds and their ideas. Hylas has hitherto believed in matter, but he is no match for Philonous, who mercilessly drives him into contradictions and paradoxes, and makes his own denial of matter seem, in the end, as if it were almost common sense. The arguments employed are of very different value: some are important and sound, others are confused or quibbling. But Berkeley retains the merit of having shown that the existence of matter is capable of being denied without absurdity, and that if there are any things that exist independently of us they cannot be the immediate objects of our sensations.</p>	
<p>There are two different questions involved when we ask whether matter exists, and it is important to keep them clear. We commonly mean by 'matter' something which is opposed to 'mind', something which we think of as occupying space and as radically incapable of any sort of thought or consciousness. It is chiefly in this sense that Berkeley denies matter; that is to say, he does not deny that the sense-data which we commonly take as signs of the existence of the table are really signs of the existence of something independent of us, but he does deny that this something is nonmental, that it is neither mind nor ideas entertained by some mind. He admits that there must be something which continues to exist when we go out of the room or shut our eyes, and that what we call seeing the table does really give us reason for believing in something which persists even when we are not seeing it. But he thinks that this something cannot be radically different in nature from what we see, and cannot be independent of seeing altogether, though it must be independent of our seeing. He is thus led to regard the 'real' table as an idea in the mind of God. Such an idea has the required permanence and independence of ourselves, without being -- as matter would otherwise be -- something quite unknowable, in the sense that we can only infer it, and can never be directly and immediately aware of it.</p>	
<p>Other philosophers since Berkeley have also held that, although the table does not depend for its existence upon being seen by me, it does depend upon being seen (or otherwise apprehended in sensation) by some mind -- not necessarily the mind of God, but more often the whole collective mind of the universe. This they hold, as Berkeley does, chiefly because they think there can be nothing real -- or at any rate nothing known to be real except minds and their thoughts and feelings. We might state the argument by which they support their view in some such way as this: 'Whatever can be thought of is an idea in the mind of the person thinking of it; therefore nothing can be thought of except ideas in minds; therefore anything else is inconceivable, and what is inconceivable cannot exist.'</p>	
<p>Such an argument, in my opinion, is fallacious; and of course those who advance it do not put it so shortly or so crudely. But whether valid or not, the argument has been very widely advanced in one form or another; and very</p>	

<p>many philosophers, perhaps a majority, have held that there is nothing real except minds and their ideas. Such philosophers are called 'idealists'. When they come to explaining matter, they either say, like Berkeley, that matter is really nothing but a collection of ideas, or they say, like Leibniz (1646-1716), that what appears as matter is really a collection of more or less rudimentary minds.</p>	
<p>But these philosophers, though they deny matter as opposed to mind, nevertheless, in another sense, admit matter. It will be remembered that we asked two questions; namely, (1) Is there a real table at all? (2) If so, what sort of object can it be? Now both Berkeley and Leibniz admit that there is a real table, but Berkeley says it is certain ideas in the mind of God, and Leibniz says it is a colony of souls. Thus both of them answer our first question in the affirmative, and only diverge from the views of ordinary mortals in their answer to our second question. In fact, almost all philosophers seem to be agreed that there is a real table. they almost all agree that, however much our sense-data -- colour, shape, smoothness, etc. -- may depend upon us, yet their occurrence is a sign of something existing independently of us, something differing, perhaps, completely from our sense-data whenever we are in a suitable relation to the real table.</p>	
<p>Now obviously this point in which the philosophers are agreed -- the view that there is a real table, whatever its nature may be is vitally important, and it will be worth while to consider what reasons there are for accepting this view before we go on to the further question as to the nature of the real table. Our next chapter, therefore, will be concerned with the reasons for supposing that there is a real table at all.</p>	
<p>Before we go farther it will be well to consider for a moment what it is that we have discovered so far. It has appeared that, if we take any common object of the sort that is supposed to be known by the senses, what the senses immediately tell us is not the truth about the object as it is apart from us, but only the truth about certain sense-data which, so far as we can see, depend upon the relations between us and the object. Thus what we directly see and feel is merely 'appearance', which we believe to be a sign of some 'reality' behind. But if the reality is not what appears, have we any means of knowing whether there is any reality at all? And if so, have we any means of finding out what it is like?</p>	
<p>Such questions are bewildering, and it is difficult to know that even the strangest hypotheses may not be true. Thus our familiar table, has become a problem full of surprising possibilities. The one thing we know about it is that it is not what it seems. Beyond this who knows?. Leibniz tells us it is a community of souls: Berkeley tells us it is an idea in the mind of God; science, scarcely less wonderful, tells us it is a vast collection of electric charges in violent motion. Philosophy, has at least the power of asking questions which increase the interest of the world, and show the strangeness and wonder lying just below the surface even in the commonest things of daily life.</p>	