

THE THIRD “RUSSELL ON”

GRAHAM STEVENS
Philosophy / U. of Manchester
Oxford Road, Manchester M13 9PL, UK
GRAHAM.P.STEVENS@MANCHESTER.AC.UK

Stephen Mumford, ed. *Russell on Metaphysics: Selections from the Writings of Bertrand Russell*. London: Routledge, 2003. Pp. viii, 256. ISBN 0-415-27744-2. £60/US\$105 (hb); £17.99/US\$31.95 (pb).

Editing a fairly short collection of Russell’s work on metaphysics must be like writing a fairly short guidebook to Himalayan mountaineering routes. The phrase “spoilt for choice” was made for occasions like these. That level of choice doesn’t necessarily make the job of choosing easy: it is hard to please everyone when everyone has so many favourites and the space is too limited by far to include everything that merits inclusion. The easiest way to make a choice in such circumstances is to play safe and pick the well known and well liked. Stephen Mumford’s more ambitious approach is to delve deeply but selectively into the full range of Russell’s output on metaphysics over more than 60 years, including some of the highlights from the manuscript material that was only published

after Russell's death in *The Collected Papers of Bertrand Russell*. The result is a striking self-portrait of Russell's philosophical career unmatched by anything apart from the *Collected Papers* itself.

The book is divided into five sections as follows: Idealism, Ontology (1903–18), Universals, Causality and Laws, Ontology (1923–50). The first section consists of manuscript material, all of which apart from one piece was first published in the first two volumes of the *Papers* (the exception is the 1897 paper that Russell presented to the Cambridge Moral Sciences Club, “Seems, Madam? Nay, It Is”, which Russell later chose to publish in *Why I Am Not a Christian*. It is re-published in *Papers* 1). As readers of these volumes of *CPBR* know, the gradual retreat from, and eventual rejection of, neo-Hegelianism in Russell's work during the 1890s makes for fascinating reading. The selections from the period have obviously been made with great care. Although, by necessity, the picture of this period in Russell's development that emerges lacks the full detail one gets from a study of *CPBR* (notably absent are the 1898 manuscript “An Analysis of Mathematical Reasoning” and the 1899 manuscript “The Classification of Relations”, both from *Papers* 2), the general picture is perhaps easier to bring into focus as a consequence. One can clearly see Russell's rapidly developing thought on the importance of relations, particularly in regard to mathematics, driving him towards the eventual rejection of neo-Hegelianism in favour of the pluralistic metaphysics he saw as central to analytical philosophy. Some of Russell's writing during his neo-Hegelian period displays the foggy character that is common among those he was no doubt influenced by. There are also quite striking moments, however, when the precision and rigour that characterize his work after the rejection of neo-Hegelianism pierce the fog. For example, the essay titled “Why Do We Regard Time, But Not Space, as Necessarily a Plenum?” is sparklingly sharp. Russell disposes of the various arguments for drawing such a distinction between the natures of time and space, concluding that there is no reason to see them as distinct in this respect at all. He does not decide between a plenal or punctual theory of time and space, resting content with the conclusion that they are alike whichever they may be. Which nature they share, Russell states, will depend on the answer to “the most fundamental question in metaphysics” (p. 51), namely that regarding “the choice between Monadism and Monism” (p. 50). Although he doesn't venture an answer to that question, there are many signs of the sophisticated, mathematically informed arguments that he would later invoke in support of his answer to that question in *The Principles of Mathematics*.

It is not only Russell's views on the metaphysics of relations that can be seen undergoing rapid development in these selections. His development as a mathematician and philosopher of mathematics is also evident. For example, the selections from “The Dialectic of the Sciences” contain arguments for the thesis that geometry presupposes the existence of matter (pp. 42–3). This view would

be abandoned by the time of the *Principles*, and the change of position is made very clear here by the inclusion of a letter from Russell to Meinong (first published in this journal¹) in which Russell utterly rejects the idea that Geometry implies anything whatsoever about the nature of actual space. Whether space is Euclidean or not, Russell insists, is an empirical question, not something to be learned from an a priori science. The example he uses to support this claim is also interesting. It relies on a significant departure from the standard meaning of the geometric term “parallel”, resulting in a conception of the status of Euclid’s parallel axiom that Russell must surely have later revised in light of Einstein’s Theory of Relativity: “That two parallels cannot intersect is indubitable; but it has to be asked whether the real world admits parallels or not” (p. 84).²

The letter to Meinong is from the first section on Russell’s ontology. This section begins with passages from the *Principles* concerning one of Russell’s most important legacies—his ontology of propositions as entities containing the things they are about. My only criticism of Mumford’s otherwise extremely clear and helpful editorial comments applies to his comments on this topic. In pages 64–5, Mumford attributes to Russell a Meinongian semantics (and, consequently, ontology). This view, although supported by some passages in the *Principles* and elsewhere in Russell’s writing, is also hard to square with other passages in the *Principles* and elsewhere, and has been vigorously challenged in recent years. It is particularly hard to square with the theory of denoting employed in the *Principles*. Russell would have had little use for denoting concepts (at least the ones expressed by definite descriptions) if he could simply invoke Meinongian objects to answer to the phrases that express them. The most natural way to interpret Russell’s semantics for definite descriptions in the *Principles* is along very similar lines to his position as stated in the 1905 paper “The Existential Import of Propositions”, which is included as the next chapter in the book: “the present King of France’ is a ... complex concept denoting nothing” (p. 79). Mumford, taking this to be a sign of Russell’s move away from Meinongianism, gives this the approving paraphrase: “The present King of France’ does not denote an unreal individual; rather it fails to denote” (p. 77). What Mumford says here of the denoting *phrase* is what I, and others, would say of the denoting *concept* it is taken to express in the *Principles*. The same

¹ Russell o.s. 9 (1973): 15–18.

² I confess that I cannot find anywhere that Russell explicitly rejects this claim—understood as a stipulation about the meaning of the term “parallel” it is consistent with relativity theory. However, the view is so highly non-standard that I think the very absence of any mention of it in later discussions of relativity theory (e.g. in *The ABC of Relativity*, or the papers discussing Einstein collected in *Papers II*) can be taken as evidence that Russell no longer thought it when writing those pieces.

point has been made by several Russell scholars,³ and it is unfortunate that this debate is overlooked.

This section of the book also contains two important papers in which Russell states his version of realism in programmatic form. Both of these papers (“The Basis of Realism” and “Analytic Realism”), although they were published in 1911, are not as widely read as they deserve to be. The first, for example, contains a very clear statement of Russell’s conception of the relationship between philosophy and science, and shows signs of the naturalism that emerged more explicitly in much later work: “[M]any questions which have been supposed amenable to a priori treatment must be dealt with empirically, since logic leaves the alternatives undecided.... Moreover, by the rejection of a priori constructions the way is opened for philosophy to become inductive, and to begin the patient cooperative accumulation of results by which the triumphs of science have been achieved” (p. 90).

It is his belief in the reality of relations that always bore the weight of Russell’s realism, as many of the selections throughout the book testify. It is therefore entirely apt that an entire section of the book should be devoted to Russell’s work on universals. The section only contains two chapters, but these are drawn from 1911 and 1946, thereby presenting Russell’s views over a lengthy time difference. The difference is notable: although it is pleasing to see Russell’s later work being taken more seriously here than it sometimes is, it has to be said that the earlier paper has retained a relevance to contemporary debates in metaphysics that the later one has not. Russell’s arguments for the reality of universals during the time of the early paper, Mumford notes (p. 123), are still cited in contemporary discussions,⁴ while his “bundle” theory of objects (bundles of qualities) and his insistence on locating universals in a Platonic realm are unpopular views among current metaphysicians. Mumford’s selection of pieces for the section on causation also, commendably, spans Russell’s philosophy from 1913 to 1948.

The final section (the second on ontology) brings to the fore Russell’s complex attitude towards the relationship between metaphysics and language. For example, in the influential 1923 paper “Vagueness”, Russell argued that only language can be vague, not the things in the world it represents. This is unsur-

³ See, e.g., Peter Hylton, *Russell, Idealism and the Emergence of Analytic Philosophy* (Oxford U. P., 1990); Nicholas Griffin, “Denoting Concepts in *The Principles of Mathematics*”, in Ray Monk and Anthony Palmer, eds., *Bertrand Russell and the Origins of Analytical Philosophy* (Bristol: Thoemmes P., 1996), pp. 23–64; and Gideon Makin, *The Metaphysicians of Meaning* (London: Routledge, 2000).

⁴ Albeit from *The Problems of Philosophy*, not the chapter included here (“On the Relation of Universals and Particulars”). Mumford mentions Chris Daly, “Tropes”, in D. H. Mellor and A. Oliver, eds., *Properties* (Oxford U. P., 1997), as a recent example of one who cites Russell’s argument for the reality of the universal *resemblance* from the *Problems*.

prising: Russell is famous for his distrust of surface grammar as a guide to metaphysics, a distrust summed up explicitly in a paper written in 1947 which is reprinted here (another excellent and unexpected choice), “The Principle of Individuation”: “to allow grammar to dictate our metaphysic is now generally recognized as dangerous” (p. 239). This conviction led Russell to reject the “ordinary language” philosophy associated with Wittgenstein and his followers, but, as Mumford makes clear in his editorial contributions to this section, this should not lead one to the view that Russell is not interested in language and meaning. Indeed, in the very same paper, we can see Russell tackling the difficult subject of indexical semantics with a degree of sophistication rarely (if at all) found in the work of the ordinary language philosophers of the time (see especially p. 245).

This is a superb collection of Russell’s work on metaphysics that does not just duplicate what previous collections of his papers have done. Mumford has done an excellent editorial job, both in terms of the selection of chapters and the commentary. The people who will benefit most from the book are students. In an ideal world, every philosophy student would have, and read, every volume of *Collected Papers*. In the actual world, they should all have, and read, *Russell on Metaphysics*.
