

## Russell, Spinoza, and desire

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Kenneth Blackwell. *The Spinozistic Ethics of Bertrand Russell*. London and Boston: George Allen & Unwin, 1985. Pp. 262. £20.00 ; US\$20.00.

THE BOOK IS based on a dissertation submitted to the University of Guelph. It is well written and easy to read. Dr. Blackwell's theme is clear and his arguments are well presented. The scope of his field is quite extensive, since it encompasses Russell's published and unpublished works. His method of selecting the relevant events in Russell's life and adducing the precise quotation from Russell's most relevant works in support of his arguments reflects Blackwell's keen sense of scholarship.

The thesis that Blackwell tries to establish is both original and contentious. Original for many reasons. First, it asserts something new. Second, it takes Russell's view of ethics more seriously than is generally done. His thesis is also contentious for various reasons. First, it deals with an area that is not well appreciated by other philosophers. Second, it admits into a philosophical discussion writings of Russell that were not intended for a philosophical audience, such as Russell's love letters and undergraduate essays. Third, it asserts a relationship between Russell and Spinoza the full proof of which cannot be established short of several works. Blackwell's study of the connection between Spinoza and Russell goes a long way in clarifying that connection and throwing new light on Russell's ethics.

The book is divided into two major parts in addition to the introduction. Part A deals with Russell's writings on Spinoza and Part B with Russell's Spinozistic Ethic. Each part is further divided into three chapters and each chapter is divided into sub-sections. The numbers of the sub-sections make it very easy to refer to points discussed at various stages.

Early on in the introduction, Blackwell explains what he means by "ethics". "When there is a theoretical basis to a morality, that basis is called 'ethics', or

more usually ‘normative ethics’” (p. 2). A morality is “a code of conduct” (p. 2), a set of rules, maxims and moral injunctions. According to Blackwell, Russell’s ethics is Spinozistic, that is, Russell was influenced by Spinoza. The ethics that Russell has advocated throughout his life contains, in Blackwell’s view, two fundamental concepts: “self-enlargement and the intellectual love of God” (p. 17). Not only are these two concepts fundamental in Spinoza’s ethics, but also Russell was indebted to Spinoza for them. Other commentators on Russell have alluded to a connection between Spinoza and Russell, but none has maintained that the connection was other than a close affinity.

To establish his thesis, Blackwell surveys Russell’s entire writings and treats Russell’s writings on religion as a part of his ethics. Although Russell was not particularly known for his religious zeal or for his belief in monotheism, Blackwell finds in Russell’s religious writings an echo of Spinoza’s view of the intellectual love of God. In a letter to Lady Ottoline, Russell says that commentators quarrel as to what Spinoza meant by the intellectual love of God, “but I feel I know. He thinks men as individuals are not immortal, but in so far as they love God, their love of God is something deathless, but impersonal” (p. 70). Russell has developed this theme in many works particularly his article “A Free Man’s Worship” and his book *Principles of Social Reconstruction*. An individual is small and quite insignificant when compared with the universe, and a person should aspire to enlarge himself or herself. “Self”, in Blackwell’s view, should be “conceived impersonally” (p. 69). Self-enlargement is not to be measured in terms of material possessions, but rather in terms of the growth of the scope of the person’s interests to encompass those of others and the whole universe.

Blackwell admits that Russell did not accept Spinoza’s metaphysics or believe that there is a logical connection between his own metaphysics and ethics. Nevertheless, Blackwell neglects to see whether or not the concept of the intellectual love of God can be collapsed into that of impersonal self-enlargement. For, if one does not accept Spinoza’s metaphysical view of God, then there remains no significant difference between the two concepts. Russell himself concedes that the intellectual love of God is an emotion which can be experienced “without taking on Spinoza’s metaphysics” (p. 88), but nowhere does Russell give a serious analysis of this emotion. Given the fact that Russell believed that his ethics is based on desire, it might be possible to view the intellectual love of God as satisfaction of the desire for impersonal self-enlargement.

Of course, Blackwell is aware of the basis of Russell’s ethics in desire, but he does not devote a lot of space to it, presumably because it is not directly relevant to his thesis. But if Russell’s ethics is based on desire, as Blackwell admits, then Russell’s ethics would be Spinozistic only if it can be shown that the theory of desire that Russell develops in his ethical and religious writings is the same as Spinoza’s or adapted from Spinoza’s. The facts that Russell respected Spinoza more than any other philosopher and that Russell accepted Spinoza’s concept of the intellectual love of God do not constitute, in my view, conclusive evidence that Russell’s ethics is Spinozistic. However, a full proof

of this issue cannot be provided in a book devoted to crystallizing the connection between Russell and Spinoza.

Blackwell’s work shows that a full discussion of Russell’s theory of desire in his ethical writings needs to be studied separately. Such a study would have to explain how Russell’s ethics is based on desire and what desire is. Is “desire” a primitive ethical notion or a psychological one? If it is a psychological one, then how does it relate to ethics? Russell maintains that Spinoza’s “view of human nature is identical with my own” (p. 82). From this it does not follow that Spinoza’s ethics as well is identical with Russell’s. One cannot settle this issue without settling first the role of desire in Russell’s ethics.

Despite Russell’s respect and admiration for Spinoza and the similarity in their love for the world, caution must be taken in speaking of the Spinozistic ethics of Russell. Russell did not accept the connection between Spinoza’s metaphysics and ethics nor did he accept Spinoza’s belief in the proofs of ethical statements and positions. Spinoza’s ethical proofs give the impression that there is a demonstrably true universal ethical position. In comparison, Russell’s ethics aspires to inculcate different attitudes. Not only is there no universally true ethical position, but also it is not possible to give a proof of an ethical position. Dogmatism has no place in Russell’s ethics, but it seems compatible with Spinoza’s.

Blackwell’s book *The Spinozistic Ethics of Bertrand Russell* fills a gap in studies on Russell’s ethics. It shows Russell’s ethics from a historical perspective. Even if Russell was not influenced by Spinoza’s ethics, still Blackwell’s study reveals the similarities in their two ethical systems, and thereby points to the importance of Russell’s view of ethics. Russell maintained that he did not write on ethics in his capacity as a philosopher, but Blackwell’s study shows clearly that this claim is not a sufficient reason for not studying Russell’s view of ethics and its foundation.

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