

The philosophical importance of Russell's *Collected Papers*

by Nicholas Griffin

What we need is a Complete Works, such as those with which the nineteenth century honoured Hobbes, Locke, and Hume, of both Russell and Frege. Instead we have a number of incomplete and overlapping volumes.¹

RUSSELL'S CONTRIBUTIONS TO philosophy, over a period of more than 50 years, were important and numerous enough to have established several reputations; and his influence is felt in every branch of twentieth-century analytic philosophy—even those to which he did not himself contribute. In a large number of crucial contributions in the early years of this century, Russell transformed logic and made it of central philosophical importance; in a no less important series of publications in later years, he used his logic to tackle fundamental problems of epistemology, metaphysics and philosophy of science. The influence of his work, even on those who disputed it, is quite unparalleled in this century. Of course, it is not maintained that he accomplished this single-handed: Russell was not an isolated thinker. His genius consisted as much in the transformation of the ideas of others as in the production of completely new ideas. This fact has made it comparatively easy to underestimate his role by the simple (but misleading) practice of tracing the ancestry of his ideas to pre-Russellian sources. This is the simplest “scholarly” methodology in the history of philosophy, but it yields a distorted picture of the relative importance of various thinkers (including Russell). Despite the fact that a considerable number of Russell's ideas seem to resist this style of historical reduction, those that do can give no

¹ Stephen Read, review of Russell, *Essays in Analysis*, *Philosophical Quarterly*, 24 (1974), 184.

adequate idea of his contribution. As a thinker who was influenced by almost every significant intellectual trend this century, from Bradleyan Idealism to quantum mechanics, Russell stands unique as a synthesizer of ideas drawn from diverse disciplines. On the other hand, two of his most original ideas—the theory of incomplete symbols, and the theory of types—still stand at the centre of discussion in analytic philosophy.

The central role that logic and linguistic analysis now play in philosophy in the English-speaking world owes more to Russell than to any other thinker. His contribution to the development of formal logic, culminating in *Principia Mathematica* (by Whitehead and himself), his advocacy of its use in philosophy and, even more influential, the example he set in the application of formal logic to philosophical problems, have transformed the nature and methods of philosophy, and made Russell uniquely important among the founders of the analytic movement. Reichenbach's claim that "The logic and epistemology of today is unthinkable without Russell's contribution"² is as true now as when he wrote it. Russell's influence on analytic philosophy, both direct and indirect, is pervasive. It consists not only in his doctrines and writings, but in his students (including Broad and Wittgenstein) and those who, like Moore,³ Carnap and Quine, were brought to philosophy as a result of being encouraged by him or reading him. Even philosophies which repudiate his doctrines, such as those of Wittgenstein and the Oxford movement, bear substantial signs of his influence. "[W]ith the possible exception of his pupil Ludwig Wittgenstein", writes A. J. Ayer, "there is no philosopher of our time who has made such a large difference, not only to the treatment of particular philosophical problems, but to the way in which the whole subject is pursued."⁴

Russell's most important contribution to philosophy lies in logic and the philosophy of logic. *The Principles of Mathematics* and *Principia Mathematica* are, by any standards, among the most important works ever written in this area. The former was described, with justice, by Jules Vuillemin as "inaugurating contemporary philosophy",⁵ while the latter was the first comprehensive and thorough exposition and application of the new logical techniques. Between the two works Russell published the theory of descrip-

tions,⁶ described by Ramsey as "a paradigm of philosophy" and still the subject of widespread debate; and the theory of types⁷ which, though no longer widely used in foundational work, made the concept of nonsense important in philosophy and has led to major advances in our understanding of language. These two theories, together with Russell's use of Peanesque techniques in the treatment of relations,⁸ have become as much part of the furniture of philosophical discussion as is possible for any philosophical doctrine.

Even outside this area of maximum impact, Russell's contributions to philosophy remain some of the most important this century. His epistemological work in the period 1905-14, together with his simultaneous critique of Idealism, was one of the main influences serving to revive empiricism as a major philosophy in the twentieth century. Ironically, Russell was also well ahead of his time in arguing the inadequacy of empiricism.⁹ Grover Maxwell wrote of *Human Knowledge*, Russell's last major publication on epistemology: "it seems to me that these later views of Russell on perception and related matters are crucially important and, moreover, that they are the nearest thing to the truth about these issues that have been proposed to date."¹⁰ The substantial mass of unpublished MS. closely connected with the themes of *Human Knowledge* will form the centrepiece of Volume XI of the *Collected Papers*. In the philosophy of mind, Russell's neutral monist writings have played an important role in the later development of brain-mind identity theories.¹¹ Again, in addition to the major published writings—*The Analysis of Mind*, *The Analysis of Matter*, and *Human Knowledge*—Russell left a mass of unpublished material that will be included in the *Collected Papers*.

In some areas of philosophy the importance of Russell's contribution has been controversial. In the history of philosophy, e.g., his *History of Western Philosophy*, though without doubt the best written

⁶ "On Denoting", *Mind*, 14 (1905), 479-93.

⁷ "Mathematical Logic as Based on the Theory of Types", *American Journal of Mathematics*, 30 (1908), 222-62.

⁸ "Sur la Logique des Relations avec des Applications à la Théorie des Séries", *Revue de Mathématiques*, 7 (1901), 115-48.

⁹ See his "The Limits of Empiricism", *Proc. Aristotelian Society*, 36 (1936), 131-50, and *Human Knowledge* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1948); and for sympathetic comment, Noam Chomsky, *Problems of Knowledge and Freedom: The Russell Lectures* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1971).

¹⁰ "Russell on Perception: A Study in Philosophical Method", in D. F. Pears, ed., *Bertrand Russell: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Garden City, N. Y.: Anchor Books, 1972), pp. 110-11.

¹¹ See Herbert Feigl, *The "Mental" and the "Physical"*; *The Essay and a Postscript* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1967).

² Hans Reichenbach, "Bertrand Russell's Logic", in P. A. Schilpp, ed., *The Philosophy of Bertrand Russell* (Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1944), p. 53.

³ G. E. Moore, "An Autobiography", in P. A. Schilpp, ed., *The Philosophy of G. E. Moore* (Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern University, 1942), pp. 13-14.

⁴ *Russell* (London: Fontana, 1972), p. 11.

⁵ *Leçons sur la Première Philosophie de Russell* (Paris: A. Colin, 1968), p. 333.

and most entertaining history of philosophy written this century, has been widely disparaged for its lack of scholarly credentials. On the other hand, Russell's book on Leibniz was described by Stuart Hampshire (himself the author of a valuable book on Spinoza) as "probably the best work ever written by one philosopher about another."¹² Again, in ethics, where Russell's contribution is often held to be slight, he led the field in the twentieth-century presentation of emotivism.¹³ It seems inevitable that in areas like ethics, where Russell's work was not dominated by large and easily recognized books, the collection of all his shorter writings is the only way in which the nature and scope of his contribution can come to be assessed. It is certainly the only way in which the unity of his practical ethics will come to be recognized.

The volume of Russell's work, the range of his influence, and the range of the influences upon him have made it difficult to form a reliable estimate of his contribution. In addition Russell scholarship has been frustrated for years by the fact that the full range of his writings is not generally available for study. A large majority of his published philosophical papers have never been collected into book form, and have to be sought in diverse and sometimes rare journals. Even the most determined researchers of his published work have been hampered by the absence of a full and reliable bibliography of his writings. Moreover, despite the enormous quantity of his published work, a great many philosophical papers (including some of great importance) have never been published. A rough estimate suggests that, of the material to be included in the first five volumes of the series of "Philosophical Papers", at least half would be appearing in print for the first time, while only a comparatively small number of them are currently available in book form. On perhaps his two most important contributions to logic and philosophy, the theory of descriptions and the theory of types, the published material is only a small fraction of the total. The unpublished MSS. on these two topics—around which much philosophical debate still continues—are of the utmost importance; already a study of only some of them has revealed that the nature of Russell's thinking on these problems was almost certainly quite different from what was supposed before the Archival material was available.

¹² "Conversation with Stuart Hampshire, The Philosophy of Bertrand Russell: I", in Bryan Magee, *Modern British Philosophy* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1971), p. 19.

¹³ See his "The War and Non-Resistance. A Rejoinder to Professor Perry", *International Journal of Ethics*, 16 (1915), 25-30, and *Religion and Science* (London: Thornton, Butterworth, 1935), chap. IX.

It is, of course, both difficult and dangerous to try to estimate what effects hitherto unpublished papers might have once published. But the fundamental changes in our understanding of Russell which have already been wrought by the comparatively small number of scholars who have studied at the Russell Archives suggest some modest extrapolations. For example, the traditional view¹⁴ for many years was that Russell was led to his theory of descriptions as a means of escaping the alleged ontological commitments of Meinong's theory of objects, or the genuine ones of Russell's earlier realism. Work by Smith¹⁵ and myself¹⁶ has shown that in fact Russell's objection to Meinong was logical rather than ontological. A more sophisticated view than the traditional one is that Russell adopted the theory of definite descriptions in order to preserve his view of propositions as subsistent complexes without excessive ontological commitments.¹⁷ However, documents¹⁸ in the Russell Archives to be included in the *Collected Papers* show conclusively that the real reason for the theory of descriptions was the difficulty of specifying, on any other theory, the relation between the meaning (if any) and the reference (if any) of definite descriptions. The central argument, in fact, was published by Russell in "On Denoting", but in such a form that its significance (as well as its structure) has not been appreciated.¹⁹ The unpublished MS., "On Fundamentals", by contrast, gives a much fuller version of the argument and explicitly notes its role in the genesis of the theory of descriptions. Together with other MSS. on the same topic from the same period, it makes a decisive contribution to our understanding of the origin of the theory of descriptions, and possibly even to our understanding of the still troublesome problems of reference that Russell's theory was designed to solve.

No less striking changes may result in our understanding of the ramified type theory of the first edition of *Principia Mathematica*. Research by Sommerville²⁰ on Archival documents to be published

¹⁴ See W. V. O. Quine, "On What There Is", *Review of Metaphysics*, 2 (1948), 21-38.

¹⁵ Janet Farrell Smith, "Theory of Reference and Existential Presuppositions in Russell and Meinong" (unpublished PH.D. thesis, Columbia University, 1975).

¹⁶ "Russell's 'Horrible Travesty' of Meinong", *Russell*, nos. 25-28 (1977), 39-51.

¹⁷ Susan Haack, *Deviant Logic: Some Philosophical Issues* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1974), pp. 132-3.

¹⁸ E.g., "On Fundamentals", 1905 (unpublished MS., Russell Archives).

¹⁹ For recent discussions of the argument, see Simon Blackburn and Alan Code, "The Power of Russell's Criticism of Frege: 'On Denoting'", pp. 48-50", *Analysis*, 38 (1978), 65-77; and Herbert Hochberg, "Russell's Attack on Frege's Theory of Meaning", *Philosophica*, 18 (1976), 9-34, and his *Thought, Fact and Reference: The Origins and Ontology of Logical Atomism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1978), chap. VIII.

²⁰ S. T. Sommerville, "Types, Categories and Significance" (unpublished PH.D. thesis, McMaster University, 1979).

in the *Collected Papers* suggests convincingly (and contrary to all previous interpretations) that it was Russell's ultimate intention to provide ramified type theory with an epistemological foundation in the theory of judgment. This interpretation, if correct, will change dramatically our picture of Russell's philosophy during the period 1908-13. The principle of acquaintance, e.g., is to be seen not as a mere epistemological appendage to the theory of descriptions, but as the central postulate of Russell's theory of propositions (including logical propositions). Moreover, the philosophical position which underlies the apparatus of *Principia Mathematica* is seen to be quite different from what has been suspected. Prior to the study of the Archival MSS. we have simply been in ignorance of Russell's answer to the question "What is Logic?" in the years 1908-13, when he was making a greater contribution to logic than anyone else then working in the field. Moreover, these discoveries by no means exhaust the new insights which may be gained in this area. Very recently a chance Archival find, relating to the origins of Russell's class paradox, has thrown new and quite unexpected light on this comparatively well-studied area of Russell's thought of nearly 80 years ago.²¹

Although in the two areas of type theory and theory of incomplete symbols the unpublished material is particularly rich, elsewhere fundamentally new ideas have been produced as a result of study in the Russell Archives. Spadoni²² has studied Russell's neo-Hegelian period and provided a new assessment of Russell's revolt into realism. Sommerville²³ has shown that the standard view of Russell's propositional functions as either open sentences or attributes²⁴ is in error; whether Sommerville's own view (which concentrates on the period after 1908) is correct depends upon the study of MSS. written before that date. Grattan-Guinness²⁵ has thrown new light on the history of the multiplicative axiom; Jager²⁶ has done the same for some aspects of Russell's Platonism; examples could be multiplied at length. It can confidently be predicted that other, no less remarkable

²¹ J. Alberto Coffa, "The Humble Origins of Russell's Paradox", *Russell*, nos. 33-34 (Spring-Summer 1979), pp. 31-7.

²² Carl Spadoni, "Russell's Rebellion against Neo-Hegelianism" (unpublished PH.D. thesis, University of Waterloo, 1978).

²³ *Op. cit.* (at n. 20).

²⁴ See Quine, *Set Theory and Its Logic* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1963).

²⁵ I. Grattan-Guinness, *Dear Russell—Dear Jourdain: A Commentary on Russell's Logic, Based on His Correspondence with Philip Jourdain* (London: Duckworth, 1977).

²⁶ Ronald Jager, "Russell and Religion", in J. E. Thomas and K. Blackwell, eds., *Russell in Review: The Bertrand Russell Centenary Celebrations at McMaster University, October 12-14, 1972* (Toronto: Samuel Stevens, Hakkert, 1976).

discoveries will result if hitherto unstudied documents were made available in Russell's *Collected Papers*.

The effects of a collected edition of Russell's philosophical papers will be felt beyond the already wide boundaries of Russell scholarship. The use of papers in the Russell Archives has already resulted in new evaluations of Wittgenstein's early philosophy, the pre-Tractarian relations of Russell and Wittgenstein, and the origins of the seminal logical atomist movement.²⁷ There is opportunity for similar work in connection with Russell's relations with other contemporary philosophers (e.g., Whitehead, Meinong, Peano) and with his predecessors (e.g., Spinoza, Leibniz, Kant, and Bradley). Finally, it might be expected that the publication of Russell's collected philosophical papers will have effects outside of historical scholarship in philosophy. Issues such as the theory of reference are of perennial interest in philosophy, and dissatisfaction with traditional solutions to these problems (in the case of the theory of reference, the traditional solution is Russell's) has led to renewed interest in historically discarded solutions (e.g., Meinong's). Publication of several important MSS. on this topic, dating from a period just before Russell conceived his theory of descriptions, could well provide new impetus for research in this area.

Although the new interpretations mentioned all differ substantially from received opinion on Russell's philosophy, they have been made largely on the basis of unpublished material that needs to be available for study by the entire philosophical community. The fact is that for a philosopher of his magnitude Russell's thought is not well understood, and not even well known. Our understanding of even his published papers has been distorted by an inability to study them in their historical context alongside other papers (published and unpublished) that he wrote at the same time. Russell's thought was anything but static; it changed continuously throughout his life, never reaching a stage of complete final systematization. The conclusions of one paper are the background of the next, a fact which it is easy to miss if the two papers are printed in different volumes and appear to be on such different topics as (e.g.) type theory and belief.

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²⁷ See Blackwell, "Wittgenstein's Impact on Russell's Theory of Belief" (unpublished M.A. thesis, McMaster University, 1974) and "The Early Wittgenstein and the Middle Russell" in I. Block, ed., *Proceedings of the Wittgenstein Colloquium* (Oxford: B. H. Blackwell, forthcoming); B. F. McGuinness, "Bertrand Russell and Ludwig Wittgenstein's 'Notes on Logic'", *Review Internationale de Philosophie*, 26 (1972), 444-60; and Sommerville, *op. cit.* (at n. 20).