
AN INTRODUCTION TO RUSSELL

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John G. Slater. *Bertrand Russell*. (Bristol Introductions.) Preface by Ray Monk. Bristol: Thoemmes P., 1994. Pp. xii, 171. £25 (£9.99 paper); from Scholarly Book Services, Toronto: C\$67.50 (\$26.95 paper).

My maternal grandmother was a socialist in politics and a Wesleyan in religion. I first heard of Bertrand Russell from her. It was 1955, I was an impressionable eleven-year-old, and we had heard the re-broadcast of a BBC interview in which Russell wittily demolished the easy pieties of the British Labour Party, then laid waste the obscure pieties of Low-Church Anglicanism. Although Gran didn't know whether to laugh or cry, she made it clear that for her generation, Russell was one of "those you could not forget or ignore. The man forced perfectly fine opinions out of the shadows and into the light, where he could destroy them. We all loathed him." Needless to say, Gran guaranteed in that moment that I would be a lifelong reader of Bertrand Russell.

Having read John Slater's account of Russell's life and work, it is easier to see how a professional philosopher could become so public a figure, and why he bothered my grandmother so. Here, after all, was a democratic aristocrat, an emotionally charged logician, a liberal socialist, a theorist of free love who nonetheless married four times—and who celebrated all these antinomies in the mass media through most of the twentieth century. As an editor of *Papers* I, 6, 8–10 and the forthcoming II, Slater is unusually well placed to illustrate and to explain all of this. He knows the whole range of Russell's philosophical and political activities. When Slater asserts *x* about Russell's beliefs and motives, one has confidence that *x* is true.

On the other hand, the variety and volume of Russell's output compelled Slater to make hard choices, especially considering that he was restricted to 161 pages of text. The book was meant to give "a sample of [Russell's] ideas," and thus to make the "daunting obstacle" of Russell's vast output just a little less fearsome (p. xi). Slater offers not just a sample of ideas, but also a glimpse of the circumstances in which those ideas were hatched, and in which they acquired fame (or notoriety). As I shall argue, he has not brought it all off in quite the way he may have hoped. The book is none the less a

good one, especially as a basis for teaching philosophy and, possibly, the intellectual history of the twentieth century.

The book's central chapters are a solid introduction to some logical puzzles Russell discovered and began to solve. The discussion of Russell's methods of analysis (pp. 27–40) might be read as a description of Slater's own methods of writing. Slater must, for example, have rejected many possible ways—hypotheses, if you like—of setting out the logicist programme in mathematical philosophy before he settled on a single, simple illustration (the pages on number, class, and definition, pp. 17–19). But the hard work has already been done, of course, and the reader is invited to enjoy the results. In reading Slater on Russell, I found myself thinking of Russell's *Problems of Philosophy*. The writing is that clear and that stimulating.

The difficulty of so straightforward an approach is that the general reader, or a first-year philosophy student, may decide that he or she needs *only* three pages to dispose of number, class, and definition! The very directness of Slater's treatment of logical problems in Russell, and of Russell's work as politician, educator, and historian, might lead the unsuspecting reader to think that it is all rather easy. Slater knows very well that it's not at all easy. Yet the book leaves out too many complications. I would have valued Slater's opinion of Russell's critics, philosophical opponents, protagonists and enemies, even if in just a few additional sentences each chapter. Slater's book made me want to argue his points, to see whether a little more complication here, and a little more detail there, might make a good book still better.

Many an author would love to have the “problem” of being too clear and too straightforward, and I owe the readers of this review an explanation why this is in any way a problem. After all, how many of us could hope to write an honest and yet entirely accessible introduction to the logic of relations as Russell understood it, or to lay out the essentials of “Russell's paradox” and his theory of descriptions, and yet keep the general reader ... reading? Not only has Slater managed to do this, he has written chapters on Russellian metaphysics (especially the section on the logical construction of the external world, pp. 54ff.) and epistemology that make original contributions to those subjects.

But on Russell's ethics and views of religion, Slater is less persuasive. On ethics (Chap. VII), Russell is said to have desired a sensible balance of ends and means, recommending that we think kindly of people who are different from ourselves, accepting that words like “ought” have only emotional-preferential content. Russell apparently hoped in later life for “harmonious desires” among people. In brief, Slater makes it out that Russell held vaguely pleasant but philosophically inconsequential ethical views. We are, however, led to see how Russell's ethics may have arisen partly from meetings with the

great Victorian utilitarians, then with G. E. Moore, with Wittgenstein, with Santayana, with C. L. Stevenson, and the chapter is in this way a condensed history of important streams in nineteenth- and twentieth-century ethical argument.

Still, Slater seems to think that Russell did not have much impact on ethical theory, except in the indirect sense of recommending a strong emphasis on the logic of ethical concepts, a certain respect for moral-social facts, and a healthy regard for the language.

My difficulty is that Russell's life was filled with ethical argument and peppered with carefully considered (and morally freighted) actions. The problem of pacificism; the obligation to one's wives, lovers, and children; the question of the State and the individual; the matter of workers' rights—all of these are moral, not just political matters, and all of them preoccupied both Russell and his philosophical acquaintances. By implication and inference, one could surely find the form and content of an elaborate ethical theory, subtended by practice, lying just beneath the surface of Russell's life. Yet Slater chooses not to draw the connections between theory and practice, logic and application, ethics and political action. There are few clues here to the links between Russell's philosophical and literary times, and Russell's own thinking. This I found a frustrating feature of the writing, although explicable as the effect of extreme compression. (Slater's book is one of a series, and thus presumably limited in length and subjected to certain formal limitations.)

Moving on from ethics, the chapter on Russell's religious views includes a tidy review of standard arguments for the existence of God, the after-life, and the possibility of Christian love—and Russell's demolition of them. These pages serve as a vehicle for a little more biography, in this case (p. 92) a note on Russell's loss of a post at City College of New York in 1940 on account of his putatively anti-religious stand. Similarly, Slater's treatment of Russell's political economy shows how Russell's critique of the late Marx (pp. 98–103) had something to do with Russell's travels in the 1890s and early 1900s, with his later support for guild socialism (p. 106), and how he came eventually to propose a liberal-democratic State whose function was to manage people's most destructive inclinations and emotions (pp. 108–13).

In these discussions of religion and of political theory, however, we learn little about the theories against which Russell may have been arguing. Without contextual guidance, it is hard to judge how far Russell was pioneer or follower. Slater's clear and helpful description of what the later Marx thought, and who Ricardo was, are very good indeed. So is Slater's characterization of Russell's idea of religious phenomena. On the other hand, Slater leaves an impression of Russell's cool and decontextualized reason,

when in fact Russell was every bit a man of his time and place, occasionally driven by emotional states we might now characterize as maudlin, or very near.

Nowhere are the risks of Slater's approach more evident than in the chapters on history and education. Let me take a detailed example, Russell's book on *The Problem of China*.

The *Problem* appeared in 1922, again in 1926 slightly revised, to be reprinted only in 1966 during the Maoist Cultural Revolution. It is among historical works Slater mentions in discussing Russell's views of history as art, history as teacher-by-example, and history as unscientific. The footnotes to the *Problem* show that Russell based it on some two dozen printed works, some by Chinese authors, but most by Europeans and Americans. The book teems with clever and even prescient opinions, seasoned with moralizing dicta (particularly the repeated assertion that Japan was wicked), but few inferentially strong arguments. Its style reminds one of the early Winston Churchill writing about English Army campaigns in India, the Sudan, and South Africa in the 1880s and 1890s. In a word, this is journalism, more or less well informed, but highly tendentious. It is entertaining, even amusing. It is not history as even Russell's academic contemporaries understood the word. His theoretical writings on "history" are, in some sense, not about history alone (if they are about history at all), but rather they concern the fate of people and opinions that Russell held dear. These historiographical works are, then, a road-map to the opinions and feelings of an Edwardian liberal, gifted in other areas of the intellect.

The same is true, but more so, of Russell's writings on education. It is possible, although something of a stretch, to argue that his educational work and writing constituted a kind of emotional autobiography. Their amateurish psychology and pedagogy would not have stood up against the sophistication of a Deweyan critique, let alone a Froebelian one. Slater does not say what Russell thought of the Freudian-Jungian experiments going on at A. S. Neill's Summerhill during the years Russell was operating Beacon Hill school (*cf.* Clark, pp. 523-5, on this question). Slater's discussion of Russell-as-educator is too kind. Russell was a follower of Rousseau and Wordsworth, a devotee of unlimited critical thinking in the young, but all the while a believer in "a good dose of instruction". This collection of views was a recipe for disaster. It's worth saying so, and saying why, even if in only a hundred extra words.

For people who already know a bit of Russell, and for teachers of intellectual history and philosophy, Slater's *Russell* is a book well worth owning. It encourages argument by its clarity, and it will produce many arguments among its readers. Russell would have liked it on both accounts.
