ON ODELL ON RUSSELL

RAY PERKINS
Philosophy / Plymouth State College
Plymouth, NH 03264-1600, USA
PERKRK@EARTHLINK.NET

S. Jack Odell. *On Russell.* Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning, 2000. Pp. 90. US$13.95 (pb).

S. Jack Odell has produced a book on Bertrand Russell's philosophy for the Wadsworth Philosophers series under the general editorship of Daniel Kolak. It's no easy task to turn out a book on a philosopher of Russell's complexity in 90 pages. But Odell has done it. The book undertakes to present the main ideas of Russell's philosophy, and to show their meaning by contrast with some of his philosophical contemporaries, including G. E. Moore, Peter Strawson and Ludwig Wittgenstein. It's a worthy undertaking, and Odell presents some good exposition and original critique.

Unfortunately, there are several problems with the book, apart from the many typographical errors and erroneous references. One problem—perhaps inevitable in a brief introduction—is omission of important material. For example, in his first chapter, "The Man", Odell never mentions the City College case nor any of the post-World War II activism—especially Russell's anti-nuclear efforts and his opposition to the war in Vietnam—that helped define his greatness as a man of practical wisdom and public conscience. Sometimes Odell's details are annoyingly inaccurate, as when he says Russell's fourth wife was "over thirty years" younger (she was actually 28 years younger) and that Russell served six months in prison (he served four and a half months). And sometimes when the details are accurate one wonders whether the emphasis is appropriate. For example, his first chapter is only eight pages long, but nearly three pages are devoted to Russell's love affairs (Ottoline Morrell and Helen Dudley) and to reflecting on his alleged psychological shortcomings, especially his "feelings of estrangement from others which bordered on the pathological".

More seriously, Odell sometimes seems unaware of important Russellian doctrines. For example, his chapter on ethics begins: "His efforts to develop a theory of ethics are limited to two works, one early in his career, 'The Elements of Ethics' (1910), based on, as he acknowledges, Moore's *Principia Ethica*, and one much later, *Human Society in Ethics and Politics* (1954)." Eight of the chapter's twelve pages are devoted to the first of these, which the author does a decent job of explicating. But he seems oblivious to the fact that Russell repudiated much of his objectivist ethics after 1913, and he completely omits any mention of Russell's subjectivist/emotivist views—according to which moral judgments are outside the realm of science and knowledge—which dominated Russell's thinking in ethics for the intervening 40 years.

From the title of Chapter 4, "The Scope and Limits of Knowledge", one might think that Russell's 1948 book, *Human Knowledge: Its Scope and Limits*, would be an important focus of the chapter, but it gets barely a mention. Instead Odell takes Russell's epistemic writings as a whole as supposedly revealing that Russell was an advocate of "epistemological scepticism"—there is no knowledge other than sense-data beliefs and analytic judgments—and proceeds to examine this thesis in the light of Moore's attack in "Four Forms of Scepticism". Odell decides that Moore is unconvincing, but insists that Russell must be wrong because even the sceptic's claims must presuppose

knowledge of definitions (of what his words mean).

But the whole exercise (three-fourths of the chapter), though clear and well developed, seems irrelevant to Russell's theory of knowledge. It's true that Russell and Moore differed over which propositions had the highest degree of certainty, but Russell was never an epistemological sceptic in the sense that he was "forced to adopt Humian [*sic*] scepticism" (p. 54). Even in *The Problems of Philosophy* (1912), which Odell cites as evidence of his alleged scepticism, Russell accepts à priori non-demonstrative principles, including the principle of induction, as providing knowledge (albeit less than "certain") of things beyond experience, including physical objects. The view expressed in *My Philosophical Development* (which Odell shows no evidence of having consulted) is representative: "Everybody, in fact, accepts innumerable propositions about things not experienced.... I will admit at once that there are difficulties in explaining how we acquire knowledge that transcends experience, but I think the view that we have no such knowledge is utterly untenable" (*MPD*, pp. 131–2).

The chapter on "Logic, Mathematics, Philosophy and Reality" is satisfactory despite the fact that it draws almost wholly on the 1914–18 atomist period. But too much space is devoted to truth-tables (which he describes as "an innovation of Wittgenstein's"[1]). Unfortunately, his presentation is marred by a repeated typo that the number of rows in the truth-tables are given by $2n$ (rather than 2^n) where n is the number of sentential variables. There is also no mention of Russell's (and Frege's) famous definition of number as a class of classes.

Odell's Chapter 3, "Meaning and Language", is perhaps the best. He is concerned to explicate and defend Russell's theory of descriptions as set forth in "On Denoting", and he sides with Linsky in defence of Russell against Strawson's presupposition theory. But there are many careless errors in Odell's presentation which make it hard to follow. For example, he cites Linsky's argument that presupposition needn't obviate Russell's claim that "The king of France is wise" entails that one, and only one, person is king of France. But he omits two sentences from Linsky's original argument without which it is almost impossible to follow Linsky's reasoning. There is no hint in the chapter that Russell's theory of meaning underwent some changes after World War I under the influence of Watson and the behaviourists. And there is no hint that after his atomist period, Russell undertook (e.g. in *An Inquiry into Meaning and Truth*) to examine the relation of language—especially

[1] For a view that involves Russell's contribution, see John Shosky, "Russell's Use of Truth Tables", *Russell*, n.s. 17 (1997): 11–26.

epistemologically basic sentences—to experience.

The chapter on "The Mind–Body Problem" is somewhat difficult to follow because it takes all of Russell's ideas from a short, compact 1945 article "Mind and Matter in Modern Science".[2] There is no mention of *The Analysis of Mind*, nor even that Russell wrote such a thing and advanced a theory of neutral monism partly under the influence of William James. Odell does advance the interesting suggestion that Russell's theory of mind and matter partly anticipates Churchland's eliminative materialism, although he acknowledges that Russell construed some events as irreducibly mental.

The final chapter, "God, Religion and the Meaning of Life", states Russell's case against organized Christianity fairly and yet recognizes that there was a side to Russell which had a mystical strain, believing, as he says in "A Free Man's Worship", that mysticism contained an element of wisdom and could be "an inspirer of whatever is best in Man".

The book has problems which cause it to fall short of the best short introductions to Russell, e.g. those by Slater and Grayling. But it is sympathetic to, and respectful of, Russell the philosopher. And it's hard to disagree with its overall judgment that Bertrand Russell "... was a great thinker and a great man. While his faults were no greater than most, his virtues were" (p. 11).

[2] Reprinted in *Understanding History, An Atheist's Bertrand Russell*, and *Bertrand Russell on God and Religion*.