

Ybu Roi
nee feurt



Book 1
Bertrand Russell's
Teapot

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an
incomplete
Pataphysic Sortie

intuitive; or *ad Calendas Graecas* (at the Greek calends), which was a joke to all Romans - basically meaning just as soon as Hell freezes over. Romans liked to mock the Greeks for not having a calends (it's a Latin word, meaning the initial day of each Roman month, from which our word "calendar" derives). But he did explain the tiny ceramic teapot that Bertrand Russell famously claims is somewhere out there orbiting the sun, at a radius between Earth and Mars. In disciplines of philosophy and logic this didactic object is universally known as *Russell's Teapot*. Philosophers and logicians now study how Bertrand Russell challenged his readers to consider the possibility of its existence. Russell's point was that the teapot's supposed existence could not be falsified (like all other insular propositions which Russell found to be non-empirical) - and thus perforce: all such non-falsifiable statements are similarly vacant.

Since Russell's time in the early Twentieth Century, *Russell's Teapot* has been a popular meme among academics, who receive spontaneous anodyne erudition credits from their peers for referencing *Russell's Teapot* in their sophisticated conversations and lectures.

Russell's Mistake (another popular academic meme) defines a common philosophical error. It critiques how the scopings of human knowledge often get stretched beyond the anomalous pale of reason, especially in our post-diluvian milieu of widespread scientism. This epistemological overstep was described by Russell, recounting an old lady who had reportedly argued with him at one of his lectures. *Russell's Mistake*¹ is the belief that the universe can be explained. As Russell tells the story: this lady adhered to the ancient belief that the cosmos is established on the back of a gargantuan celestial turtle. Russell challenged her, asking "What then could it possibly be underneath, supporting this big turtle, which you claim holds up the universe?" "Don't get clever with me, young man," the lady snapped. "The ancients tell us there's another bigger turtle beneath that one, and it's turtles all the way down". Johnson's point, of course, is that any and all attempts at explaining the universe suffer from *Russell's Mistake*, and all rely upon an endless stack of specious suppositions, going all the way down. Ultimately with no more or less inherent fungibility than the old lady's infinite stack of turtles.

What Russell's pejorative parable doesn't explain are the modern scientific imaginings which indict the ancient knuckle-draggers' stories about turtles - and then vacuously detail how infinite sequences of nothingness suddenly exploded with a causeless boom becoming our tangible universe; or else how a simple abstracted hermeneutic approach to existence itself should be sufficient answer for modern inquiry. According to Johnson all scientific stories of how existence and time began² including explanations of a Big Bang which instantly burped the universe out from a state of absolute timeless non-existence - these are all class-two metaphors, and by Johnson's reckoning structurally isomorphic to a stack of turtles going all the way down.

"Which is the more exculpatory," she asks, "Russell's titanic turtles or Hawking's complex mathematical proof showing that absolute non-existence (whatever that is) suddenly gave birth to existence, time, and in particular quale?" Although Baudrillard's *Simulacrum* paradigm, on a

¹ The old lady made the original mistake, but it's didact Russell's story; and he's equally culpable for his supercilious implication that scientific abstractions somehow provide a more lucid cosmological metaphor than an infinite stack of cosmic turtles.

² ... (or how they simultaneously did-and-did-not begin, per Stephen Hawking's arrogatory disquisition.