

Russell and the English idealist heritage

by Carl Spadoni

Roberto Pujia. *Bertrand Russell e l'eredità idealista inglese*. (Biblioteca di filosofia moderna, no. 7.) Messina, Italy: Editrice La Libra, 1977. 220 pp. 5000 Lire.

THE TRANSLATION OF the title of this book is *Bertrand Russell and the English Idealist Heritage*. In the preface, the author, Roberto Pujia, states that he is not presenting an overall examination of Russell's philosophy but "rather, a contribution to a more correct interpretation of certain subjects included in the area of epistemological research and the relationship between language and experience" (p. 7). Pujia's focus is on the development of Russell's philosophy up to 1918: Russell's epistemology and reconstruction of empiricism, his theory of meaning and his views concerning philosophical method. According to Pujia, Russell's ties to traditional empiricism in Hume, Locke, Berkeley and Mill have been amply investigated and pointed out, but his relationship to the neo-Hegelian movement has been neglected, obscured and misunderstood. F. H. Bradley, in particular, Pujia claims, has been characterized unjustifiably as a convenient target of polemical abuse instead of as a positive influence on Russell's mature thought. At the outset, therefore, this book purports to fill a gap in the existing literature by revising a chapter of the history of philosophy. The publisher's description on the back cover promises that this is a documented study thanks to the opening of the Russell Archives. Although Pujia's work is well intentioned in its attempt to dispel the prevalent myth that Russell's philosophy was a mere outgrowth of traditional empiricism, it does not fulfill its expectations. Not only is the case for Bradley's influence overstated, but, also, from a research point of view, there is serious cause for complaint.

In the first chapter ("Idealism in English Culture"), the reader is introduced to background material. Russell is regarded as an innovator whose contribution of ideal language analysis inaugurated the "linguistic turn". In Pujia's opinion, Russell's understanding of philosophy fluctuated between ontology, on the one hand, and the activity of analysis, on the other. Chapters 2 and 3 of Elizabeth Eames's book, *Bertrand Russell's Theory of Knowledge*, would have proved useful here, but for some undisclosed reason

Pujia discounts Eames's careful explanation of Russell's seemingly conflicting assertions about the role of philosophy (pp. 14, 161-2). The relevance of language and meaning to philosophical problem-solving raises the question of how Russell came to advocate such an approach. There is an uninspired paragraph, now standard in commentaries on Russell, of how he attended Cambridge, took courses of mathematics, changed to philosophy in his fourth year, and was influenced by his idealist teachers and friends. Casual mention is made by Pujia of Russell's early book on geometry, his article on number and quantity (wrongly dated as 1896 instead of 1897), and his grand scheme of a dialectic of the sciences. There is no depth of coverage, however. Given the topic of Pujia's book, one would have expected a thorough presentation of Russell's neo-Hegelian period. Quite to the contrary, nothing of the sort is to be found, and at this point one surmises that the author has simply not done his homework. The suspicion is confirmed when Pujia claims that at the end of 1898, after having *flirted* with Bradley's philosophy rather than *adhered* to it, Russell ventured into pluralism (p. 46). While it is true that Russell devised his own rarified form of neo-Hegelianism rather than espousing wholeheartedly one species of that philosophy, it is a blunder to suggest that he only flirted with Bradley's philosophy. How Bradley's influence on Russell's later philosophy can be judged when the extent of Russell's idealist apprenticeship is not investigated, does not appear to concern Pujia. In haste, he states that all the influences on Russell at this time were in the direction of German idealism, forgetting to mention the major exception, Henry Sidgwick (pp. 17-18).

The rest of the chapter contains a description of the intellectual climate that gave rise to the neo-Hegelian movement in England. There is also a concluding section on Bradley's philosophy. The former makes for interesting reading, especially the discussion of Thomas Reid's opposition to Hume. Presentation is selective, however, rather than systematic. For example, more attention is devoted to the novelist, Thomas Love Peacock, than to Bradley's immediate predecessor, T. H. Green. One gets the distinct impression that Pujia's selectivity is due to his prior acquaintance with certain writers and philosophers rather than to their proper place in the history of English idealism. McTaggart, Bosanquet and Joachim are only given lip service despite their prominent place in Russell's early development. Pujia's treatment of Bradley's philosophy, on the other hand, appears greatly indebted to Richard Wollheim's *F. H. Bradley*. The debt to Wollheim is particularly obvious in the next chapter. While Wollheim's book is *generally* reliable, it is always a dangerous practice to base one's understanding of a philosopher on one interpretation alone—especially is this the case with a work such as Pujia's which claims to make an original contribution to the Russell-Bradley interaction. Idealistically inclined writers on Bradley's philosophy—Ewing, Blanshard, Saxena and Vander Veer, to name a few—should at least have been consulted.

the collapse of a house of cards. Unfortunately, this orthodox interpretation is insensitive to Bradley's denials and consequently attacks a straw man. Bradley, for example, wrote to Russell on 21 October 1907: "Do you think that 'internal relation' *must* mean that relations are adjectives [properties] of their terms? I fail to see why this follows." In part, Pujia's failure to examine the complete correspondence of Russell and Bradley has led him to fall prey to this orthodox view.

The final two chapters ("Constructionism and Logical Atomism" and "The Problem of Method") deal with Russell's reformation of traditional empiricism: his substitution of the propositional character of knowledge for Hume's model of experience, and his attempt through analysis to make philosophy scientific. At the beginning of Chapter 4, brief mention is made of the theory of external relations and how it implies Russell's pluralism. From that point on, however, Pujia makes little effort to link these two concluding chapters to previous discussion. As a result, they appear tacked on to the rest of the book. Bradley is reintroduced only in the last several pages (p. 174). The author also has the annoying habit of raising a particular point and then saying that it will not be discussed in detail. In short, although these two final chapters are competently written in part, presentation is sketchy and there is nothing new.

According to Geoffrey Warnock, metaphysical systems are rarely susceptible to frontal attack because, by character, they are only explicable or demonstrable internally. English idealism did not die of refutation but of ennui.⁴ In dissenting from this opinion, Pujia states: "All this is true up to a point, but the access to documents [those of the Russell Archives] hitherto unknown, testifies to the necessity of a historical examination of this period" (p. 57). What a pity that in writing this book, Pujia has not heeded his own advice! If he had carried out a thorough literature search including the resources of the Archives, he would not have been caught in so many glaring errors and omissions.

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⁴ *English Philosophy since 1900* (London: Oxford University Press, 1958), pp. 10-11.