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Bertrand Russell and Ralph Barton Perry on War and Nonviolence: On Russell's "The Ethics of War"*

Alan Ryan

The exchange between Bertrand Russell and Ralph Barton Perry dates from early in the Great War. That is one thing that explains the civility of both sides; Russell had yet to be dismissed from his lecturership at Trinity College, Cambridge, as happened in 1916, and Perry was not yet enrolled as a major in the United States Army. It was three years later that Russell was sentenced to six months in jail for "insulting an ally" when he wrote that he had no doubt that after the war American troops would remain in Europe to be employed overseas as strikebreakers in the way they had been at home. The war had already belied the optimism of the young men who had left for the front in August 1914 cheerfully expecting "to be home for Christmas," and British propaganda was making the most of German mistreatment of Belgian civilians; but the sinking of the *Lusitania* was a few months away when Russell's first paper was published in January 1915, and a month away when Perry's reply appeared in April. By the time the last essay in this exchange was published in October 1915, the *Lusitania* had been sunk, on May 7, and Germany was embarking on the unrestricted submarine warfare that eventually provided the casus belli for American intervention. Nonetheless, the American official position remained one of watchful neutrality, and the following year Woodrow Wilson was able to campaign for the presidency on the slogan "He kept us out of war."

Another reason for the civilized tone of the exchange may well have been that it was less than a year since Russell had been a visiting professor

* A retrospective essay on Bertrand Russell's "The Ethics of War," *International Journal of Ethics* 25 (1915): 127–42; Ralph Barton Perry's "Non-resistance and the Present War—a Reply to Mr. Russell," *International Journal of Ethics* 25 (1915): 307–16; and Russell's "The War and Non-resistance: A Rejoinder to Professor Perry," *International Journal of Ethics* 26 (1915): 23–30.

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in the philosophy department at Harvard, where Perry was teaching, as he had since 1903. Philosophically, Perry was not at odds with Russell. An admirer of William James, of whom he wrote a Pulitzer Prize–winning biography in 1936, Perry was one of the "new realists," espousing a thoroughgoing naturalism in epistemology. Russell himself was conventionally classed among the new realists. What Russell thought of Perry personally is hard to tell; Russell's *Autobiography* is unkind about American professors in general, and the Harvard faculty of 1914 in particular, whom he dismissed as graceless, pompous, and snobbish, but there is no mention of Perry by name. Whether Perry had Russell in mind when he observed that British democracy was marred by excessively rigid class distinctions and the snobbery that went with them is impossible to guess, but it seems unlikely. Like Russell, Perry was an enthusiastic supporter of voting rights for women, for instance, although Russell was perfectly capable of alienating people who shared just about all his views.

Perry and Russell were wholly at odds about the war, however. Perry was an enthusiastic American nationalist. Unlike some American nationalists who saw Britain as a rival naval power and had no particular desire to assist Britain in what many observers saw as an imperial rivalry that had got out of hand, Perry believed in the "special relationship" long before anyone thought to coin the expression. America was the home of democracy, which he associated with a vigorous citizenry and a manly determination to assert individual rights. The liberal ideals and institutions on which Americans prided themselves were an inheritance from England. Conversely, Germany was the home of autocracy, and its citizens possessed only a thoroughly unmanly capacity for obedience. How they came to be such formidable soldiers in both world wars was unexplained. Perry held the same view of the difference between the Anglo-American liberal democracies and their authoritarian, and later their totalitarian, enemies not only in World War I, but during the interwar years and World War II. He was a thoroughgoing anti-isolationist. Americans might wish the world to leave them alone, but the world would not do so unless the United States was itself formidable and possessed formidable allies.

As that might suggest, Perry was a believer in "preparedness," the movement that set out to create an officer corps for the American army against the day when America might be embroiled in the European conflict. The "Plattsburg movement," as it was also known, was aimed at recruiting well-educated and generally upper-class men for the day when an officer corps would be needed. Perry had himself undertaken military training at Plattsburg, and would go on to join the army when America joined the war, be promoted to major, and put in charge of the educational activities of the army. Russell was, in his own way, deeply patriotic, too, but he was also deeply skeptical of the motives that had impelled Britain to make war on Germany in 1914. The skepticism went back at

least to 1906 when Britain and Russia had first guaranteed the independence of Persia, and then carved the country into two zones of influence, giving Russia a free hand to execute the leaders of the nascent movement for Persian democracy.

Their exchange in the *International Journal of Ethics* was paralleled by a near-simultaneous exchange on the same topic in the *Atlantic Monthly*. Neither Russell's nor Perry's arguments were significantly different in any of the numerous contexts in which they wrote, nor were they modified on either side by their exchange. Each wrote elsewhere at greater length, both on the war narrowly and on the wider question of what sort of society they thought would be preserved or undermined by the war. Russell lectured wherever the Defence of the Realm Act allowed him to do so—essentially at a safe distance from the coastline—and the book that resulted, *The Principles of Social Reconstruction*, was the most considered and in many ways the most interesting of his contributions to political theory. Perry published a collection of essays, *The Soldier and the Free Man*, in 1916 and a very long book on the philosophical implications of the war in 1920.

Because both Russell and Perry wrote so briskly and so clearly, the simplicity of their arguments is very visible. They agreed, as Perry observed, in thinking that the argument over the rightness or wrongness of the war, and in particular the British declaration of war on Germany, must be a consequentialist one. As he did on other occasions, Russell raised the stakes by treating the preservation of Western civilization as the crucial consequence to consider; the realist view that wars can and should be fought only to further national self-interest was not one he ever accepted. He also raised the stakes by arguing not only for British neutrality in a war between France and Russia on the one side and Germany and Austria-Hungary on the other, but for a policy of nonresistance if the Central Powers attacked a neutral Britain as Germany had attacked a neutral Belgium.

Russell's view, fiercely disputed by Perry, was that the British would have lost nothing by a German occupation. But Russell's premises are interesting in their own right. He was a skeptic about international law; it lacked the sanctions that domestic law possessed and was at most a form of international morality, violated whenever powerful states found it in their interest to do so. Nor was Russell impressed by traditional just-war theory, as his response to Perry's response made clear. Perry thought the war was justified in order, among other things, to punish the aggressors; this was a good Augustinian principle, but Russell was unimpressed. The damage done by the war outweighed any possible benefit from trying to punish the aggressors. The war was part of a cycle of great power aggression that went back beyond the battle of Jena; the likeliest outcome of the war was a renewal of the cycle as Germany sought revenge for defeat in the current war, a prescient observation.

What is likely to make a modern reader flinch is Russell's view of the varieties of war and their possible justification. Dividing them into wars of colonization, principle, self-defense, and prestige, he argued that the first two were fairly often justified, the third rarely, and the fourth never. The present war belonged in the fourth category. Whether self-defense was justified depended on the good done by resistance versus the harm caused, whence the argument for nonresistance in the present instance. Russell stuck to his guns until the Second World War; *Which Way to Peace?* was an extended defense of the doctrine of passive resistance, abandoned only when Russell came to terms with the sheer vileness of Hitler and his purposes. Elsewhere Russell offered an elaboration of the argument from self-defense that reflected the ideal consequentialism that underlaid much of his work. If a robber tried to steal our purse and we could prevent his doing it by violent measures, we usually ought not to do so; but if we were on the way to a conference to deliver an important theorem to an audience that could understand it, we were justified in all measures up to and including the death of our assailant.

The modern reader is most likely to flinch from Russell's remarks about wars of colonization. Not entirely unlike Karl Marx on the subject of the East India Company—its motives were appalling, but the good it did in dragging India into the mainstream of history outweighed such considerations—Russell agreed that it was hard on Native Americans to be dispossessed of their land, murdered, and exterminated by disease, but from the point of view of the universe it was a good thing that these distressing events had occurred. Civilization had been advanced. But that was exactly why the present war was a disaster; it was being fought between civilized and militarily powerful nations who could do themselves nothing but damage. Perry did not take on Russell's unusual opinions on colonization, but stuck, sensibly enough, to the consequentialist argument that Russell's optimism about the survival of everything worth having in Britain even under Prussian occupation was ill-founded. It is hard not to think Perry was right, even if the war itself was a terrible mistake.