

**The order of Russell's thought**  
*by Albert C. Lewis*

Paul Grimley Kuntz. *Bertrand Russell*. (Twayne's English Authors Series.) Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1986. Pp. xxii, 186. US\$14.95.

**THERE ARE THIRTY-TWO** books concerned with Russell in the 1989

*Books in Print.* What distinguishes these from the many articles and journal papers relating to Russell is presumably that they provide more of their own context and thus a larger unity. But in the field of Russell studies there could hardly be a larger theme than Kuntz's: "The logical, metaphysical, and moral unity of Russell's philosophy." "My thesis," Kuntz states in his Preface,

about the whole Russell is that it is a major error to fail to recognize the structure relating the parts. ... I shall try to interpret his thought sympathetically in following one theme that is common to all these disciplines of philosophy both theoretical and practical.

This theme is *order*, which is given a precise definition in mathematical logic and which is central to Russell's theory of knowledge and truth, mind and matter, the individual and the authority of state and church.

This theme certainly allows a wide range of topics, but, as I shall note, this very advantage tends to do itself in.

The key words of the chapter titles reflect the progression of Russell's life: "free thought", "quest for certainty", "logic of relations: the order of thought and the order of things", "order of language", "real order", "moral order", "the disorders of our age", and "Could his God be the ground of order?" Under these headings Kuntz gives very brief summaries of Russell's work and, for almost every quotation, paraphrase, or explanation, there is a comment of a sentence or two. Opening the book at random for a sample, on p. 99 we find the beginning of a three-page subsection, "Is There Truth in Moral Judgments and Are These Parts of a Science?" The "alliance between Russell and Moore" is the starting-point for this subtopic. There are a dozen quotations from what are designated "MG" and "EE", abbreviations for works which are not identified in the list given at the beginning of the book (apparently this is only for books) but are more or less identified in the hard-to-find Notes and References as "[The] Meaning of Good" (1904), Russell's review of Moore's *Principia Ethica*, and "[The] Elements of Ethics". The first paragraph concludes:

It may come as a shock that Russell's "The Elements of Ethics" (1910) aims at the discovery of "true propositions about virtuous and vicious conduct and that these are just as much a part of truth as true propositions about oxygen or the multiplication table." The aim of ethics then is not conduct, but theory about conduct.

The next paragraph begins:

Can the quest for certainty be satisfied in ethics as it is in logic? Just as in logic we discover self-evident truths ( $A$  is  $A$ , not both  $A$  and  $\neg A$ , either  $A$  or  $\neg A$ ) so in ethics there are principles that are immediately known to be true.

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

which was often in conflict with his expressed beliefs.<sup>1</sup>

The solution Kuntz puts forward is that Russell's theory of virtue and vice (or what we can construct out of it) has one goal which comes the closest to being a good-in-itself, namely to move from self-interest towards selflessness: to seek a larger unity of feeling. The same ethical principle is confirmed as fundamental for Russell by Kenneth Blackwell in a book which appeared too late for Kuntz to take advantage of, *The Spinozistic Ethics of Bertrand Russell*.<sup>2</sup>

Among the topics Kuntz treats, the complexities of religion, ethics, and morality seem the least amenable to fitting into the order theme, and it may be no coincidence that these are the book's most interesting topics. With these Kuntz seems most willing to cut to what he sees as the essence of the matter. But for other topics—principally logic and metaphysics—a “wholeness” approach tends to dominate where each of Russell's works and actions is given an apparently equal billing, from adolescence through old age, from one political or philosophical position to a contradictory one. Here contradictions are reported rather than resolved or analyzed. Kuntz does try to bring out many such contradictions: in Chapter 2 he presents “paradoxes” of Russell's life, such as that “although he sought certainty, what fascinates him are the frontiers of knowledge, where all questions are ‘still open to serious doubt’” (p. 13). And in Chapter 4, “On Words and the World,” there is a section on “paradoxes and their solutions”. If Kuntz had had available Russell's early manuscripts, to be published in Volume 2 of the *Collected Papers*, he undoubtedly would have taken note of the seemingly strange notion of contradiction as a positive element in thought for Russell: a real, seemingly unresolvable contradiction in science, for example, points the way to another branch or level of science which may resolve the earlier contradiction but raise new ones of its own. Though this has its roots in Russell's neo-Hegelian period, it is an attitude which can be seen at least through the time of the discovery of Russell's paradox.<sup>3</sup>

Though there are many points which could be summarized in this review, Kuntz seems to me best in bringing out the religious and moral contradictions. And on these, as with Russell's ethics, he evaluates Russell's views:

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*,<sup>4</sup> 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. Presumably 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

<sup>1</sup> Alan Ryan's book, *Bertrand Russell: a Political Life* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1988), which appeared after Kuntz's, is more concerned with Russell's political actions than his theories, but in Chapter 2 he identifies Russell's “religious tone” as a fairly constant factor in his ethical writings and as a key to understanding Russell's political actions. For Ryan, however, “religious tone” refers to less flattering traits than Kuntz allows: “the preacher's conviction of sinfulness of mankind”, “the preacher's voice in reprobating it”, and not dealing kindly with the motives of opponents (p. 54).

<sup>2</sup> London: Allen & Unwin, 1985.

<sup>3</sup> Nicholas Griffin, *Russell's Idealist Apprenticeship* (Oxford U. P., forthcoming). G.H. Moore, “The Roots of Russell's Paradox”, *Russell*, n.s. 8 (1988): 46–56.

<sup>4</sup> New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975.

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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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