

## *Russell on the Meaning of “Good”*

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In *An Outline of Philosophy*,<sup>1</sup> Bertrand Russell tells us that he once followed G. E. Moore in believing that “good” was indefinable but that he was “partly” led to abandon that doctrine by reading George Santayana’s *Winds of Doctrine*.<sup>2</sup> Though when he first encountered Santayana’s criticisms,<sup>3</sup> he was not convinced of their cogency, they must have been decisive because never again, to my knowledge, did he defend the concept of the intrinsic, objective, unanalyzable good.

Russell exhibits an uncharacteristic reticence in reacting to Santayana’s criticisms. In the above comment from *An Outline of Philosophy*, he does not explain the “partly”; that is, he does not say what else led him to abandon the concept in question, nor does he specify which criticisms of Santayana’s he found especially telling. In none of his writings after 1911 does he seek to refute the criticisms of the indefinability of “good”, either by Santayana or anybody else. When, in later years, he argues for the concept of good as satisfaction of desire,<sup>4</sup> he does not compare his new theory with the old one, nor refute or even mention the objections to the relativity of good which he had himself expressed in 1910.

Could Russell have refuted Santayana’s criticisms successfully? Were those criticisms decisive? It is significant that G. E. Moore, who no doubt was also aware of Santayana’s criticisms, not to mention the objections that others had raised against his theory, continued to defend it nearly forty years after he had first published it.<sup>5</sup> Why did Russell give up the theory so quickly and without serious protest? Was it Santayana’s irony which spoke to Russell, himself a devoted practitioner of the art of polemical rhetoric?<sup>6</sup>

Russell first met Santayana in 1893 when Russell’s brother, Frank, who had met Santayana in America some years earlier, arranged for the three of them to have lunch together. In an entry in Russell’s diary for 29 August

1893, he records the following impression of Santayana: "a charming cosmopolitan with whom I discussed much philosophy, poetry and art; also German Universities."<sup>7</sup> Though we know nothing more about the encounter, it is plausible to suppose that it was a pleasant, relaxed session in which the young, bright scholar (twenty-one years old) sought guidance on his further education from the distinguished Harvard professor (age thirty). The quality of this first meeting may also help to account for the remarkable absence of rancour in their comments in the subsequent years on each other's philosophies, as divergent as they were.<sup>8</sup>

They met also some years later, in 1912, after Santayana's *Winds of Doctrine* had appeared. Santayana had come to Cambridge, England, after retiring from Harvard in 1912, and Russell met him at least six times, but not once in his letters to Lady Ottoline Morrell during that period does Russell report any discussion with Santayana on ethical issues.<sup>9</sup> Neither does Santayana report any such discussions with Russell in his letters of that period.<sup>10</sup>

In this paper, I shall review some of the essays on ethics which Russell wrote in the 1890s, some for a class in ethics with Henry Sidgwick at Cambridge and some which he read to the Apostles, a select group of Cambridge students and teachers who met regularly for intellectual discussions. This will constitute the first part of my paper and will provide background information to Russell's interaction with Santayana. In addition, I have set myself two tasks which Russell failed to perform: to identify and comment on Santayana's criticisms; and to indicate how Russell later on might have answered his own earlier criticisms of the theory of good as derivative of desire which he expressed when he was defending the theory of good as indefinable. Russell was content to abandon the theory of the indefinability of "good" which he shared with Moore, but he left undischarged an obligation to justify that abandonment.

## I

In October 1893 Russell wrote a paper for Sidgwick's ethics course entitled "The Relation of What Ought to Be to What Is, Has Been or Will Be".<sup>11</sup> In it he denies that there is a relation between what ought to be and what is. Even when a desire for a goal has led to that goal, one is not required to judge that goal to be good, for one may desire unworthy goals. Hence, that one desires  $x$  does not establish that one ought to desire  $x$  or that  $x$  ought to exist.

In later years, such a conclusion will seem to Russell unwarranted. He will maintain that since the good depends on desire, and one "ought" to seek good goals, and only desired goals are "good", therefore what one desires is what one ought to desire. He will mitigate the apparently

paradoxical character of this conclusion by distinguishing desires of narrow scope from those of broad scope, and by distinguishing desires which conflict with other desires from desires that form a harmonious totality. A "bad" desire, one which one "ought" not to indulge in, will merely be one whose satisfaction will cancel out the satisfaction of other desires—and outside the realm of desire, "good" means nothing. Since good is not independent of desire, neither is right, which derives from it.

In January of the following year, Russell wrote an essay on the ethical bearings of "psychogony", an obsolete term for the science of the historical development of mentality (including the moral sentiments).<sup>12</sup> Even if we assume, Russell declares, that evolution has produced a system of morality which on the whole tends to promote life, shall we accept this end as ours? The later, or the more successful, is not necessarily the better.

On 20 October 1894, Russell wrote to Alys Pearsall Smith that he planned to write a paper on "controlling our passions", pointing out that we *cannot* control them. The more intense they are, however, the less obligated we are to control them though the easier it is to do so. In subsequent letters to her, he commented further that he planned to deal with the issue of the independence of desire and knowledge. Just as no isolated truth is wholly true, so no isolated object of desire is wholly good.

Russell read that paper (entitled "Cleopatra or Maggie Tulliver") to the Apostles on 3 November 1894. In it he defines "passion" as "a body of particular desires coordinated by direction to a single end or to a closely related system of ends". From an ethical standpoint, he continues, "the greater a passion is the more it ought to be followed, and ... the problem of self-control is to give the victory to the great and permanent passion rather than to the small and temporary one."<sup>13</sup> A passion cannot be valuable for its own sake since its essence is desire and desire is the awareness of incompleteness, of a discrepancy between the real and the ideal. However, a passion can be valuable as a means.

In the development of desire, we remove ourselves more and more from wishes that can be gratified immediately. When the object of one's desire is, for example, power, then since no one particular object can satisfy it, one is launched on a series of actions directed toward the sought-after goal. Such desires of broad scope may be called passions and are all the more commendable for their comprehensiveness. Self-control is the ability to bring vividly before one's mind a more comprehensive desire (or system of desires) so that the urge for immediate gratification may be transcended.

Russell draws a parallel between the true and the good thus: "Just as truth is true, ultimately, because we cannot but believe it if we judge at all, so the Good is good because we cannot but desire it if we desire at all."<sup>14</sup> But he adds that there may be error in desire as there is error in belief. The former occurs when a given desire conflicts with a general body of desires.

Though truth and goodness are parallel, they are independent: knowledge is concerned with fact but desire can oppose or condemn fact. Desires can be judged ethically "according as they are such as can be satisfied universally".<sup>15</sup> Thus, reciprocal hatreds do not form a harmony and cannot be simultaneously satisfied, but reciprocal loves can, and are hence ethically superior. Russell anticipates in these comments the concept of "compossibility" which he was to develop more fully forty years later.

At the conclusion of the presentation of "Cleopatra or Maggie Tulliver", the Apostles present were asked to vote for passion or for duty. With characteristic piquancy, Russell voted for both, adding the comment, "according to circumstances", to his vote for duty.

If we replace the two poles voted on with a comparable pair, impulse versus reason, we recognize a polarity which Russell encountered often in his ethical writings in later years. The attempt to satisfy one's desires is doomed to frustration unless one has accurate and full knowledge of effective means towards one's ends. In *What I Believe* (1925), for example, Russell assigned to ethics the task of identifying one's goals and to science the task of spelling out the means to their fulfillment. "Given an end to be achieved", he writes, "it is a question of science to discover how to achieve it. All moral rules must be tested by examining whether they tend to realize ends that we desire."<sup>16</sup> Note that the word "duty" does not enter into this characterization; indeed, that concept plays a most negligible role in Russell's ethics. The word does not appear in the section in "The Elements of Ethics" (to be discussed below) entitled "Right and Wrong".

In 1896, Russell wrote a short paper entitled "Are All Desires Equally Moral?" In it he declares that the "indisputable postulate" of ethics is that the good for someone at a given moment is what that person wants at that moment. The desired (and hence the good) is not the satisfaction of desire but the thing desired. There are primary and secondary desires, the former directed toward ends, the latter concerned with means.

Why cannot "good" be equated with satisfaction? The reason is that in fact satisfaction often brings satiety. Most of our desires deal—and deal erroneously—with means. "If we desire a thing truly for its own sake, and not as a means, its attainment *must* bring satisfaction."<sup>17</sup>

It is apparent therefore that Russell had wrestled with ethical issues long before he published his essay, "The Elements of Ethics". Consequently the impression that he gives in acknowledging his debt in ethics to Moore—that he is but an unoriginal, perhaps even slavish, follower of Moore—is to a great extent inaccurate. Since his earliest views are akin to his latest views, the similarity in these views suggests that defining the good as the object of desire posed such serious problems for him in the 1890s that he turned to Moore's simplistic doctrine to escape those problems. But when Santayana poked fun at the hypostatized good, Russell was glad to desert it and he

returned to the relativity of good to desire. Perhaps that explains why he did not trouble to meet Santayana's criticisms.

Also in 1896, Russell wrote a brief "Note on Ethical Theory". He used some of the passages in this note a year later for a paper on the relation of ethics to psychology. The note includes some reflections on harmony (equivalent to what Russell later called "compossibility") not found in the later paper—for example: one with perfect knowledge would want to desire that which led to the greatest possible harmony "inside and outside himself".<sup>18</sup>

In the later paper read to the Apostles on 6 February 1897, entitled "Is Ethics a Branch of Empirical Psychology?", Russell contrasts ethics and epistemology.<sup>19</sup> "This is good" and "I desire this" are "strictly equivalent", but "This is true" and "I believe this" are not. He refers to F. H. Bradley who in his *Appearance and Reality* had written "We may speak of the good, generally, as that which satisfies desire."<sup>20</sup> "Foolish" desires can be excluded by distinguishing what genuinely satisfies a desire from what is, perhaps frivolously, desired.

Still Russell prefers the definition of the good as the latter rather than the former. He appeals to self-evidence ("A man needs no argument to convince him that what he desires is good") and to the authority of economics which defines goods as whatever people desire. Any other criterion of the good can be challenged. If we do not desire something, it helps not a bit to tell us we ought to desire it, even if as a matter of fact it would satisfy a desire of ours. Russell here distinguishes three ways of defining "good" relative to desire: (1) as the satisfaction of desire, (2) as that which satisfies desire, and (3) as that which is *desired*. The first would make our desires slaves to reality, for not always can we achieve what we desire, and if what we desire cannot be achieved, then the definition would require us to deny that it is good—but certainly we balk at that. The second definition ignores the fact of human perversity—for do we not often persist in desiring some things which when we obtain them not only do not give us the satisfaction we had anticipated but turn out to be repulsive? Does the untoward result negate our original judgment of the desirability of the spurious good? Not necessarily. If one says, "I desire some things which I know will disappoint me", the "unhappy moralist is left shocked and speechless, but without arguments."<sup>21</sup> The third definition is the one Russell accepts, though he acknowledges that he cannot prove it—but then "all argument in proof of a definition of the good is impossible."<sup>22</sup>

Summarizing, Russell says, "Since all goodness, all morality, rest on the contrast of ideal and actual, desire alone can supply the criterion among desires." The contrast rests on the difference between the desires we desire and those we dislike. Good desires are those which harmonize with one another; bad ones are those which clash. We note again the centrality of compossibility in the characterization of the good.

That at this stage, Russell was not convinced of the objectivity and independence of "good", even though Moore apparently was, is indicated by Russell's challenge to Moore in the last paragraph of Russell's paper:

That my conclusion is satisfactory, I do not pretend. If our brother Moore will give me an unexceptionable premiss for his definition of the good, or even a hint of where to find one, I will retract. At present, I see no way of distinguishing between the good and the desired. I regard the good, therefore, as totally devoid of objectivity, and as a matter for purely psychological investigation.<sup>23</sup>

It appears then that the period of Russell's discipleship in ethics to Moore was but an interlude between Russell's early and late periods during both of which he was loyal to the principle of the relativity of good to desire.

These reflections may bear on the two questions I raised early in this paper: why did Russell not answer Santayana's criticisms, and what did Russell mean when he said that he was "partly" led to abandon Moore's doctrine of the good by reading Santayana's *Winds of Doctrine*? The explanation, I am suggesting, is that Santayana reawakened in Russell his earliest convictions about good which were only incompletely and temporarily eclipsed by Moore's influence. Russell had apparently not abandoned fully his earliest views and only needed a slight prod—which Santayana provided—to reestablish them.

In 1899, Moore read a paper to the Apostles entitled "Do We Love Ourselves Best?" in which he denied that self-love is the only motive of human behaviour.<sup>24</sup> Moore went further, maintaining that properly speaking we can only be said to love others and not ourselves at all. The proposition voted on by the Apostles was phrased in the reverse: "Can we hate ourselves as much as other people?" The majority voted No with Moore, but Russell voted Yes.

The basic problem posed in Moore's paper, the competing claims of oneself and others, is of course a central problem for the moralist, one with which Russell dealt repeatedly during his lifetime, most directly perhaps in *Power* (1938) and *Authority and the Individual* (1949). In the latter, for instance, he writes:

For man though partly social, is not wholly so. He has thoughts and feelings and impulses which may be wise or foolish, noble or base, filled with love or inspired by hate. And for the better among these thoughts and feelings and impulses, if his life is to be tolerable, there must be scope. For although few men can be happy in solitude, still fewer can be happy in a community which allows no freedom of individual action.<sup>25</sup>

Also in 1899, Russell read a paper entitled "Was the World Good Before the Sixth Day?" He was responding to Moore's view, defended in a lecture delivered by Moore in London a few months earlier, that beauty has intrinsic value. Moore had argued that beauty cannot be good as a means only, for if that were the case, then ugliness could be of equal value, for it is conceivable that beauty and ugliness could produce the same effect—the same amount of pleasure for example—in different persons. If beauty can be good in itself, then the world which, in the Biblical account, was not judged to be good or bad until the sixth day, could very well have been so even before God (or anyone) so judged it. In short, Moore would have to say that even when no one is contemplating it, a purely material but beautiful world could still possess goodness.

Russell was willing to agree that beauty is an objective quality, intrinsic to its object. He was also willing to grant that in the absence of omniscience we cannot assert without qualification that only psychical states are good. Yet, among the things *we do know*, Russell claimed, there is *nothing* good or bad except states of mind. Hence, beauty in the absence of a perceiver is neither good nor bad. When it produces in one capable of perceiving it a certain aesthetic emotion, then it can be judged good. Beauty's value derives from the psychical state it produces. The emphasis on states of mind as the chief source of value appears also in *Principia Ethica*. It is combined there with the doctrine of the objectivity of good despite their apparent incompatibility. Russell had not raised this issue in his essay, and when, as he characterized his outlook in *An Outline of Philosophy*, he was following Moore in ethics, it apparently was no problem for him then either. Russell's 1899 paper generated two issues: "Is matter beautiful?" and "Is matter good?" Russell joined the other Apostles in voting Yes on the first question; he voted No on the second, diverging from Moore who voted Yes.

Incidentally, a passage in *Human Society in Ethics and Politics* strikingly parallels the thesis of Russell's paper of half a century earlier:

That feelings are relevant to ethics is readily seen by considering the hypothesis of a purely material universe consisting of matter without sentience. Such a universe would be neither good nor bad, and nothing in it would be right or wrong. When, in Genesis, God "saw that it was good" before He had created life, we must suppose that the goodness depended either upon His emotions in contemplating His work, or upon the fitness of the inanimate world as an environment for sentient beings.<sup>26</sup>

## II

Russell's essay, "The Elements of Ethics", came to be written perhaps thus: Russell, R. G. Trevelyan, Sydney Waterlow, and G. Lowes Dickinson proposed to write a cooperative volume expressing views inspired by Moore's new philosophy in language accessible to the educated layman. Moore did not care for the idea especially, since exactitude, which for Moore had supreme importance, was to be subordinated to popularity; nor was there as much agreement among the projected collaborators as they supposed. But Russell busied himself anyway writing the chapter on ethics which he confessed, in a letter to Moore dated 2 May 1905, was simply a condensed popularized version of *Principia Ethica*. The essay first appeared in three installments in 1908 and 1910 in *The Hibbert Journal* and *The New Quarterly* and was included in Russell's *Philosophical Essays* as "The Elements of Ethics".<sup>27</sup>

I paraphrase now Russell's account of the basic principles of ethics as formulated in "The Elements of Ethics". Truth is as much a goal of ethics as of science. Some truths in ethics, as also in science, cannot be proved but are required to prove other truths. In ethics there are some ultimate truths which are so simple or so obvious that nothing more fundamental can be found from which to deduce them. Statements which assert that certain things are good on their own account are truths of that kind. Other things may be called good which produce consequences which are good in themselves and are to be judged in terms of those likely consequences, but there are no extrinsic criteria for judging those things which are intrinsically good. Intrinsic goodness cannot be perceived by the senses nor can it be defined, for it is simple, but it can be apprehended nonetheless. Moreover, the ability to do so is widespread. "Immediate inspection", not distorted by prejudice or haste, is all that is needed. When proper precautions are taken, "people probably differ very little in their judgments of intrinsic value".<sup>28</sup> Among the mistakes which are to be avoided is the assumption that what we desire, or what brings pleasure, or what is later in time is necessarily better. The good may be *accompanied* by satisfaction or pleasure or a greater degree of complexity but these ancillary qualities do not define, nor are they essential to, the good.

I have summarized the essentials of Russell's doctrine without argument. Indeed, Russell does not argue for his view—after all, if it is ultimate, it is unarguable—but he does argue against rival views and attempts to meet objections. If the good cannot be defined, can it be understood? Yes, for it is recognizable as that which ought to exist for its own sake. Is not the good subordinate to the right (the ought)? On the contrary, we define the ought in terms of the good. We ought to engage in that action which is most likely to produce the greatest good. Is not my good to be preferred to the good of

another? No, for it is "evident" that it is better to secure a greater good for *A* than a lesser good for *B*, even if I happen to be that *B*. Even those persons who maintain that good is the satisfaction of desire agree that it is better that the desires of many should be satisfied than those of a few. Is it not the case that the only thing that is good is the satisfaction of desire? No, for there may be bad desires, such as the desire to inflict pain on another. Then are not pleasure and pain the ultimate criteria of good and evil? No, because it is widely recognized that noble ends are sometimes achieved through suffering and that pleasure may produce depravity.

But there is a stronger refutation of the doctrine that pleasure and the good are one, an abstract one supplementing this empirical one: it makes sense to ask, "are all pleasures good?" If we can answer No, then pleasure cannot define good, for a genuine and accurate definition permits of no exceptions. If "being a five-sided figure" is a proper definition of a "pentagon", then it will be inappropriate to ask, "are there some pentagons which are not five-sided?" If you were to present me with a figure which is not five-sided, I would simply refuse to call it a "pentagon". If when I said "pentagons are five-sided figures", I meant only that *most* pentagons were five-sided, then I would not be expressing a definition but rather a characterization or generalization. Similarly, it is a reasonable and meaningful hypothesis that pleasure is always or at least nearly always present whenever good is; but that is not the same as saying that the good *means* the pleasant. In fact, when we are told the latter, we understand by the statement not an assertion about a word, but one about reality.

Whenever a proposed definition sets us thinking whether it is true in fact, and not whether that is how the word is used, there is reason to suspect that we are not dealing with a definition, but with a significant proposition, in which the word professedly defined has a meaning already known to us, either as simple or as defined in some other way.<sup>29</sup>

Hence, "all hitherto suggested definitions of the good are significant, not merely verbal, propositions; and ... therefore, though they may be true in fact, they do not give the meaning of the word 'good'."<sup>30</sup> Russell's clincher is this: if desired were identical to good, then it would be self-contradictory to say, "I desire *x* rather than *y*, but *y* is better". Since this is an assertion that many of us are constrained, alas, to make frequently, and since we understand it and are understood by it perfectly, it cannot be nonsensical.

Russell concludes by maintaining that since "immediate inspection" is sufficient for identifying the good, "genuine" differences as to what is intrinsically good are "very rare".<sup>31</sup> If we avoid certain mistakes, such as those Russell identified in his critical remarks, then it is to be expected that people will "probably differ very little in their judgments of intrinsic

value".<sup>32</sup> However, conspicuously absent from this essay is any specification of acts which *are* good. Russell justifies this lack by remarking that if the reader agrees with the analysis, he could make such a list himself, and if he disagrees "without falling into any of the possible confusions, there is no way of altering his opinion".<sup>33</sup>

Moore was somewhat bolder in this respect. He identified two classes of the good: personal affection and appreciation of what is beautiful in art or nature.<sup>34</sup> Though he mentions only two classes of the good, he finds three types of evil: the hatred of what is good, the admiration of what is evil, and the consciousness of great pain. Moore's list may suggest why Russell avoided following his example: the circularity and arbitrariness of the specification, the end result of much hard thinking, strikes one as anticlimactic.

I present now some samples of Santayana's irony from *Winds of Doctrine*, which serve also to give one the direction of his criticisms:

Not being able to define good, [Russell] hypostasizes it. (P. 140)

We are asked to believe that good attaches to things for no reason or cause, and according to no principles of distribution. (P. 141)

That the quality "good" is indefinable is one assertion, and obvious, but that the presence of this quality is unconditioned is another, and astonishing. My logic, I am well aware, is not very accurate or subtle; and I wish Mr. Russell had not left it to me to discover the connection between these two propositions. (*Ibid.*)

Right and left are indefinable ... yet everything that is to the right is not to the right on no condition.... If Mr. Russell thinks this is a contradiction, I understand why the universe does not please him. (Pp. 141-2)

[Russell's state of mind is one of] belated innocence, [of] estrangement from reality. (Pp. 143, 148)

[Russell would require us to] maintain our prejudices, however absurd, lest it should become unnecessary to quarrel about them! Truly the debating society has its idols, no less than the cave and the theatre. (P. 144)

[Russell] thinks he triumphs when he feels that the prejudices of his readers will agree with his own. (P. 145)

For the human system whiskey is truly more intoxicating than coffee, [but how strange it would be] to insist that whiskey is more intoxicating in itself ... that it is pervaded, as it were, by an inherent intoxication, and stands dead drunk in its bottle! Yet just in this way Mr. Russell and Mr. Moore conceive things to be dead good and dead bad. (P. 146)

[If no point of reference is available for judging good and evil, then nothing but] physical stress could give to one assertion of value greater force than to another. The shouting moralist no doubt has his place, but not in philosophy. (P. 147)

The twang of intolerance and of self-mutilation is not absent from the ethics of Mr. Russell ... and one trembles to think what it may become in the mouths of [his] disciples. Intolerance is itself a form of egoism, and to condemn egoism intolerantly is to share it. (P. 151)<sup>35</sup>

I paraphrase now and comment on Santayana's arguments. He says that the indefinability of good, even supposing it were granted, does not imply its objectivity nor its absoluteness. He supports this by referring to "right" and "left", which he says are indefinable but conditional on the direction in which one is looking. An object which is to one's right when one looks straight ahead will be to one's left when one turns around. But *are* "right" and "left" indefinable? My dictionary defines "right" as "pertaining to the side of a person ... toward the east when the face is toward the north". That definition is circular if "east" is defined by reference to "north" and vice versa. But "north" can be defined independently by reference to Polaris, or to the equator; or "east" could be defined with reference to the rising sun. Moreover, the indefinability which Moore and Russell ascribe to "good" refers to its simplicity, its lack of parts. Not having parts, it is not dependent on them but is what it is solely in virtue of its own intrinsic nature. To say that it is not dependent is another way of saying it is absolute. It is thus that the indefinability of good implies its absoluteness.

Though Russell insists that good cannot be *defined*, he does *characterize* it: he describes it as that which "ought to exist on its own account, not on account of its consequences, nor yet of who is going to enjoy it".<sup>36</sup> This characterization is not to be taken either as a definition of the concept nor as an ascription to it of parts, for it is the word "good" which is being "defined", so that one knows something about how to use the word in the English language. "Ought to exist" is not *part* of the concept good, only an expression of its *relation* to existence and to the ought.

From this characterization, it follows that disagreement about the goodness of a particular action reveals that one of the parties to the disagreement must be right and the other wrong, for obviously it cannot be said, in truth,

simultaneously that something ought and also ought not to exist. Such disagreements as are found must be on means to good ends, for there probability rules, and the amount of evidence available to two different persons or to the same person at different times may very well be disparate. Thus, Santayana counters that though the *idea* of good is to be distinguished from the *idea* of evil, the same object can be, and often is, "yellow and green, to the left and to the right, good and evil, many and one".<sup>37</sup> Not all of these contrasting concepts may be parallel, but for the first pair, Russell may have replied at that stage in his philosophical development that the *perception* of yellow and green will vary from person to person and from condition to condition but the *yellowness* of the yellow and the *greenness* of the green will be of a definite nature, as defined by wavelengths. Specifying that nature is not relative but subject to canons of truth and falsity.

Says Santayana, "to speak of the truth of an ultimate good would be a false collocation of terms; an ultimate good is chosen, found, or aimed at."<sup>38</sup> However, Russell speaks not of the truth of ultimate goods, but of the truth of statements about them. Moreover, he maintains that if the good were merely that which is chosen, there would be no point to debating our judgments of what is good, as we do. "If one man likes oysters and another dislikes them, we do not say that either of them is mistaken."<sup>39</sup> If moral judgment is simply a matter of who prefers what, then will not *vox populi* become *vox Dei*? Power becomes the ultimate arbiter of right and wrong. Russell rebelled passionately against any such a notion all his life, against the power of the British Government to send young men to their deaths in the First World War, against the power of clerics and the police to withhold birth control information from women whose lives were shortened or made miserable through many births, and against the power of the American government to destroy Vietnamese populations and villages. If Russell was irrational and fanatical in making the judgments he did, then he had much company.

When Russell approaches a concrete ethical question, says Santayana, he abandons his central doctrine that good is an intrinsic, objective quality and instead implies its relativity. To show that the good is not pleasure, Russell appeals to consensus. For example, is mindless pleasure a good? "Here the British reader ... is expected to answer instinctively, No!" But the response is prompt in forthcoming not because it is self-evident but rather because the man who answers "No" is a particular kind of man. "He is shocked at the idea of resembling an oyster." The mystic's ideal, Santayana asserts, is exactly this: "changeless pleasure, without memory or reflection, without the wearisome intermixture of arbitrary images".<sup>40</sup> Such a standard is no foundation for political or artistic life, but who is to say that it does not define a good?

It seems to me that Santayana misconstrues Russell's intent here. Russell

is not trying to prove that mindless pleasure is bad, only that the metaphysician who maintains that evil is the same as non-existence is mistaken, for if he were correct, he would have to infer that pain and blank unconsciousness were equal as far as the non-possession of evil is concerned—a conclusion which follows from the doctrine that nothing that exists is evil, and only a metaphysician defending a theory would advocate such a position.

How does the good come into existence? It is easy to say that what is good ought to exist, but suppose no one feels any obligation to follow through? Santayana criticizes Russell for leaving the transition from the ideal to the real a mystery. Suppose we grant that "in the realm of eternal essences, before anything exists, there are certain essences that have this remarkable property, that they ought to exist." Will nature recognize the claim upon her? "What exists ... is deaf to this moral emphasis in the eternal.... As the good is not a power, there is no one to redeem the world."<sup>41</sup>

To my mind, this is Santayana's most telling criticism. In his eagerness to establish the good's objectivity, Russell has separated values from man and man's will so emphatically that there is no way to reunite them. He may proclaim "ought to exist" as often as he wishes, but if no one is moved to take on the role of the demiurge, the eternal and potential ideals will remain remote from depraved reality. "What a pity", are Santayana's closing words, "if this pure morality, in detaching itself impetuously from the earth, whose bright satellite it might be, should fly into the abyss at a tangent, and leave us as much in the dark as before."<sup>42</sup>

### III

I turn now to the contrast between Russell's early views and his later views, especially on the significance of desire, the relevance of pleasure to the good life, and the limitations of egoism.

It will be recalled that Russell tried to show that the good cannot be identified with the object of desire, since it is meaningful to speak of bad desires. In a number of his later publications in which he defended what I shall call the conative theory of good, he disposes of this objection easily. A "bad desire" is simply one which conflicts with other desires, either with one's own or with those of others. In itself no desire is "bad". Thus, in *An Outline of Philosophy*, Russell says of the harmonious life that it is one "in which action is dominated by consistent quasi-permanent desires" (p. 239). There is "a greater *total* satisfaction when two people's desires harmonize than when they conflict" (p. 240). However, each desire counts as one. "In themselves", he says, "all desires, taken singly, are on a level" (p. 241). It is only when the satisfaction of many is considered, that some desires, those which tend to promote many satisfactions, are to be preferred.

Is it not, however, often the case that humans are mistaken on what it is that they truly desire? In *The Analysis of Mind*, Russell clearly characterizes a predicament in which we all often find ourselves:

We feel dissatisfaction, and think that such-and-such a thing would remove it; but in thinking this, we are theorizing, not observing a patent fact. Our theorizing is often mistaken, and when it is mistaken there is a difference between what we think we desire and what in fact will bring satisfaction. This is such a common phenomenon that any theory of desire which fails to account for it must be wrong.<sup>43</sup>

Does the conative theory of good avoid this error? It does, for it sets the distinction between genuine desires and fraudulent ones parallel exactly to the distinction between genuine goods and fraudulent ones. In so far as a goal seems to satisfy a desire, the satisfaction of that goal is to that extent good. But the satisfaction is essential, whether it is apparent or real.

How does one discover which desires are authentic? Russell points out that the discovery of motives is made by observing one's actions and inferring the desire which could prompt them.<sup>44</sup> The process for oneself is the same as the process for others. The calculus of motives is crucial here. A person supposes that he desires *A*; but when he achieves it, he discovers that it does not provide the gratification anticipated. What is worse, it frustrates various other desires that he has and may in addition frustrate the desires of certain other persons. At the minimum, the gratification it provides is transitory while the frustration endures. What the person thought was quite good turns out to be mostly bad—but it was the frustration that made it bad, not any intrinsic quality inherent in the goal. That people rarely know what they "really" want is beside the point. "Their desires influence their behaviour ... just as much when unconscious as when conscious."<sup>45</sup>

The social aspect is also significant. Russell denies that an ethical judgment merely expresses a desire of some individual: it must in addition have an element of universality. He writes, "I should interpret, 'A is good' as 'Would that all men desired A'."<sup>46</sup> The recognition of those *A*s which have this universal quality is often a difficult task, but it is one to which Russell himself devoted much of his time and energy. "The wish to harmonize desires", he wrote at age seventy-one, looking back on his career, "is the chief motive of my political and social beliefs, from the nursery to the international state."<sup>47</sup>

How can the motivation be created to facilitate the satisfaction of the desires of many rather than those of a few? Law and education and a social order which encourages cooperation rather than rivalry are the chief means. Criminal law, social praise and blame, and economic motives do not directly create good desires but produce a tension between greed, envy, ambition,

and enmity on the one hand, and fear on the other, so that fear and prudence may cancel out or at least mitigate the destructive passions. These external techniques, however, do not get to the heart of the matter, the re-education of human emotion. Only through education can desires be changed so that people will act spontaneously in a social fashion.

The "supreme" moral rule becomes then, "Act so as to produce harmonious rather than discordant desires."<sup>48</sup> The need for knowledge to provide clues to the establishing of the kind of social institutions which do not put a premium on exploitation but rather promote cooperation is obvious. Relevant also is the ability to assess accurately the consequences of one's decisions and actions on one's own life and on the lives of others. Hence, it is accurate to say of the "good life", as Russell said, that it is "one inspired by love and guided by knowledge".<sup>49</sup>

These theses are repeated and reinforced in Russell *Human Society in Ethics and Politics*. There he introduces the term "compossible", which he borrowed from Leibniz, to characterize harmonious desires, and he calls conflicting desires "incompatible" ones or "noncompossible". The role of reason in ethics, he starts by saying, is restricted to choosing efficient means to an end selected by passion or emotion. He reminds us that "some impulses, when they exist in two human beings or in two groups of human beings, are such as essentially involve strife, since the satisfaction of the one is incompatible with the satisfaction of the other",<sup>50</sup> and there are others of which the same need not be said. Moreover, such conflict can exist among the desires of an individual. For example, "I may desire to get drunk tonight and to have my faculties at their very best tomorrow morning", but of course "these desires get in each other's way".<sup>51</sup> More broadly, "The desires of those who feel benevolently to each other are compossible, but those who feel reciprocal malevolence have desires that are incompatible."<sup>52</sup> This is not quite right, for two duelists can simultaneously destroy one another if for instance they both shoot at the same time and aim right. Reciprocal malevolence in this case would be compatible. Incompatible are *A*'s hatred of *B* with *B*'s self-love.

The new theory retains a certain allegiance to the objectivity of value as is evidenced by Russell's assertion that "A thing is 'good' ... if it is valued for its own sake."<sup>53</sup> A state of affairs is "good" which has a certain intrinsic quality or set of intrinsic qualities such that we are inclined to seek it, while if it is such that we are inclined to reject it, it is "bad". Note that it is not the goodness or the badness which is the intrinsic quality. The state of affairs has *some* intrinsic quality or other, unspecified and varying from case to case, but having in common in all instances the power to evoke the drive to create or to acquire it. It is this attraction toward the "good", its *desiredness*, which is central to its goodness and in fact is the source of its goodness.

Is pleasure good? That depends on its cost. If it produces pain either to



oneself subsequently or to another, it is so far bad. If, for example, the pleasure the sadist derives from being cruel could occur without actual pain or injury to another, we might perhaps not be quick to condemn it. To cite a more traditional kind of example: the pleasure of the drunkard is seriously compromised not only because of the hangover the morning after but also because of the possible disruption of family life and of occupational competence, even if we disregard the tragic consequences of traffic accidents.

Russell's analysis of "good" is quantitative not only with respect to the number of desires, and the number of persons whose desires are relevant, but also with regard to the intensity of the competing desires. Thus he says: "The satisfaction of one person's desires is as good as that of another person's, provided the two desires are of equal intensity."<sup>54</sup> Note that he is not distinguishing pleasures in terms of their nature. He avoids embracing what may be called the aristocratic form of hedonism, expressed for example in Mill's famous rejection of Bentham's dictum that, from the standpoint of pleasure, pushpin is as good as poetry. "It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied."<sup>55</sup> Mill argues that the person of refinement knows both the elevated pleasures and the crass ones, while the boor knows only the latter; hence the judgments of the superior person, since they are better grounded in experience, merit greater credence.

Santayana puts the case for the ethics of snobbishness, as we may label it, thus: egoism, he says, asserts "that a given man, oneself, and those akin to him, are *qualitatively* better than other beings; that the things they prize are intrinsically better than the things prized by others; and that therefore there is no injustice in treating these chosen interests as supreme."<sup>56</sup> Even when Russell was an intuitionist he approached cautiously the task of designating those goods which he intuited, or which anyone with certainty could specify. Thus, in his chapter on intuitive knowledge in *The Problems of Philosophy*, he asserts that self-evidence has degrees—certainly a remarkably undogmatic position. Would not one suppose that a proposition or a quality either was or was not self-evident? On the continuum of self-evidence, Russell puts judgments of intrinsic ethical or aesthetic value last (they are "apt to have some self-evidence, but not much").<sup>57</sup>

This paradoxical result of setting up a continuum for what would seem to be an all-or-nothing matter is avoided when one speaks in terms of desire, for obviously some desires are more intense and demanding than others. But then a new problem arises. If degree of intensity is relevant, how shall we measure it? We may be faced with an irremediably subjective element in choosing among competing claims. Is each person to be judge, jury, and executioner as to which desires are most intense? Does not that leave open the possibility that force will decide the issue?

Fortunately, psychologists and sociologists have developed various ob-

jective measures of intensity of desire. The most promising approach is in terms of the pain to which one is willing to subject oneself in order to achieve the object of one's desire. Noble ends, we generally recognize, merit greater sacrifice, if called for, than trivial ones. To be sure, there is danger of tyranny in this, when *you* tell me what sacrifices I should make for your noble ends. A prudent scepticism is called for when that happens.

Considering further the issue of egoism, Russell acknowledges that every person "seeks the satisfaction of his own desires".<sup>58</sup> However, this is not to be taken to imply that we are "wholly egocentric" in our actions. "Most people", he says, "desire the happiness of their children, many that of their friends, some that of their country, and a few that of all mankind."<sup>59</sup> When we take out life insurance, we demonstrate by our act that our wishes go beyond the scope of our own lives. Summarizing, Russell says: "Right desires [are] those that are capable of being compossible with as many other desires as possible; wrong desires [are] those that can only be satisfied by thwarting other desires."<sup>60</sup>

Finally, the new theory cancels out the force of Santayana's criticism of the early theory that it has no way of accounting for the generation of good. The motive power of good, on Russell's conative theory, comes from desire, from the centre of energy in man. The locus of good has been transferred to human nature, not to some realm of disembodied eternal essences. Some of Russell's critics have accused him of inconsistency when on the one hand he denies that moral judgments can be said to be true and decries fanaticism, and on the other hand judges persons and actions with great intensity, often with severity. If Russell has certain desires, and of course, he does, and expresses them, and if "good" and "bad" are functions of desire and derive their meaning solely from that source, where is the inconsistency? As Russell says in his reply to Justus Buchler's criticisms in the Schilpp volume on Russell, "I am quite at a loss to understand why any one should be surprised at my expressing vehement ethical judgments. By my own theory, I am, in doing so, expressing vehement desires as to the desires of mankind; I feel such desires, so why not express them?"<sup>61</sup>

Why not indeed? To express and act upon our desires calls for but one caution: do not at the same time deny that same privilege to others. The two great moral teachers of the Western religious tradition put the point succinctly: love your neighbour as yourself—not more so, but not less so either.<sup>62</sup>

## Notes

- 1 (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1927), p. 238.
- 2 (London: Dent, 1913; New York: Scribner's 1913), pp. 138–54. Santayana's criticisms first appeared in *The Journal of Philosophy, Psychology, and Scientific Methods*, 8 (1911): 421–32, in the last unit of a three-part review of Russell's *Philosophical Essays*.
- 3 The *Journal* article appeared 3 Aug. 1911. On 15 Sept. 1911 #180, Russell wrote to Lady Ottoline Morrell reporting receipt of it and saying, "It is largely critical but serious and quite good. His ethic is very different from mine. I don't think it can be right, but it is hard to feel sure."
- 4 *An Outline of Philosophy*, Chap. 22; *Religion and Science* (London: Butterworth, 1935), Chap. 9; *Human Society in Ethics and Politics* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1954), Part 1, Chap. 4; "Reply to Criticisms" in *The Philosophy of Bertrand Russell*, ed. Paul Arthur Schilpp (Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern University, 1944), pp. 681–741.
- 5 "A Reply to My Critics" in *The Philosophy of G. E. Moore*, ed. Paul Arthur Schilpp (Evanston: Northwestern University, 1942), pp. 535–627.
- 6 In a letter (postmarked 15 Feb. 1913 #699) to Lady Ottoline, Russell writes, "Santayana's criticism is like literary criticism—he is not so much concerned to discuss the truth or falsehood of people's views as to dissect their characters and aims." In *The Development of Bertrand Russell's Philosophy* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1972), p. 474, Ronald Jager writes, "Santayana did not refute Moore and Russell's theory. He mocked it."
- 7 "A Locked Diary" in *The Collected Papers of Bertrand Russell*, Vol. 1, eds. Kenneth Blackwell, Andrew Brink, Nicholas Griffin, Richard A. Rempel, and John G. Slater (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1983), p. 63.
- 8 Russell published his reminiscences of Santayana in *The Listener*, 50 (24 Sept. 1953): 503, 511 (reprinted in *Portraits from Memory*), where he designates June 1893 as the date of their first meeting. Russell reviewed Santayana's *Reason in Science* in 1906; *Soliloquies in England* in 1922; *The Life of Reason* in 1923; and *Scepticism and Animal Faith*, also in 1923. Santayana reviewed Russell's *Religion and Science* in 1936.
- 9 See the following letters Russell wrote to Lady Ottoline: postmarked 15 Oct. 1913 #895; postmarked 16 Oct. 1913 #901; postmarked 6 Nov. 1913 #906; postmarked 9 Nov. 1913 #909; postmarked 5 Dec. 1913 #930; and [Dec. 1913] #936.
- 10 *The Letters of George Santayana*, ed. Daniel Cory (New York: Scribner's, 1955), especially the letters dated 7 Nov. and 7 Dec. 1911, and 2 Jan., 2 April, and 6 Dec. 1912. In one of these, Santayana writes that he plans to discuss his system of philosophy with Russell and Moore "with whom I agree and disagree just enough to make discussion profitable". Later, in a letter from Seville dated 7 Feb. 1914, he reports that he has lost interest in Russell as a thinker since Russell's philosophy had taken a new turn—attempting to construct the universe out of sense-data.
- 11 *The Collected Papers of Bertrand Russell*, 1: 213–4.
- 12 "The Ethical Bearings of Psychogony" in *The Collected Papers of Bertrand Russell*, 1: 223–5.
- 13 *The Collected Papers of Bertrand Russell*, 1: 92–3.
- 14 *Ibid.*, p. 97.
- 15 *Ibid.*, p. 98.
- 16 *The Basic Writings of Bertrand Russell*, eds. R. E. Egner and L. E. Denonn (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1961), p. 174.
- 17 *The Collected Papers of Bertrand Russell*, 1: 243.
- 18 *Ibid.*, p. 241.
- 19 *Ibid.*, pp. 100–4.
- 20 (London: Swan Sonnenschein, 1893), p. 402.
- 21 *The Collected Papers of Bertrand Russell*, 1: 103.
- 22 *Ibid.*
- 23 *Ibid.*, p. 104.
- 24 Paul Levy, *Moore: G. E. Moore and the Cambridge Apostles* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1979), p. 204.
- 25 *Authority and the Individual, The Reith Lectures for 1948–9* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1949), p. 11.
- 26 *Human Society in Ethics and Politics*, p. 25.
- 27 References to "The Elements of Ethics" in my paper are to *Philosophical Essays* (London: Longmans, Green, 1910).
- 28 "The Elements of Ethics", p. 58.
- 29 *Ibid.*, p. 9.
- 30 *Ibid.*
- 31 *Ibid.*, p. 53.
- 32 *Ibid.*, p. 58.
- 33 *Ibid.*
- 34 *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1903), pp. 188–9. Russell reviewed this book in *The Independent Review*, 2 (1904): 328–33.
- 35 Lincoln MacVeagh, "The Philosophy of Mr. Bertrand Russell", *The Harvard Monthly*, 56 (April 1913): 58–62, paraphrases this last criticism thus: if goodness is an independent quality, perceived by some but not by others, then "there is obviously no way for one man to prove his perception.... We see it or not as the case may be.... We cannot admit that others who see it differently ... have any share in righteousness" (pp. 60–1).
- 36 "The Elements of Ethics", p. 7.
- 37 *Winds of Doctrine*, p. 142.
- 38 *Ibid.*, p. 144.
- 39 "The Elements of Ethics", p. 18.
- 40 *Winds of Doctrine*, p. 147 (all quotations in this paragraph).
- 41 *Ibid.*, p. 153.
- 42 *Ibid.*, p. 154.
- 43 (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1921), p. 32.
- 44 *Ibid.*, p. 31.
- 45 "Reply to Criticisms", p. 725.
- 46 *Ibid.*, p. 722.
- 47 *Ibid.*, p. 725.
- 48 *An Outline of Philosophy*, p. 242.
- 49 *Ibid.*, p. 243.
- 50 *Human Society in Ethics and Politics*, p. 19.
- 51 *Ibid.*
- 52 *Ibid.*, p. 59.
- 53 *Ibid.*, p. 51.
- 54 *Ibid.*, p. 56.
- 55 John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism*, originally published in 1863, chap. 2.
- 56 *Winds of Doctrine*, p. 150.
- 57 *The Problems of Philosophy* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1912), p. 184.
- 58 *Human Society in Ethics and Politics*, p. 56.
- 59 *Ibid.*
- 60 *Ibid.*, p. 59.
- 61 "Reply to Criticisms", p. 722.
- 62 Leviticus 19: 18; Matthew 22: 39. Ronald Jager, *op. cit.*, pp. 463–4 and Lillian W. Aiken, *Bertrand Russell's Philosophy of Morals* (New York: Humanities, 1963), pp. ix, 63 and 105

distinguish between three ethical theories which Russell defended during his lifetime, the intuitive, the affective (or emotive), and the conative (my titles). I have chosen not to discuss the second of these, which relates the good to feeling or taste rather than to desire, since Russell did not advocate it prominently or continually, as he did the third, and since, as a relativistic theory it has closer affinity with the third than with the first.