Bertrand Russell's Philosophical Development: A Review

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BERTRAND RUSSELL has been and still is one of the more fascinating figures in western philosophy. This review of his thought is based on his recently published **My Philosophical Development**, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1959. In this work, he sketches seventy years of philosophical thought, beginning with some early writings when he was sixteen years of age and ending with his reply to contemporary critics. Much of the book can be read without difficulty. The five chapters devoted to his mathematical writings will be more difficult for non-mathematical readers, although even here the general reader will find much enlightenment.

Russell's interest in philosophy began with the Idealism of Kant and Hegel. He remarks concerning a paper written under their influence that although some authorities reviewed it favorably, "it seems to me now nothing but unmitigated rubbish." (41) Following this, he revolted "into Dualism" described in chapter five. Here he considers his and G. E. Moore's rejection of Kant and Hegel. Here he also discusses his use of Occam's razor, the principle that one should not increase unnecessarily the factors with which he operates. Of this principle he wrote: "I do not mean that it could prove the non-reality of entities which it showed to be unnecessary; I mean only that it abolished arguments in favor of their reality. I still think it impossible to disprove the existence of integers or points or instants or the gods of Olympus. For aught I know these may all be real, but there is not the faintest reason to think so." (62 f) At this time, more than forty years ago, Russell developed an interest in linguistic problems, which has now become a flourishishing philosophical movement.

He concludes this section of his story by summarizing what beliefs remain after all the changes which followed. "I still hold to the doctrine of external relations and to pluralism, which is bound up with it. I still hold that an isolated truth may be quite true. I still hold that analysis is not falsification. I still hold that any proposition other than a tautology, if it is true, is true in virtue of a relation to **fact**, and that facts in general are independent of experience. I see nothing impossible in a universe devoid of experience. On the contrary, I think that experience is a very restricted and cosmically trivial aspect of a very tiny portion of the universe." (63 f.)

His chapter on "Universals and Particulars and Names" covers matters subject to serious debate today. He outlines certain fundamental beliefs he does not know how to demonstrate but which he is unable to doubt. They are: "that 'truth' depends upon some kind of relation to 'fact'; that world consists of many interrelated things; that syntax, i.e., the structure of sentences, must have some relation to the structure of facts, at any rate in those aspects of syntax which are unavoidable and not peculiar to this or that language." And, "that what can be said about a complex can be said without mentioning it by setting forth its parts and their mutual relations." By the first statement, Russell indicated his belief in the correspondence theory of truth, the view that there must be some correspondence, identity or likeness of language and

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that to which it refers. What is meant by stating that the animal before us is a horse is that the object agrees with or is congruent, in some degree, with what we imagine a horse to be. By the second, that the world consists in many interrelated things, he affirms his belief in pluralism as opposed to monism; that each thing has some status in its own right even though related to other things. The third takes us into the problem of names and naming.

He notes the traditional distinction of names into proper and common. This distinction was based upon the view that common names have "instances" whereas proper names "denote some unique object." He dismissed common names by noting that for "Socrates is a man" we may substitute "Socrates is human." In this case, the common name 'man' is replaceable by an adjective. With proper names, the situation appears to be different. There must always be an object to which they point. Yet he believes that "the fundamental apparatus out of which ordinary proper names are manufactured must . . . be composed of what would ordinarily be regarded as qualities rather than substances—e.g., red and blue and hard and soft and pleasant and unpleasant." (170) Perhaps his meaning may be clarified by noting that his view of particulars does not include some "thing" which **has** certain qualities or properties. It is precisely the "bundle" of such qualities and properties from a given perspective. The same would apply to that to which proper names refer. Theologicaly, this has interesting implications. The several names used to designate God refer to the divine qualities or properties identifiable by man rather than to some Being as such.

Toward the end of the book, Russell returns to the problem of knowledge. He rejects both idealism and pragmatism. Idealism advocates a monistic theory. Truth in this case consists in a coherent system. Monism "maintains that no one truth is independent of any other, but each, stated in all its fullness and without illegitimate abstraction, turns out to be the whole truth about the whole universe. Falsehood, according to this theory, consists in abstraction and in treating parts as if they were independent wholes." (175) He rejects it on the grounds that it provides no basis for testing particular judgments. If falsehood consists in partial truths, how does one decide whether or not a proposition, "A was hanged for murder" is partial. It may be the whole truth about a specifific situation, yet does not tell one all about the whole universe.

His criticism of pragmatism is this: "pragmatism holds that a belief is to be judged true if it has certain kinds of **effects**, whereas I hold that an empirical belief is to be judged true if it has certain kinds of **causes**." (176) The point of his criticism lies in the meaning of "effects." Belief in the doctrines of Karl Marx has had many far-reaching effects; the same may be said concerning those of Locke and Jefferson, yet in some instances at least they were diametrically opposed. Does this mean the same thing could be both true and false at the same time? While presenting this argument, Russell's primary concern with pragmatism was its social effects. So long as men accept as true "what pays for them," there appears little hope that mankind will find some impersonal, factual basis for peace and justice.

His own view of truth consists in two parts: "first, the analysis of what is meant by 'belief'; and then, the investigation of the relation between belief and fact which makes the belief true." (183) He defines a belief as "a state of an organism involving no very direct relation to the fact or facts which make the belief true or false." (183) Most human beliefs are stated in language, but words are merely one of the several ways whereby beliefs may be expressed. One may expect a door to slam and indicate his belief by shrinking away

from the impending bang. By "fact" Russell refers to what verifies the belief. Here he takes issue with those who begin such analyses with general laws rather than with particular facts. Taking a simple belief such as "I feel hot" Russell suggests that it can be expressed without words, and be verified with little chance of error. The "verifier" in this case is the state of his body. He does or does not feel hot. Whether or not he does is decided by the normal indications of the condition suggested.

Beginning at this modest level, it is possible to test beliefs including the words "all" or "some," "a" and "the." Russell suggests the sentence: "I met a man on the moor." If he had actually met his friend Jones on the moor, having first concluded from an indefinite number of instances that persons named Jones, Smith, etc., are all men, he could legitimately infer from meeting Jones that he had met "a man" on the moor. This is the type of analysis by which Russell believes we may understand the meaning of sentences which go beyond one's personal experience. We may know something about what is beyond our own personal experience. In this conection, he quotes a statement from his work, **Human Knowledge** (1948): "Every belief which is not merely an impulse to action is in the nature of a picture, combined with a yes-feeling or a no-feeling; in the case of a yes-feeling it is 'true' if there is a fact having to the picture the kind of similarity that a prototype has to an image; in the case of a no-feeling it is 'true' if there is no such fact. A belief which is not true is called 'false'." (p. 189)

This is a correspondence theory, or perhaps we should say a congruence theory, which asserts that a belief is true if there is agreement between the belief and some fact to which it refers. Facts, as he notes in another connection, are never simple. They consist in what is in some degree relational. Thus, "the sun" is not a fact, but that "the sun is above the horizon" is a fact. Whereas he once believed in the existence of simples, Russell no longer does. The next comment has to do with his view of thinking as consisting in images. Studies conducted half a century ago on imageless thought indicate that there may be thinking which does not employ images or pictures. These studies and more recent work in the field are reported in **Thinking: An Introduction to its Experimental Psychology**, by George Humphrey (New York: 1951).

The relation of a belief to its verifier may be expressed in terms other than those of image to what is imagined. Let us use one of Russell's judgments to argue the point. He is exasperated by the Analytical philosophers who assert that philosophy has nothing to do with the relation of language to things. I believe this to be true. My belief rests not upon any image I may have of Russell scowling or tearing his hair while reading one of these men, Strawson for example. It rests upon what I read in Russell's works. My belief may be formulated in this fashion: Russell was one of the founders of the interest which led to the contemporary school known as Analytical Philosophy. Some of these men had profited by Russell's earlier works, but now reject what he presently believes, namely, his retention of interest in empiricism. He is exasperated if he takes occasion to criticize them in sarcastic language. Since language is a form of human behavior, speaking, writing, etc., it can be imagined. By examining chapter 18 of this book, "Some Replies to Criticism," I discover what corresponds to what I had imagined. Here the theory is supported. Truth is some correspondence between an image and a fact.

Suppose, however, I believe that Russell's criticism of Analytic Philosophy is based upon rational thought, in part at least, rather than wholly upon some emotion such as exasperation. I may now reformulate my belief in these

terms: Bertrand Russell's criticism of Analytic philosophy is a "thinking man's" criticism. What is the image of a "thinking man"? One may think at once of Rodin's "The Thinker," a seated figure with his head resting upon a hand, supported by the elbow resting upon a knee. There is no real connection between this pose and pondering. One may do his best thinking while so seated. Or, he may assume this pose when tired. What constitutes "thinking" may be indicated by various expressions or attitudes. But the relationship here is, in Russell's language, non-symmetrical, i.e., where symmetry is not affirmed. Symmetrical relations are such that whenever they hold between A and B, they also hold between B and A. In the case of non-symmetrical relations Russell stated that in the case of the relation "brother," A may be brother of B, but B may be sister of A. In this case what holds in one case may not hold in another. So thinkers may assume the pose presented by Rodin, but it does not follow that all who assume the pose are thinking. They may be loafing.

We do not yet know enough about what thinking **is as such** to find an adequate image of the process or activity. Here we must test by consequences. If the results of thinking, such as is exemplified excellently in Russell's works, are what would be expected from an intelligent man's attempts to understand himself and his world, the congruence of these consequences with normal expectations may well be considered the "fact" which verifies a given belief.

Russell's insistence upon image-thinking finds some justification in his chapter on "The Retreat from Pythagoras," the final chapter in the development of the book. Pythagoreanism consisted in a form of mysticism bound up with mathematics. This combination appealed to Russell at one stage in his development. "I had, for a time, a very similar outlook and found in the nature of mathematical logic, as I then supposed its nature to be, something profoundly satisfying in some important emotional respects." (208) He then believed that mathematics was, in some sense, the key to the nature of what may be real. But he changed his mind. "Mathematics has ceased to seem to me non-human in its subject-matter. I have come to believe, though very reluctantly, that it consists in tautologies. I fear that, to a mind of sufficient intellectual power, the whole of mathematics would appear trivial, as trivial as the statement that a four-footed animal is an animal. I think that the timelessness of mathematics has none of the sublimity that it once seemed to me to have, but consists merely in the fact that the pure mathematician is not talking about time. I cannot any longer find any mystical satisfaction in the contemplation of mathematical truth." (211 f.)

Russell's experiences during the First World War made it impossible for him to live any longer in the realm of abstractions. Watching boys march off to war and almost certain slaughter reduced to triviality the "abstract world of ideas." In this situation, he lost his interest in perfection, finality and certainty. He was compelled to think in terms of individuals, of boys, guns, trees, particulars wherever he found them. I suggest that it was the triviality or irrelevance of "pure ideas," "Being," etc., which led him to restrain his thinking to what could be imagined. A man is a particular, with nerves which can be affected painfully or pleasantly. It is not some "man" in general who enjoys or suffers, but his friend Jones, a specific person. One may quarrel with the way Russell formulates his theory of what constitutes truth, but not with the interests which prompted him to formulate it as he did.

The appendix to this work is by the late Alan Wood who wrote a full-length biography of Russell with the sub-title "The Passionate Skeptic." He stated that "there is little of importance in present-day philosophizing which is

not derived from him." He also stated that "all philosophers are failures. But Russell was one of the few with enough integrity to admit it." (264) The problems to which Russell gave himself were of such magnitude that they admit of no final answers. Admitting that every judgment has its coefficient of error, Russell still did his best to reduce the error factor as much as possible.

Many religious people think of Russell as a "bad" man. Yet he went to prison because he refused to support his government during the first World War. He observed the rise of Hitlerism, and was man enough to change his mind concerning the relevance of the power factor in controlling the behavior of men in certain positions. His interest in truth is probably second to that of no other living man. The clarity with which he presents his ideas, popular or unpopular though they be, is something that many of us could emulate. His tough-minded insistence that we be guided in our actions by fact is another trait which could well be adopted by those of us who work with people. Aside from these values in his life and work, Russell is always stimulating. A reading of some of his many works would serve as a freshening breeze disturbing the dry leaves of much contemporary theological thinking.