

RUSSELL THE POLITICAL THEORIST

PETER STONE

Political Science / U. of Rochester

Rochester, NY 14627, USA

PRSE@TROJ.CC.ROCHESTER.EDU

Bart Schultz, ed. "The Social and Political Philosophy of Bertrand Russell", Parts 1-2. *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, 26 (June, Sept. 1996): 157-266, 317-68. US\$30 (the 2-issue set).

Talent requires training in order to produce consistent strong performance. Indeed, without training of some sort, talent may not count for much. Michael Jordan might well have played basketball better than anyone else in history. Had he received no training or coaching at all, however, I

doubt that his extraordinary natural ability would have proven a match for the highly developed skills of even a mediocre NBA player. He might have excelled, but more likely there would have been a lot of variance, flashes of brilliant play surrounded by much that was commonplace, with an abundance of truly abysmal mistakes. Interestingly enough, this description also fits Bertrand Russell's career as a political theorist, and with good reason. The recent two-part symposium in *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* on "The Social and Political Philosophy of Bertrand Russell" demonstrates this fact. The contributors to this valuable symposium—an august group of philosophers and political scientists, several of whom are noted for previous work in Russell studies—address a variety of issues relating to Russell's political theory and practice. Together, they paint a picture of a wildly intelligent and passionately concerned thinker who lacked the training for first-rate political thought. Russell, in short, could have used a good coach in political theory.

Training, of course, is not an end in itself; possession of a doctorate in political theory is neither necessary nor sufficient for good work in the field. Rather, training has value because of what it imparts. Political theory, like most other human endeavours,¹ benefits from careful reflection on the nature of the activity, with an eye to eliminating mistakes and improving performance. In basketball, players study techniques leading to better dribbling, passing, and shooting; in political theory, practitioners consider the warrant for the various parts of the normative arguments they advance. In both cases, of course, the development of skill usually requires some sort of coach; no man is an island, and both political theorists and basketball players need mentors to train them. But the best players and political theorists become "self-coaching", able to engage in critical reflection on their own work which will lead to improvements in the long run. Not everyone can become a Michael Jordan or a John Rawls, but virtually any player in any "sport" can do better through practice, provided that practice is accompanied by reflection as to what needs improvement.

Over the course of his long life, Russell reflected upon and wrote about many topics, including mathematics, philosophy, and social and political affairs. He attacked the first two with a passion for precision, permitting neither himself nor others any sloppiness or lack of rigour. But despite an engagement with political affairs that lasted approximately 75 years,² Russell

¹ For a sustained defence of this conception of human activity, one that explicitly relies on the analogy with playing and coaching in sports, see Eugene Meehan, *The Thinking Game: a Guide to Effective Study* (Chatham, N.J.: Chatham House, 1988).

² I take Russell's interventions in politics to start with the publication of his book *German Social Democracy* in 1896, and to end only with his death in 1970.

never gave political issues the sort of careful attention and painstaking analysis he devoted to epistemology, metaphysics, and mathematics. In short, he never became a self-coaching political theorist; and his work reflected this fact.³

Many people have noted this gap between Russell's technical philosophy and his political theory. Bart Schultz, the editor of the symposium (and one of the few political scientists not to ignore Russell), wrote in his introduction, "It is difficult ... to fit Russell together as a whole, to bring the life, the ethics, and the politics into easy relation with the analytic philosophy" (p. 158). Russell himself, however, would probably not have found this lack of fit discomfiting. Normative questions, of the sort political theorists attempt to answer, were just *different* from questions about set theory or the nature of matter. For most of his life, Russell held to an emotivist theory of ethics, whereby statements of "right" and "wrong" expressed only an emotional response by the speaker. These judgments could not be true or false, or ultimately better or worse, and thus were not susceptible to critical analysis and improvement. Charles Pigden's contribution to the symposium, "Bertrand Russell: Meta-Ethical Pioneer", details Russell's articulation of emotivism—decades before Ayer and Stevenson developed the position in full.⁴

Russell's emotivism, however, formed a part of a broader philosophy, one that intellectually and temperamentally precluded self-criticism and improvement of political theory. The best way to understand how this philosophy did so is to contrast it with the philosophy of one of Russell's least favourite contemporary thinkers, John Dewey. The differences between them are illuminating, so much so that many students of Russell (including several contributors to this symposium) make some sort of comparison. For Dewey, the central task of philosophy was criticism. Ideas, such as those in which political theorists trade, were instruments employed by human beings to achieve particular purposes. Their value depended on the contributions they made towards these purposes. Philosophy made possible the criticism and improvement of these intellectual tools. This view of philosophy led Dewey

³ Most of the criticisms I make here of Russell as a political theorist also apply, I believe, to Russell in his practical interventions in politics. This claim, however, rests upon always-controversial assumptions about the relationship between theory and practice, and so I shall not pursue the claim here. In any event, it is not strictly germane, given the focus of the symposium on Russell's theoretical contributions.

⁴ As Pigden details, once Russell adopted emotivism, he abandoned it only once, briefly embracing the error theory. This theory contends that ethical judgments attribute a property to the world. They can thereby be true or false, but since this property does not exist, it is supposed, they are universally false. Needless to say, this position leaves no more room for critical improvement of normative judgments than emotivism.

to an infamously broad conception of logic, defining its scope and purpose as “none other than the problem of the possibility of the development and employment of intelligent method in inquiries concerned with the deliberate reconstruction of experience.”⁵ Criticism, including self-criticism of the sort described above, constituted the central task of philosophy for Dewey; its application to political ideas was natural for him.⁶

Russell would have none of this view of philosophy. Throughout his life, he divided human activity into categories much as Aristotle did. There was the realm of production and manual labour, a realm into which Russell never entered (although he was capable of great concern for those who did). There was the realm of practical activity, into which political theory fell and within which emotivism appeared to block rational evaluation and criticism. And there was the realm of theory, including philosophy. The aim of philosophy, in Russell’s mind, was the pursuit of a reality deeper than that accessed in everyday life. As Alan Ryan points out in his own symposium contribution, Russell associated this pursuit with European civilization. For Russell it was that civilization which had over the past few centuries allowed some people to approach the commanding heights of truth, goodness, and beauty. And it was the threat to that civilization that so concerned Russell in his ruminations on the First World War and the subsequent rise of fascism (p. 257).⁷ The production of this sort of truth was the highest accomplishment of the human race for Russell, and its pursuit the most valuable endeavour to which a person could aspire.⁸

Russell’s veneration for the higher truths that philosophical reflection could reveal left no room for critical analysis with practical aims in mind.

⁵ John Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, enlarged ed. (Boston: Beacon P., 1948), p. 138.

⁶ This is not to say that Dewey’s theory was always consistent with his practice. For example, Dewey’s biographer, George Dykhuizen, has pointed out that “Dewey’s lectures were a boring experience; the wonder was how one who so stressed the role of interest in the educative process could himself fail so abysmally to create it in his own classes” (*The Life and Mind of John Dewey* [Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois U. P., 1973], p. 249). Boredom was one of the few reactions Russell never generated.

⁷ Russell’s desire to ensure that civilization continued to provide people with the opportunity to approach this higher realm is a major theme of Philip Ironside’s *The Social and Political Thought of Bertrand Russell: the Development of an Aristocratic Liberalism* (New York: Cambridge U. P., 1996). An excellent review of Ironside’s book by Bart Schultz accompanies the symposium (pp. 267–78).

⁸ As many commentators have pointed out, Russell’s work in mathematical philosophy ended at about the time Wittgenstein convinced him that mathematical truths were merely linguistic artifacts. If these truths did not reflect some sort of “higher” reality, as he had previously believed, they did not merit to him the agonizing level of effort necessary for such monumental works as *Principia Mathematica*.

Indeed, to take the tools of philosophical analysis, and apply them to such mere mortal concerns as political affairs, must have seemed to Russell a sort of sacrilege. Ryan contrasts Russell and Dewey on this point as follows:

... Russell thought that there could be no such thing as political philosophy, but Dewey had no trouble with the idea of a political philosophy. Because philosophy was not the quasi-science of Russell but “cultural criticism, or rather the criticism of cultural criticism”, the vast gulf between disciplines aimed at an austere and humanly irrelevant truth and the rhetoric of persuasion was more or less closed. This, curiously enough, was the source of their mutual dislike. Russell wanted truth and falsity to be uncontaminated by human purpose, and he thought Dewey “impious” for dragging the universe into human affairs, while Dewey attacked Russell’s “impiety” in representing the universe as cold toward us and uncaring about us. (P. 264)

Ryan may not do justice to Dewey here—his description seems to match the Pollyanna-like James better than the down-to-earth Dewey—but his characterization of Russell fits well with the reverential language Russell often used to describe philosophy. And the attitude this language reflected rendered the tools of careful analysis associated with philosophy alien to the realm of human desires and purposes—to the realm of ethical and political theory.

While Russell may have downplayed the significance of practical matters in comparison to the lofty mission of philosophy, he was never oblivious to human concerns. As the famous opening line of his *Autobiography* boldly declares, he felt throughout his life “unbearable pity for the suffering of mankind”, and frequently intervened to relieve this suffering when he could. Russell’s theorizing about politics also reflects this passion, as well as his unmistakable intelligence. However, his belief that self-conscious critical analysis was neither useful nor appropriate for political theory made much of his thought on the topic unmistakably amateurish. On the one hand, he displayed undeniable genius at times, making crucial insights that shone all the more brightly when expressed in his scintillating prose. Louis Greenspan, for example, argues in his essay “Bertrand Russell and the End of Nationalism” that Russell anticipated two of the primary modern normative perspectives on nationalism, the “modernist” and the “ethnacist” views (pp. 353–4). On the other hand, he could demonstrate an appalling lack of judgment on social and political matters. Ray Monk’s piece, “The Tiger and the Machine: D. H. Lawrence and Bertrand Russell”, develops this point. Monk outlines the near-instantaneous birth and slow painful death of Russell’s admiration for Lawrence. A few hours with Lawrence were apparently enough to convince Russell that Lawrence “is infallible ... sees everything and is always right”—words that must have proved embarrassing to Russell later, as

Lawrence's lunatic political ideas fully revealed themselves (quoted on p. 210).⁹ Such lapses of judgment have provided ample fuel for Russell's detractors, among whom Monk stands prominently,¹⁰ and make it far too easy to overlook Russell's better moments.

Between the sublime and the ridiculous in Russell's political thought lies much that is mundane or underdeveloped. Russell Hardin's contribution, "Russell's Power", examines Russell's well-known book of that name. In that book, Russell promised to demonstrate that "the fundamental concept in social science is Power, in the same sense in which Energy is the fundamental concept in physics" (quoted on p. 331). Hardin argues persuasively, however, that Russell's categorization of power focuses narrowly on states (pp. 330–1). Moreover, Russell relied excessively on the "will to power" as a motivation for political leaders (pp. 322–3). The result makes a substantial part of his argument an unreflective (if understandable) reaction to the rise of Hitler and Stalin, not a rigorous analysis of one of political science's fundamental building blocks. Nevertheless, the book still contains much of value. Hardin salutes Russell's insight that political and economic institutions pose similar problems in terms of individual control over collective outcomes (pp. 323, 339–41). If Russell's psychology is mundane, however, his social science is quite undeveloped, and Hardin undertakes to develop it and compare it to findings within contemporary social science.¹¹

The limitations of Russell's political thought might provoke many different responses, several of which appear in the symposium. Richard Flathman's "The Imagined and Wished for Imperium of Science: Russell's Empiricism and Its Relation to His and Our Ethics and Politics" makes a virtue out of Russell's non-philosophical approach to political issues. Following Isaiah

⁹ Russell's words here are even more astonishing given that, as Monk demonstrates, Russell frequently denigrated insight and intuition as pathways to knowledge of others, in response to the philosophical claims of Bergson and others (p. 210). Apparently, Russell did not consider his own advice to be applicable outside of purely academic debate.

¹⁰ Monk unfortunately overstates his case, displaying a sympathy for Lawrence that his own account of Lawrence's behaviour does not seem to warrant. For example, he quotes extensively from a letter in which Lawrence scathingly attacks Russell, accusing him of disguising a cruel desire to dominate behind a seemingly rational pacifism (pp. 236–7). Monk takes this rather shrill Nietzschean rant very seriously, which is difficult to understand unless Russell really deserved the nickname some gave to him at the time—"Mephisto" (p. 319). Monk clearly is convinced that Russell does deserve the epithet, but provides little reason for others to believe it.

¹¹ Hardin sees Russell at his best when he avoided ethereal speculation about human nature—such as his Nietzschean claims about the omnipresent "will to power"—and engaged in a more focused study of the logic of institutions. In discussing institutions, Russell often brought some of his analytical powers to bear in spite of himself. Hardin recognizes this, and concludes that "Russell ... was best when he was analytical and was quite ordinary when he was not analytical" (p. 325).

Berlin, Flathman sees a slippery slope to totalitarianism behind any effort to prescribe ends to people. He even accuses Russell (particularly in *Human Society in Ethics and Politics*) of periodically going beyond emotivism and winding up at the top of this slope—through his tentative efforts, for example, to connect empiricist philosophy and political liberalism in such works as *Philosophy and Politics* (pp. 174–7). Monk's dismissive attitude towards Russell in any capacity other than that of mathematical philosopher is palpable throughout his essay. Flathman and Monk's contributions are a good read. But if Berlin did not convince you that rationalist philosophy leads straight to Auschwitz, and if the first volume of Monk's massive Russell biography did not destroy your admiration for the political Russell, you are unlikely to be swayed by either of these two essays.

Two other approaches pursued in the symposium are more promising. Hardin, as noted above, attempts to build on Russell's best moments as a political theorist, separating the wheat from the chaff using the critical methods of social inquiry that Russell failed to apply systematically. Hardin's efforts in this regard yield much fruit when applied to Russell's book on power, and similar treatments of his other political works may well prove productive. Ryan's "Russell: the Last Great Radical?" is compatible with Hardin's essay but places its emphasis elsewhere. As his title suggests, Ryan classifies Russell as an agitator extraordinaire in the tradition of Thomas Paine (whom Russell admired). He recognizes Russell's shortcomings as a political theorist, but advises readers to "take Russell at his own word" when he disavowed systematic political thought and to admire the best parts of his "untheoretical radicalism" (p. 247). Russell the radical could display a visceral sense of outrage at the expansion of the forces threatening the humane values of the Enlightenment—from the Great War to the Cold War. Moreover, he had the courage to combat these forces, no matter how overwhelming they may have seemed. At times, he did not show the best judgment, as when he urged the Soviet Union to shoot down American planes attacking North Vietnam.¹² But Ryan would value gestures like these on Russell's part, less as rational plans of action than as "an expression of sheer blind rage against overweening power" (p. 261). Generations of activists (myself included) have wanted to see a little more rage against the evils of the world, and have found inspiration in the all-too-rare public figures like Russell capable of displaying it on a large scale.

The political theorist would do well to take Hardin's approach when

¹² *BRA*, 2: 271. See his press statement and "Cable to Premier Kosygin" of 20 July 1966 (B&R C66.19, C66.33).

considering Russell's work today. Russell may have been an intellectual Michael Jordan, but his views on philosophical analysis—views which prevented him from applying his usually rigorous logic to social and political affairs—kept him out of political theory's NBA. His occasional “good moves” in politics require analysis and development before future political theorists can make best use of them. But the concerned citizen should take Ryan's idea to heart, and rejoice in Russell's demonstration that righteous indignation against evil is not dead. One can admire a rookie player for his personal character, even if he still has a lot to learn about how to play.
