

## EXPLAINING RUSSELL'S VIEWS ON ETHICS

GÜLBERK KOÇ  
Philosophy / McMaster U.  
Hamilton, ON, Canada, L8S 4K1  
KOCG@UNIVMAIL.CIS.MCMASTER.CA

Osman Elmalı. *Bertrand Russell'da Ahlak Felsefesi* [Bertrand Russell's Moral Philosophy]. İstanbul: Ataç Yayınları, 2005. In Turkish. Pp. 204. Price 10 TRY (US\$6.90).

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O sman Elmali's book on Russell's ethics is a well-structured, faithful exposition of Russell's views; however, it is not a critical one. Elmali's book is divided into two sections. The first section is an exposition of the theoretical foundations of Russell's ethics; the second, an overview of Russell's views on various issues of applied ethics, such as the family, marriage, children, sex, happiness, population, and war.

The author has divided Russell's work on metaethics into three periods, more or less in line with how the literature on Russell's ethics does.<sup>1</sup> The first period up until the First World War is the intuitionist period. Elmali explains Russell's view that there are objective moral truths, as presented in his "The Elements of Ethics".<sup>2</sup> The second period, the emotivist period, starts around 1914.<sup>3</sup> Emotivism is the view that moral judgments are mere expressions of our emotions. The end of the Second World War marks the start of the third period, according to Elmali. The main work representative of this period of Russell's ethics is *Human Society in Ethics and Politics*.<sup>4</sup> Following Pigden, Elmali notes that this work is characterized with an objective stand, even though the belief that ethics is based on feelings and emotions is retained.

In his early intuitionist period, Russell holds that the good must be indefinable; it must not be defined in terms of its consequences or the happiness it brings about. If an action is good it should be good in itself. Russell gives several arguments for this view in the "Elements" (pp. 19–20; *Papers* 6: 221–2). Elmali explains these arguments, but he does not discuss how, if at all, Russell refuted or could have refuted these arguments in his later period when he abandoned intuitionism. Elmali, nevertheless, explains the reasons that Russell gives against intuition as a source of knowledge in *Mysticism and Logic* (1918) and *Our Knowledge of the External World* (1914).

When discussing the alleged relationship between what exists and what is good or bad, Russell argues that nothing can be inferred as to what is good or bad from what exists and what does not exist. And nor are there any self-evident propositions about the goodness or badness of what does and what does not exist ("Elements", *Papers* 6: 223). But Elmali mistakes Russell, and even Moore, to mean there are no self-evident propositions at all (Elmali, p. 67). In fact, Moore claims that fundamental ethical principles are self-evident, not in the

<sup>1</sup> Charles R. Pigden, ed., *Russell on Ethics: Selections from the Writings of Bertrand Russell* (London: Routledge, 1999); Michael K. Potter, *Bertrand Russell's Ethics* (London: Continuum, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> "The Elements of Ethics", in *Philosophical Essays* (London: Routledge, 2003 (1910)); *Papers* 6: 217–50.

<sup>3</sup> This period is divided into two by Pigden and Potter, as early emotivism and mature emotivism; the latter is best formulated in *Religion and Science* (1935).

<sup>4</sup> London: George Allen and Unwin, 1954.

sense that they are true because they are evident to you or to me, but in the sense that they are true on their own, that is, not deduced or inferred from any other propositions.<sup>5</sup>

As for Russell's views on normative ethics, Elmalı observes that in both the first and third periods of his ethical thought, Russell factored in the consequences of an action in determining what is good (p. 114). First, Russell in the first period claims that consequences are relevant in determining the objective rightness<sup>6</sup> of an action, as opposed to its subjective rightness. One situation in which one has to consider consequences is when a situation is so complicated that one cannot settle the question by following a simple rule, such as "You ought not to steal." Second, Russell points out that even when simple rules can settle a question, the justification for that action will appeal to its consequences (*Papers* 6: 227). Elmalı appeals to the fundamental propositions of ethics that Russell formulates in *Human Society in Ethics and Politics* to show that Russell in his third period held that one should determine whether an action is good or bad by considering its consequences (pp. 115–16). It is an important observation that consequences have played a permanent role in Russell's ethics, but Elmalı did not take the opportunity to comparatively discuss the role of consequences in both periods.

Elmalı brings up one criticism against Russell's views on the morality of some religious judgments. Elmalı argues that the moral judgments that Russell deems "unacceptable oddities", such as not eating pork or beef, need to be evaluated within the methodology of religion, since they are religious judgments. Russell, according to Elmalı, leaves the element of belief, which is in the nature of religion, out of the evaluation or just plain ignores it. Elmalı claims that the judgments of religion were determined by God's authority and have a unity with other such judgments, and so should be evaluated in relation to these other religious judgments (p. 121). Admittedly, some moral judgments arise from religious judgments, but whatever their origin, as moral judgments Russell requires that they are in line with reason. Russell is not discussing such moral judgments as religious judgments, but as moral ones. Thus, Elmalı needs to evaluate Russell's reasons for rejecting such moral judgments on moral grounds, not on religious grounds.

Overall, Elmalı's book gives a nice survey of Russell's views on ethics, but it does not provide the reader with a critical analysis of Russell's views or contribute to the literature on Russell's ethics in a novel manner.

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<sup>5</sup> *The Elements of Ethics* (Philadelphia: Temple U. P., 1991 (1902 lectures)), p. 106.

<sup>6</sup> For Russell, an objectively right action "is that action which, of all that are [physically] possible, gives us, when account is taken of all available data, the greatest expectation of probable good effects, or the least expectation of probable bad effects" (*Elements*, *Papers* 6: 235).

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