Russell's scientific mysticism

by Stephen Nathanson

WHAT WAS THE relation of mysticism and religion to Russell's philosophy?

Most people, no doubt, would answer "none at all!" Or, if they acknowledged any relation, it would be entirely negative. That is, they might point out that Russell rejected mysticism and all other forms of religion and expended a great deal of effort attacking them. Russell the sceptic attacked religious dogma. Russell the social reformer attacked religious institutions for their social conservatism. Russell the rationalist attacked the idea that mystical insight was the route to knowledge.

The standard view—that religion had no substantial positive impact on Russell's thought—has been clearly stated by A. J. Ayer. "Russell," he writes,

> was never a theist or ... a friend of organized religion, but he was a man of religious temper. In his youth, his attitude to mathematics was almost mystical, he was always sensitive to nature and to romantic poetry, and his desire that human existence should have a meaning was reflected in the emotional stresses of his private life and in the passion which he brought to politics. At the same time, this mystical strain was balanced by a strong sense of irony, and by a skeptical and analytical intelligence; and *it makes little showing in his philosophy.*[1]

Ayer does not deny that Russell had a "religious temper". Nor does he deny that Russell's life and activities were influenced by this temper.

[1] *Bertrand Russell* (New York: Viking Press, 1972), p. 8; my italics.

However, he does deny that religious ideas or attitudes had any effect on Russell's overall philosophy.

This is all very plausible and accords with many of Russell's own descriptions of himself. In a 1959 interview, he spoke of religious interests as a feature of his adolescence and noted that his loss of religious belief affected him very little.[2] Two years earlier, in the preface to *Why I Am Not A Christian*, Russell seemed to summarize his entire view of religion when he wrote: "I think all the great religions of the world ... both untrue and harmful."[3]

In spite of its widespread acceptance and its apparent endorsement by Russell himself, this interpretation of Russell's thought has been called into question by Ronald Jager. In the concluding chapter of his book, *The Development of Bertrand Russell's Philosophy*, Jager states:

> In religion, despite the widespread impression that its relation to Russell's general philosophy is entirely external, I shall suggest that the opposite is true, that religion is far more delicately interwoven with the rest of his philosophy than appears on the surface.[4]

This remark must strike most readers as bizarre, for there seems to be no positive place for religion in Russell's thinking. Certainly, Russell's book, *Religion and Science* (1935), poses a strong opposition between the religious and scientific and comes down strongly on the side of the post-Copernican, post-Darwinian world-view, rejecting the anthropocentric theism of traditional Christianity. Moreover, though the tone is less strident, Russell had rejected the quasi-religious belief in mystical unities in his 1914 essay, "Mysticism and Logic", supporting in its stead metaphysical pluralism and the belief in the reality of the spatio-temporal world which science describes. Likewise, in that same essay, Russell dismissed claims about the validity of mystical insights, proclaiming rational thought as the arbiter of truth. What sort of religious doctrine, then, might have played a positive role in Russell's thought?

Before approaching Jager's specific thesis, it is worth noting that there are passages in Russell's works which suggest that Russell wanted to avoid a wholesale rejection of the mystical and the religious, that his aim was to retain some component of these traditions along side his commit-

[2] *Bertrand Russell Speaks His Mind* (New York: Avon Books, 1960), p. 19.
[3] New York: Simon and Schuster, 1957, p. v.
[4] London: George Allen and Unwin, 1972, p. 462.

ment to science and scientific philosophizing. Consider the opening words of "Mysticism and Logic":

> Metaphysics, or the attempt to conceive the world as a whole by means of thought, has been developed, from the first, by the union and conflict of two very different human impulses, the one urging men toward mysticism, the other urging them toward science ... the greatest men who have been philosophers have felt the need both of science and of mysticism: the attempt to harmonize the two was what made their life and what always must, for all its arduous uncertainty, make philosophy, to some minds, a greater thing than either science or religion.[5]

Here, Russell takes note of the conflicting tendencies toward religion and science, but rather than simply urging a victory for science, he suggests that the greatest philosophers are those who attempt to harmonize the two. Here is at least some indication that Russell viewed the synthesizing of religion and science as a worthwhile project. The question is whether this remark is an anomaly or whether, as Jager suggests, it might be a clue to an important aspect of Russell's thought.

In trying to substantiate the claim that religion is "delicately interwoven" with other parts of Russell's thought, Jager directs our attention to Russell's 1902 essay, "A Free Man's Worship". The message of this essay is twofold: first, that the universe which science reveals is totally inhospitable to human ideals; second, that we must carry on, nonetheless, in the service of these ideals. Human life, Russell tells us, is "brief and powerless", dominated by "omnipotent matter", subject to the "wanton cruelty" of nature. In the face of this, however, human beings are to "cherish, ere yet the blow falls, the lofty thoughts" which ennoble our day, "proudly defiant" in the face of "the trampling march of unconscious power".[6]

This is an extremely bleak vision of the universe, and the question arises whether there might be any way of remaining true to the facts discovered by science, while avoiding the conclusion that the world is entirely hostile to human ideals. Jager argues that Russell tried to go beyond the tragic determination of the Free Man by providing a metaphysical reinterpretation of the world. According to Jager, the analytic metaphysics which Russell developed between 1902 and 1927 was inspired by a religious need to make the world more humanly

[5] *Mysticism and Logic* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1972; originally published 1918), p. 9.
[6] *Ibid.*, p. 47.

acceptable. Russell's metaphysical views developed, Jager writes, "hand in glove with the evolution of his religious views" (p. 496).

The key to this development is a series of ideas which diminish the power of impersonal matter and, hence, raise the status of the mind. Russell's goal, Jager claims, was to "transform and refashion the unconscious universe" so as to satisfy "emotional and spiritual" needs (p. 492). In a key passage, Jager asks us to consider

> the career of the material universe in Russell's thought: In "A Free Man's Worship" matter was a hostile presence; in *The Problems of Philosophy* (1912) it was held at safer arms length by being a (somewhat dubious) inference from immediate experience; in *Our Knowledge of the External World* (1914) it became a *logical construction* for metaphysics; in *The Analysis of Matter* (1927) it became an even more remote theoretical *scientific construction* useful for select scientific purposes. (Pp. 496–97)

How, according to Jager, did this progressive diminishing of the physical world solve Russell's problem of making the world more hospitable to human ideals? It solved the problem, Jager says, because "we need perform no moral heroics, as was the Free Man's wont, in the presence of our own logical construction! We need merely to accept it—an act which is one with constructing it" (p. 497). More succinctly: "when the world is reconstructed out of the data of the senses, it loses its terror" (p. 505).

In other words, Russell's move toward phenomenalism and a logical constructionist interpretation of the physical world was motivated by a need to overcome the hostile, alien world of "A Free Man's Worship". What Russell had referred to as "omnipotent matter" became, in his later analytic works, a figment of the intellect. If the world is finally reduced to something of our own making, then it can no longer be alien and overbearing. One need not worry that our ideals are unsuited to the world science describes.

We can describe Jager's thesis in two ways. Either we can say that Russell was motivated by a religious desire to make the world hospitable to human ideals, even though Russell held no religious propositions to be true, or, we can attribute to Russell a belief in the religious doctrine that reality is hospitable to human ideals and interpret his metaphysical theories as an attempt to dissolve the clash between this doctrine and the propositions of modern science. In either case, if Jager is correct, then there is an important religious component in Russell's philosophy.

I find this interpretation of Jager's both profoundly interesting and profoundly mistaken. In the rest of this paper, I will do three things. First, I shall argue that Jager is mistaken about the religious motivation

of Russell's move to logical constructionism. Second, I shall briefly indicate what does motivate this move on Russell's part. Finally, since I agree with Jager that there is a mystical/religious thread that continues to play a role in Russell's thinking, I shall explain what that role is.

Let me turn first to the difficulties with Jager's interpretation. Essentially, Jager is placing Russell in the company of those philosophers who have tried to reassert the metaphysical pre-eminence of the mental and the personal in opposition to the materialistic metaphysics of post-Galilean science. The spirit of Jager's interpretation is nicely captured in E. A. Burtt's description of philosophical reactions to the scientific world-view. Burtt writes:

> [M]odern metaphysics ... is in large part a series of unsuccessful protests against this new view of the relation of man to nature. Berkeley, Hume, Kant, Fichte, Hegel, James, and Bergson—all are united in one earnest attempt, the attempt to reinstate man with his high spiritual claims in a place of importance in the cosmic scheme.[7]

Burtt is certainly correct in stressing the importance of this sort of motivation in the work of many important thinkers, but his list of philosophers should raise our suspicions about Jager's thesis. Russell was no Hegelian. Moreover, he rejected the Kantian theory of mathematics, and he specifically criticized Bergson in "Mysticism and Logic". In that same essay, Russell casually dismissed pragmatism, and while he owed much to James's neutral monism, he was a constant critic of pragmatism.[8]

Not only was Russell unsympathetic with the philosophers in whose company Jager's interpretation would place him, he was unsympathetic with them *precisely because* they sought to inject a personal element into their metaphysical theories. Russell not only thought these attempts yielded *false* theories. He found these theories to be extremely unattractive. Contrary to Jager's suggestion, he was actually repelled by the thought that the universe might turn out to be personal in this metaphysical sense, and he attached a special value to the escape from the human and the personal.

We can see this in his attitude toward mathematics. Writing in 1902,

[7] *The Metaphysical Foundations of Modern Science* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday–Anchor Books, 1954; originally published 1924), p. 25.

[8] See, for example, *Philosophical Essays* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1966; originally published 1910), Chaps. 4 and 5, as well as the chapters on James and Dewey in *A History of Western Philosophy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1945), Chaps. 29, 30.

he praised mathematical inquiry for providing the "contemplation of what is non-human, the discovery that our minds are capable of dealing with material not created by them, above all, the realization that beauty belongs to the outer world as to the inner...."[9] Mathematics, he added, takes us away "from what is human, into the region of absolute necessity". In the same essay, he attacked philosophers who reduce mathematics to the status of laws of thought or artifacts of human psychology, claiming that by "this opinion the true dignity of reason is very greatly lowered" (*ibid.*). Russell expressed the same sentiment many years later in his 1959 work, *My Philosophical Development*: "Mathematics has ceased to seem to me non-human in its subject-matter. I have come to believe, though very reluctantly, that it consists of tautologies.... I cannot any longer find any mystical satisfaction in the contemplation of mathematical truth."[10]

Moreover, Russell expressed a similar aversion to intrusions of the human and the personal into philosophy. In *The Problems of Philosophy*, a work which Jager sees as beginning the diminishing of the alien physical world, Russell wrote:

> All acquisition of knowledge is an enlargement of the Self, but this enlargement ... is not obtained when, taking the Self as it is, we try to show that the world is so similar to this Self that knowledge of it is possible without any admission of what seems alien ... greatness of soul is not fostered by those philosophies which assimilate the universe of Man.[11]

Commenting further on human-centered philosophies, he added: "This view ... in addition to being untrue ... has the effect of robbing philosophic contemplation of all that gives it value, since it fetters contemplation to Self" (p. 159). As these quotations show, Russell valued mathematics and philosophy because they provided an escape from the Self and from the human. He specifically denounced philosophical tendencies to humanize the non-human, whether in mathematics or metaphysics.

Because most of these quotations come from the period prior to Russell's development of the logical construction doctrine, it is worth concluding my criticism of Jager's interpretation with a passage from Russell's *Autobiography*. The passage was written around 1931, after the

[9] "The Study of Mathematics", in *Mysticism and Logic*, p. 55.

[10] New York: Simon and Schuster, 1959, p. 212.

[11] *The Problems of Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959; originally published 1912), pp. 158–9.

completion of the works which Jager describes and whose motivation he seeks to explain. If Jager were correct, one would expect that Russell would have found pleasure in the reduction of the physical world to a construction of the mind. The exact opposite is the case. Russell wrote:

> Formerly, the cruelty, the meanness, the dusty, fretful passion of human life seemed to me a little thing, set, like some resolved discord in music, amid the splendour of the stars and the stately procession of geological ages. What if the universe were to end in universal death? It was, nonetheless, unruffled and magnificent. But now all this has shrunk to be no more than my own reflection in the windows of the soul through which I look out upon the night of nothingness. The revolutions of the nebulae, the birth and death of stars, are no more than convenient fictions in the trivial work of linking together my own sensations.... There is no splendour, no vastness, anywhere; only triviality for a moment, and then nothing. Why live in such a world? Why even die?[12]

This was Russell's reaction to the world view which, according to Jager, was supposed to deprive the physical universe of its terror and reinstate the centrality of what is humanly important.

My conclusion is that Russell's reductionism did not flow from religious or personal motivations of the sort which Jager describes. Russell found no religious consolation in the reduction of "omnipotent matter" and the "empire of chance" to logical constructions out of sense-data.

What, then, was the motivation for Russell's move to logical constructionism? My answer to this question will be short, since it is a familiar one. Russell's move to logical constructionism was motivated by the desire to render empirical knowledge as certain as possible. Russell himself noted that in doing philosophy, the motive "which operated first and continued longest was the desire to find some knowledge that could be accepted as certainly true."[13] He began *The Problems of Philosophy* with the question: "Is there any knowledge in the world which is so certain that no reasonable man could doubt it?" (p. 7).

This classic quest for certainty, when applied to common-sense beliefs about the physical world and to the theories of physics, is what led to Russell's strategy of constructing the world from sense-data. The connection between the desire for certainty and the need for constructions out of sense-data was succinctly expressed in Russell's 1914 essay, "The Relation of Sense-Data to Physics." "Physics", Russell wrote,

[12] *The Autobiography of Bertrand Russell, The Middle Years: 1914–1944* (New York: Bantam Books, 1969), pp. 222–3.

[13] "Why I Took to Philosophy" in *Portraits from Memory* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1956), p. 14. A second motive was the desire to satisfy "religious impulses".

> is said to be an empirical science, based on observation and experiment. It is supposed to be verifiable.... In physics as commonly set forth, sense-data appear as functions of physical objects: when such-and-such waves impinge upon the eye, we see such-and-such colours, and so on. But the waves are in fact inferred from the colours, not vice-versa. Physics cannot be regarded as validly based upon empirical data until the waves have been expressed as functions of the colours and other sense-data.[14]

Since this is precisely what Russell set out to do in the works which Jager wishes to explain, we need look no further for an explanation of why Russell adopted the logical constructionist point of view. For Russell, constructions provided the path to certainty.

Is there nothing to Jager's thesis, then, about the religious influence on Russell's philosophizing? Was mysticism, as Ayer suggests, something which Russell simply outgrew? My answer to both these questions is negative. With Jager, I think Russell's religious mysticism did influence the overall form of his thought, that Russell did seek a synthesis of scientific and mystical/religious thought, rather than simply discarding the mystical/religious in favour of the scientific.

This synthesis was achieved by Russell in the years around 1912–14, and we can best understand it by considering his conceptions of science and of mysticism. Of science, Russell wrote in his 1913 essay, "The Place of Science in a Liberal Education", "The kernel of the scientific outlook is the refusal to regard our own desires, tastes and interests as affording a key to the understanding of the world" (*Mysticism and Logic*, p. 37). To be scientific, according to Russell, is to achieve a certain form of impersonal objectivity. As he explained,

> The scientific attitude of mind involves a sweeping away of all other desires in the interests of the desire to know—it involves suppression of hopes and fears, loves and hates, and the whole subjective emotional life, until we become subdued to the material, able to see it frankly, without preconceptions, without bias, without any wish except to see it as it is, and without any belief that what it is must be determined by some relation, positive or negative, to what we should like it to be.... (*Mysticism and Logic*, p. 38)

The achievement of this attitude and the channelling of efforts toward it have, Russell thought, astonishing spiritual benefits, benefits of just the sort which the Russell of "A Free Man's Worship" strongly desired. As he concluded in this same essay on science, "The desire for a larger life

[14] In *Mysticism and Logic*, pp. 108–9.

and wider interests, for an escape from private circumstances, and even from the whole recurring human cycle of birth and death, is fulfilled by the impersonal cosmic outlook of science as by nothing else" (*Mysticism and Logic*, p. 39).

Let us now turn to mysticism and see how Russell conceived it and what he found attractive. In the essay "Mysticism and Logic", Russell attributed a number of epistemological and metaphysical doctrines to the mystic—the belief in special insights or intuitions, the belief in the unity of all things and, hence, of the unreality of time and of spatially separate objects, the dissolution of the distinction between good and evil. Several of these features Russell subjected to criticism, but at the heart of mysticism he found two things which appealed to him: first, an emphasis on viewing things impersonally and, second, a tranquillity which arose out of achieving the impersonal view of reality. Summing up what could and could not be learned from mysticism, Russell attributed "inestimable value to the mystic emotion", noting that it "reveals a possiblity of human nature—a possiblity of a noble, happier, freer life than any that can be otherwise achieved. But it does not reveal anything about the non-human, or about the nature of the universe in general ..." (*Mysticism and Logic*, p. 27). Though the mystic may claim to see that the world is good, Russell claimed that "an impartial contemplation, freed from all preoccupation with the Self, will not judge things good or bad, although it is very easily combined with that feeling of universal love which leads the mystic to say that the whole world is good" (*ibid.*). Though the mystic's desire to say that the world is good may lead to intrusions of the personal into the mystical doctrine, much of the mystic's message conveys an appreciation of the selfless, impersonal, non-evaluative frame of mind which Russell valued.

If this impersonal vision of the universe is at the core of both mysticism and science, then differ though they may in doctrine, at their hearts mysticism and science are one.

Thus Russell, attacking the doctrine of mystical intuition, could even claim that the spirit of science is truer to the essence of mysticism than is the philosophy which claims validity for these moments of personal illumination. As he put it,

> In advocating the scientific restraint and balance, as against the self-assertion of a confident reliance upon intuition, we are only urging, in the sphere of knowledge, that largeness of contemplation, that impersonal disinterestedness, and that freedom from practical preoccupations which have been inculcated by all the great religions of the world. Thus, our conclusion, however it may conflict with the explicit beliefs of many mystics, is, in essence, not contrary to the spirit which inspires those beliefs, but rather the outcome of the very spirit as applied in the realm of thought. (*Mysticism and Logic*, p. 20)

It was this synthesis of the best of the mystical/religious tradition with the idea of science which led Russell to his passionate advocacy of the value of science and of a scientific approach to philosophy. Russell felt that the mystical attitude could show the value of the world, but that any attempt to say what that value is would simply lead to bad science or bad philosophy. The person who reveres the world will simply want to describe it.

Lest one think that the association of the scientific and the mystical was a merely temporary feature of Russell's thought, it is worth citing one passage from the 1931 book, *The Scientific Outlook*. Contrasting science as metaphysics with science as a technique for manipulating the world, Russell wrote: "... the value of science as metaphysic belongs ... with religion and art and love, with the pursuit of the beatific vision ... it is a value that is religious, not political, or even moral."[15] And in 1945, concluding the chapter on John Dewey in his *History of Western Philosophy*, Russell again attacked the human-centered view which is central to pragmatism, charging proponents of such views with what he called "cosmic impiety",[16] a charge which is obviously religious in its implications. The themes of *Mysticism and Logic* remained embedded in his thought.

In fairness to Jager, I want to point out that there are passages in which he suggests the interpretation I have advanced. Thus he writes that "what is valuable in the religious outlook can now be preserved by being *transferred intact*, to a new dimension" (p. 498). Later, he describes the Free Man's faith as having been "*assimilated* to the faith of the scientific method" (p. 499). Moreover, he stresses Russell's claim that the element of submission is common both to the religious and scientific traditions. Yet Jager fails to see the tension between Russell's emphasis on the *impersonal* as crucial to both science and religion and his own emphasis on the centrality of the *personal* in Russell's analytic metaphysics. Hence the thesis I have put forward, though suggested in places by Jager, does not emerge clearly in his discussion because it is entangled with another quite distinct and even opposing view.[17]

[15] *The Scientific Outlook* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1931), pp. 94–5.

[16] *A History of Western Philosophy*, p. 828.

[17] I should also note that Jager returns to his theme in "Russell and Religion", an essay in J. Thomas and K. Blackwell, eds., *Russell in Review* (Toronto: Samuel Stevens, Hakkert, 1976), pp. 91–113. The emphasis in this later essay is, I think, somewhat different and not open to my present criticisms.

What, then, was the motivational role of mysticism in Russell's philosophy? Once Russell had achieved a synthesis of the mystical and the scientific, he could go on to advocate science and scientific philosophizing wholeheartedly. Much of his later career was devoted to promoting science to philosophers and the wider public and, as in his logical reconstructions, carrying out the programme of scientific philosophy which he sketched in 1912–14. He could do these things and even attack mystically oriented philosophers like Bergson while feeling true to the spirit of mysticism and, hence, without feeling that he was betraying something he regarded as possessing "inestimable value".

Having spiritualized the scientific endeavour, Russell could recommend that philosophers imitate the scientists, something he did in his 1914 essay "On Scientific Method in Philosophy". The new scientific philosophers, according to Russell, would engage in analysis, not synthesis. Their work would be "piecemeal and tentative", rather than global and certainty-oriented. Above all, it would be free of ethical entanglements.[18] "The scientific philosophy, therefore, which aims only at understanding the world and not directly at any other improvement of human life, cannot take account of ethical notions without being turned aside from that submission to fact which is the essence of the scientific temper" (*Mysticism and Logic*, p. 83). What Russell fails to emphasize here is that his reasons for this conclusion are at least in part ethical and religious.

There are numerous ironies about Russell's situation. In these essays, Russell did a great deal to set the course of academic philosophy in the twentieth century. The new analytic philosopher would be tentative and limited in his aims. He would avoid global synthesis and issues of ethics, politics and personal religion. He would "abandon the hope of solving many of the more ambitious and humanly interesting problems of traditional philosophy" (*ibid.*, p. 92). While this description set the ideal for many practitioners, Russell himself never limited his thinking or writing in these ways. He wrote more and more on value-laden subjects and through his thinking aimed for the "improvement of human life". Moreover, the essays which provided the rationale for scientific philosophizing were masterful instances of the sort of traditional philosophy which does deal with "humanly interesting" problems. Finally, in work after work, he not only analyzed science but tried to

[18] For a spirited attack on Russell's separation of reason from value issues, see Wayne C. Booth, *Modern Dogma and the Rhetoric of Assent* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), Chap. 2.

synthesize its findings, incorporating them into an overall metaphysic. As influential as his model of scientific philosophy was, Russell himself was never constrained by it.[19]

Department of Philosophy and Religion
Northeastern University

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