

The philosopher's duty in these times

by John G. Slater

Bertrand Russell. "The Duty of a Philosopher in This Age". In *The Abdication of Philosophy: Philosophy and the Public Good; Essays in Honor of Paul Arthur Schilpp*. Edited by Eugene Freeman. La Salle, Ill.: Open Court, 1976. US\$15.00. Pp. 15-22.

IN WHAT IS probably his last essay on philosophy, Russell turns for the first time to the question of a philosopher's duties. His essay, "The Duty of a Philosopher in This Age", was written in August 1964 in tribute to Paul Arthur Schilpp and was partly inspired by Schilpp's essay, "The Task of Philosophy in an Age of Crisis". As every reader of Russell knows, he wrote eloquently in a number of places on the value of philosophy, especially to its students. The concluding chapter of *The Problems of Philosophy* is undoubtedly the most famous of these writings. This new essay, as might be expected, agrees in many particulars with his earlier writings on the topic, but in one very important respect it offers something new.

The value of studying philosophy for Russell has always consisted in the changes it will make in the student's emotional and intellectual natures. The effect of philosophy on our emotional nature is to free us from the grip of short-term, and frequently intense, emotions by the gradual replacement of them with long-term, rather placid emotions. Instead of reacting personally to provoking situations we gradually learn to develop an impersonal kind of feeling toward them, viewing them as minor, even trivial, events in an enormous fabric whose very extent emphasizes their triviality. Russell often cites Spinoza as one who experienced great success in cultivating this sort of impersonal feeling. By learning, however difficult it may prove to be, to regard provocations which elicit strong emotions under the guise of eternity, our life can be freed of them.

The change to be expected in our intellectual nature from the study of philosophy is analogous to that in our emotions. The study of philosophy gradually frees us from our ties to the here and now; we come to see, when the universe is the object of our contemplation, that our place, and the place of our species and planet and solar system, is not very important. We cut ourselves down to size and, consequently, gain a truer picture of the world. Again this is a consequence of learning to see things under the guise of eternity.

A study of philosophy which is intensive enough and long enough to free our thoughts from dependence on the here and now will also develop in us a profound scepticism of the unqualified truth of generalizations about the here and now. We will demand evidence for their truth and only accord them that degree of acceptance which is justified by the evidence. In no case will we accept them completely, for we will know that all such statements are likely to admit of exceptions, and that allowance must be made for them. What has just been said about non-normative generalizations is also true of normative ones, but, since the generalizations of morals and politics present their own special difficulties, our scepticism with regard to their value will be even more profound than it is with empirical generalizations. Russell never tires of warning us of the dangers of dogmatism in morals and politics, suggesting that its eradication would go a long way toward improving the quality of human life.

These changes in the student of philosophy are acknowledged again in "The Duty of a Philosopher in This Age", but when his attention turns to an explicit consideration of the philosopher's *duty* Russell's argument has the curious (for him) consequence of discarding both kinds of change as incompatible with the philosopher's duty at least at this time. His reason is that the extermination of human life is at stake, and when the stake is that high the philosopher must act now to try to prevent its happening. The philosopher must respond with strong emotion to this perilous provocation, with emotion strong enough to move him to actions which are very likely to endanger his livelihood, and perhaps even his life.

To guide his actions he will have to use his intellect to gather, assess and order the data relevant to making the case against nuclear arms as stark and clear as it can be made. His attention will have to focus on the here and now at least until the future is assured. When the future has been assured, then, Russell implies, the philosopher can expect to resume the cultivation of his emotional and intellectual natures in the manner of Spinoza.

While he is preaching the dangers of nuclear war the philosopher will have to abandon a sceptical attitude toward the truth of his predictions if changes are not made. He will be wasting his time if he admits publicly that a reasonable man might doubt the truth of what he says, for his opponents, and they are many, will seize upon this admission to counsel inaction. Only by painting the blackest case in the most emphatic terms is he likely to move enough people to make a difference.

In this essay, then, Russell is recommending to the philosophical world at large a model of action derived from his own life. All readers of Russell are aware that on certain important matters he has written (and acted) with a passion strong enough to sweep aside all those who recommend detachment in feeling or thought about the matter. At such times he is as impatient with the sceptic as he is at others with the dogmatist. The message comes through clearly: the philosophic frame of mind is a luxury which we can enjoy only if we have reasonable assurance that life will continue. The dead cannot do philosophy. Therefore in perilous times, philosophers, who on account of

their training can see distant consequences more clearly than the ordinary person, have a duty to adopt the ordinary person's ways of feeling and thinking in order to bring about those changes which will permit the philosopher to resume cultivation of the philosophic state of mind. One doubts that Spinoza, who also lived in very uncertain times but maintained his detachment, would agree.

What Russell fails to acknowledge fully in this essay is the importance of personality in political action. He doesn't ignore it entirely, but he seems to take the line that even those not prone to political action can, by an act of will, become activists. Again, it seems to me, he is taking himself as the model, and failing to give due weight to his own nature. Some people, Russell among them, are activists, others, probably including Spinoza, are not. So his message to philosophers has to be qualified: if you are moved by what I have to say about the likely extermination of the human race and if you find it within yourself to do something about it, then here is what I recommend you do. If you and your fellow agitators succeed, you can resume the study of philosophy; if you fail, you will at least die knowing you did your part to prevent universal death.

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