The order of Russell’s thought
by Albert C. Lewis


There are thirty-two books concerned with Russell in the 1989
This brings out a problem in Kuntz’s treatment of Russell’s mathematical logic. To me it seems wrong in this context to contrast the certainty of the foundations of science and logic with the lack of certainty of other philosophic fields. For one thing, it is not clear that that is what Russell intends in the quotation from the first paragraph of “The Elements of Ethics”. The truth of a proposition about oxygen is contingent on experience, and mathematical logic does not deal with the multiplication table but rather with the principles underlying multiplication (Principles of Mathematics, p. 5). Though it is admirable to keep things as simple as possible, to imply that logic and science are always the same type of knowledge for Russell may present more problems than the simplicity is worth. It would seem better for Kuntz to describe Russell’s stand by 1914 as one in which Principia Mathematica complements Moore’s Principia Ethica in trying to establish how far pure logic can go. If my reading of Russell is correct then ethics is not on a par with logic but, at least for Russell at this time, is of the nature of a science some of whose elements may be known a priori. Just as in Russell’s logicist programme pure mathematics consisted of the a priori elements of mathematics and was to be distinguished from applied mathematics, so ethics could itself contain such a distinction. Surprisingly Kuntz does not discuss logicism as such, though such “technical” topics as the logic of relations and the theory of types have a role (the relevance of Russell’s theory of relations is well brought out in the next subsection on his response to Santayana’s critique of his ethical theory). Logicism, and especially its fate under the later challenges presented by the works of Alfred Tarski, Kurt Gödel, and others, would parallel Russell’s philosophy of science where relativity theory and quantum mechanics challenged the late-nineteenth century physicists’ view of nature which influenced Russell’s early philosophy. Rather than simply grouping science and logic together and treating them as if they and Russell’s view of them were relatively stable and certain, a critical account of them could in turn parallel Kuntz’s account of the challenges to Russell’s ethics.

This subsection is part of the chapter entitled “Manifest Evils: Imperatives of the Moral Order”, which concludes with an important contribution to understanding Russell.

The neglected question of Russell’s moral career and his moral philosophy is what is his theory of virtues and vices? This is the ancient and medieval way that was out of favor during Russell’s career, but has been revived during the last decade. Perhaps now in retrospect we can find in Russell himself and his writings a solution he himself never made explicit. (P. 111)

Kuntz here appears to begin to break away from a close commentary on Russell. It would indeed be an accomplishment to find a solution out of the mish-mash of Russell’s writings on ethics or out of his behaviour.
A dialectical reading of Russell, because “religion” is so complex a set of attitudes, beliefs, insights, judgments, habits, and social relations, finds him on both sides. When religion is the solution, he loves it, and when religion is the problem, he hates it. This is far from crazy; it is most rational and wise. (P. 136)

Kuntz makes use of the thoughts of Katharine Tait, Russell’s daughter, on this matter and in his annotated bibliography refers to her book, My Father, Bertrand Russell, as “a profound study of Russell’s religious difficulties” (p. 176).

When Kuntz describes his account as “sympathetic” the reader might expect this to be a frank announcement that he is an admirer of Russell and that this is the wrong place to look for a debunking account. This is true, but “sympathetic” also means uncritical: there is no overall analysis of Russell’s life and work on the basis of a stated set of values and little comparison with other philosophies. Often the only explicit evaluations ostensibly have to do with economy of expression. Thus when Kuntz states that Russell’s “best statement” on order in mathematics is to be found in Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy (p. 41) or that each of “A Free Man’s Worship” and “The Essence of Religion” “is a good religion” (p. 148), Kuntz is referring, in the first instance, to the most quotable statement on order and, in the second, to manifestations of the “worship of the good” and of the “incarnation of the good”. Fortunately for the sake of holding the reader’s interest, Kuntz tries to steer all topics to the issue of morality. The basic sequence for accomplishing this starts with Russell’s quest for certainty, which leads in turn to the question of what truth is, and thence to morality. This particular order, rather than order in general, could furnish the unifying theme of the book. But perhaps the only satisfactory unity, and the only correct ordering, of Russell’s philosophy is provided by the fact that it was Russell’s philosophy. Probably this is not the conclusion Kuntz wants to be drawn: Kuntz makes it eloquently clear that Russell sought the truth and the right and that he evaluated himself according to his view of success in that search. To benefit from a study of Russell’s search, however, we would have to do more than simply accept his own self-evaluation which is, I believe, largely what Kuntz does. It is interesting to note that the frontispiece has been reversed and thus has Russell as a left-handed writer. This could symbolize the kind of looking-glass paradoxes that seem inherent in the level of investigation which Kuntz invites: are we looking at the real Russell or some reflection? Which side of the looking-glass are we on in the first place? Any reader, I think, would expect Kuntz to act as an intermediary, to select and evaluate, and to be clear about his stand vis-à-vis Russell. But Kuntz does not seem to wish to do this. He may see the complete unity of Russell’s philosophy, but it seems a self-defeating
task to take on that completeness. On the other hand, to tackle big and paradoxical subjects is what, after all, Russell invites.

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