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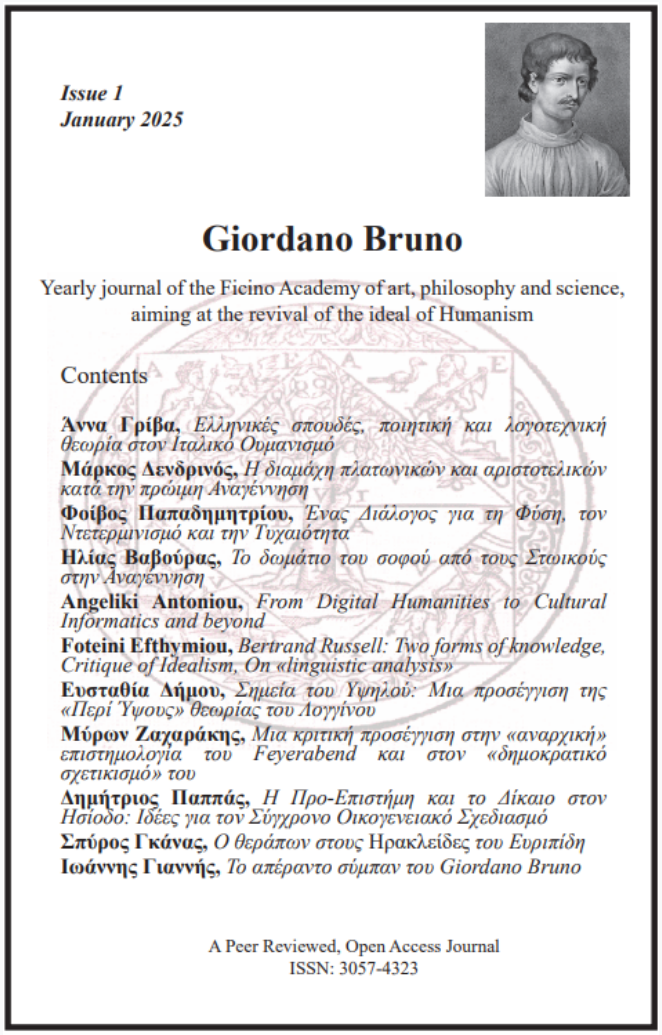
Giordano Bruno

Vol 1, No 1 (2025)

GIORDANO BRUNO – Issue 1



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A Peer Reviewed, Open Access Journal
ISSN: 3057-4323

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doi: 10.12681/gbruno.43619

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Bertrand Russell: Two Forms of Knowledge, Critique of Idealism, On "Linguistic Analysis"

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Abstract

In this paper, we will discuss two forms of knowledge—direct and descriptive—as presented by Bertrand Russell, one of the leading figures of 20th-century analytic philosophy. Next, we will explore how Russell critiques the metaphysics of idealism using the distinction between these two forms of knowledge as a tool. Finally, we will illustrate the possibility of logically depicting the structure of language according to Russell's theory of descriptions.

Keywords: Bertrand Russell, Direct and Descriptive Forms of Knowledge, Critique of Idealism, Linguistic Analysis

1. Two forms of knowledge—direct and descriptive

Russell argues that one of the fundamental characteristics of the mind is its ability "to perceive things other than itself." This capacity, defined by the philosopher as "*a relation between the mind and something other than the mind*" is regarded as a relationship of utmost importance because it is what "*enables the mind to know*" and constitutes "*the nature of knowledge*" (Russell, 2008: 56–57). Furthermore, this relationship expands the boundaries of our perception. On the one hand, it provides us with knowledge of truths "*in the sense that everything we know is true, pertaining to our beliefs or what we call judgments. In this sense, we know that something is true*". On the other hand, it allows us to attain knowledge of things themselves. When discussing the knowledge of things, Russell refers to the data provided to us by our senses regarding these things (Russell, 2008: 58–59). For Russell, something perceived by the mind, or "*whatever is* [...] *within the mind, might well not be mental*" in nature, implying that it could be something else, such as a material entity (Russell, 2008: 57).

Russell essentially distinguishes the second of the two aforementioned types of knowledge, namely knowledge of things, into "*knowledge by acquaintance*" and "*knowledge by description*" (Russell, 2008: 61–77). More specifically, we have "*acquaintance*" with anything we know directly, without the mediation of any inferential process or any knowledge of truths (Russell, 2008: 61).

Using Russell's reasoning, let us consider an example: suppose a subject (Y) possesses the five basic human senses—touch, taste, smell, hearing, and sight. Every time the subject Y gains direct knowledge of an object (X), they essentially acquire immediate knowledge of the specific sensory data conveyed by their senses regarding object X. For instance, if subject Y sees an apple (object X) and touches it, tastes it, and hears the sound it makes when bitten, they fully and completely know its color, texture, taste, aroma, and sound at the precise moment they see, touch, taste, smell, and hear it (Russell, 2008: 62).

However, according to Russell, direct knowledge of things includes more than the immediate data of our senses. Specifically, humans also have direct knowledge through introspection of what might be called internal senses, such as thoughts, emotions, and so on. Additionally, we possess direct knowledge through memory of things that were previously the data of either our external or internal senses. Furthermore, we have direct knowledge of the so-called general ideas, such as freedom, transparency, infinity, etc. (Russell, 2008: 67–68; Avgelis, 2014: 115).

Russell refers to these general ideas as "*universals*", stating that "*the knowledge of a universal is called understanding, while the corresponding universal we understand is called a concept*". In this way, he further refines our perceptual knowledge. It should also be noted that, for Russell, "*it is possible, though not certain, that we have direct knowledge of ourselves as the subject*" (Y) that has direct knowledge of all the aforementioned: the data of its senses, the data obtained through introspection and memory, and the understanding of concepts (Russell, 2008: 68).

In contrast, according to Russell, it is not possible for subject Y to have direct knowledge of object X. Let us revisit the example of the apple. The apple itself, as object X, is not directly known to subject Y. The apple is "*the physical object that causes a certain sensory datum*". This statement describes the apple using sensory data. Therefore, we can say that "*our knowledge of*

the object is knowledge by description" (Russell, 2008: 62–63). Moreover, among the things we cannot know directly are the minds of other people (Russell, 2008: 68).

Essentially, the sensory data "*caused*" by any physical object is distinct and separate from the object itself. Knowledge by description involves attributing specific properties or concepts to the object. The issue, however, is not the accuracy of the description but rather each subject Y's description of object X based on their own knowledge and experiences, as "*thought will differ depending on the individual […] and on the different moments in that individual's existence*" (Russell, 2008: 68–72).

What is particularly notable for Russell is that knowledge by description, with its distinction between physical objects and sensory data, provides a crucial way out of the limitations of personal experience. This is because, as we will see later in the discussion of linguistic analysis, in "*Russell's model of the ideal language, every word in a sentence must have a fixed meaning*" (Avgelis, 2014: 116).

2. Critique of Idealism

The doctrine of idealism asserts that anything that can be known to exist must, in some way, be mental. This doctrine fundamentally opposes common sense, which holds that ordinary things, such as an apple or a tree, are made of something entirely different from what we call the mind or the thoughts of the mind. Essentially, we perceive the external world as independent, with things being composed of matter (Russell, 2008: 50–51).

In this way, Russell introduces his critique of idealism, aiming to gradually demonstrate that if there were only thought, without anything external to it, existence would be nothing more than a mental phenomenon—an idea that, according to the philosopher, constitutes a fundamental error.

Referring to Bishop Berkeley, one of the key figures of empiricism, Russell explains that Berkeley described sensory data or things that can be immediately known, as "*ideas*". Memories and imagined things could also be immediately known due to the functioning of the mind, and these too were termed "*ideas*". For instance, a tree exists, according to Berkeley, because someone perceives it. What is true of a tree exists in the subject's perception—an idea from which the famous philosophical proposition "*esse est percipi*" derives: the existence of the tree lies in its being perceived.

But what happens if no one perceives the tree? Berkeley indeed believes in the existence of a world independent of human perception. However, in his philosophy, this world and everything within it are ideas in the mind of God. Humans, as minds, participate in the divine mind, albeit through the subjective data of their senses. The divine ideas "*resemble those we have when we perceive the tree, but they differ from ours in that these ideas remain continually in God's mind for the entire duration of the tree's existence*" (Russell, 2008: 52–53). For Berkeley, nothing could exist or be known except these "*ideas*", a position that, for Russell, leads directly to idealism (Russell, 2008: 52–53).

To counter Berkeley's idealism, Russell explains that the fundamental error of the Bishop lies in the belief that "*anything we can perceive is within our mind*" (Russell, 2008: 55–56). At the same time, he makes a distinction between the act of perception and the thing itself, asserting that the entire system of acquiring knowledge is based on this distinction. Learning and familiarity with something involves a relationship between a mind and something else, anything other than the

mind. Russell emphasizes the gap between direct and indirect knowledge in order to establish the existence of the external world. Things exist and are outside the mind of any subject. If we were to agree with Berkeley that things known exist only in the mind, we would immediately limit the human capacity to acquire knowledge. To say that what we know is "*within the mind*" is akin to saying "*before the mind*," which is a tautology. However, this leads to the contradictory conclusion that "*anything that is, in this sense, within the mind may well not be mental at all.*" (Russell, 2008: 56–57). Ultimately, the very nature of knowledge contradicts Berkeley's argument, and thus Russell rejects idealism.

Similarly, Russell attempts to "*preserve*" the real world by pointing out the paradoxes in the theory of another contemporary philosopher, Alexius Meinong. Meinong's object theory, for example, asserts that since the statement "*the golden mountain does not exist*" is a meaningful proposition, it is logically possible for there to be, in some way, a golden mountain. According to Russell, this theory undermines both the sense of reality and the logical principle of contradiction because, on the one hand, it is not possible to accept that something nonexistent exists simply because it is an object of thought, and on the other hand, if something does not exist, it cannot simultaneously exist (Avgelis, 2014:113; Pears & Kenny, 2005: 344). As will be seen later, Russell's theory of descriptions seeks to address the above issues, focusing on the problem of linguistic confusion caused by sentences that, while syntactically and grammatically correct, do not hold meaning.

3. On "linguistic analysis"

Russell advocates for analytical logic, which is based on the distinction between meaning and nonsense. For example, a sentence is logical, not because it is syntactically and grammatically correct, but because it can be analyzed into component sentences, each of which can be verified or falsified. Additionally, the component sentences must be logically connected and, consequently, lead to a more complex sentence for which it is possible to determine under what conditions it is true (Vallianos, 2008: 255-256).

Specifically, descriptions of things we cannot know directly can be expressed linguistically through sentences that are either indefinite/abstract, when the subject's article is indefinite, or definite/descriptive. All definite descriptions refer to a thing X, which is an entity or existence with which, as we have already stated, we do not have direct acquaintance. We can assign a name to this entity. Therefore, when we replace the thing with a word, which essentially functions as a symbol, we are using symbolism. However, even with naming, we still cannot have direct knowledge, because "*common words, even proper names, are usually descriptions*" (Russell, 2008: 68-72).

To solve this problem, Russell proposes the theory of definite descriptions. According to this theory, the logical form of sentences containing names is completely different from those that contain definite descriptions such as: "Pericles, is the only living mutated man". If we knew that a specific person was the only living mutated man, we could consider that both the aforementioned definite description in quotation marks and the name "Pericles" refer to a specific individual. In this case, we would treat the description as a singular term, functioning as a grammatical subject just like the name "Pericles". Therefore, the sentence (a) "Pericles is the only living mutated man" would have the same logical form as sentence (b) "Pericles is deaf." However, Russell argues that

sentence (a) is not a simple singular sentence that could function as a name and take the place of a grammatical subject. This is because when used in a negative existential sentence (c): "the only living mutated man does not exist", we are making a statement about a non-existent individual, and yet since the sentence is meaningful, this individual must exist for us to be able to make a statement about him. That is, in our example, to verify that he indeed does not exist (Avgelis, 2014: 117-118).

One of the logical analysis schemes proposed by Russell for sentences of the type "the only mutated man is alive" (1) is as follows:

(A) At least one person is a mutated man (existence condition), or there exists an individual x such that x is a mutated man,

(B) At most one person is a mutated man (uniqueness condition), or for every y, if y is F, then y and x are identical, [where F = the property of being a mutated man],

(C) Whoever is the only mutated man is alive (inclusion condition), or x is G (alive). [where G = the predicate "alive"].

The original sentence (1) is true if and only if the three sentences (A), (B), and (C) are true. However, in our example, because sentence (A) is false, sentence (1) is also false. The error arises if we assume that the grammatical subject ("the only mutated man") is also the logical subject (Avgelis, 2014: 120-121).

4. Conclusion

The distinction Russell makes between knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge by description could also be understood as a distinction between the foundational knowledge of truths acquired through acquaintance and the non-foundational knowledge of truths that ultimately depend on the foundational one. "*Acquaintance*" is an immediate, non-critical, and non-perceptible form of awareness that Russell considered necessary for both forms of knowledge. "*Knowledge by description*" depends on "*Knowledge by acquaintance*". In fact, the relationship between the subject Y and the object X, which is called acquaintance, is simply the reverse of the relationship between the object X and the subject Y that constitutes a presentation. In other words, when we say that subject Y has acquaintance with object X, it is essentially the same as saying that object X is presented to subject Y.

The doctrine of idealism holds that everything that can be known to exist must, in some way, be mental. Russell considers this assumption to be erroneous because it denies the existence of the external world, and by using the theory of descriptions, he attempts to demonstrate that if there were only thought, then existence would be exclusively a mental phenomenon. He is one of the philosophers credited with systematically illustrating the logical structure of human thought and language.

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