

SOPHOMORIC

PETER STONE

Center for Ethics and Public Affairs / Tulane U.
New Orleans, LA 70118, USA
PSTONE@TULANE.EDU

Jyotish Ch. Basak. *Bertrand Russell's Socio-Political Ideas*. New Delhi: Northern Book Centre, 2008. Pp. xii, 146. ISBN: 978-8172112547. Rs. 500.

There really is no better word for describing the book *Bertrand Russell's Socio-Political Ideas* than “sophomoric”. The author, Jyotish Basak, apparently holds a PH.D. from Aligarh Muslim University. He is currently a reader in the philosophy department of the University of North Bengal, and has published a previous book dealing with ethical issues surrounding human genetics. And yet despite these seemingly reasonable credentials, Basak has produced the sort of book I might expect an undergraduate student to write. And not a particularly bright one, either.

While reading Basak’s book, it is impossible not to notice the grammatical

and spelling errors which plague almost every page. Basak's publisher, Northern Book Centre, claims to be "Publishers of Scholarly Reference Books". But at this particular publishing company, either nobody knows how to operate the spelling and grammar checker on a word-processing programme, or else no one is fully proficient in English. I've had students who write papers with this many typos, but to the best of my knowledge none of them have ever published two books.

One might think it unfair to hold Basak responsible for the incompetence of his publisher. Perhaps, but it is certainly fair to hold him responsible for the content of the book he allegedly wrote. Why do I say "allegedly"? Well, consider his description of Russell's *Autobiography*. He writes, "In his *Autobiography* Russell mentioned three passions, which were although simple, yet overwhelmingly strong, that governed his life. These passions are: the longing for *love*, the search for *knowledge*, and unbearable *pity* for the suffering of mankind" (p. 3). He quotes Russell immediately thereafter, apparently hoping that no one would notice that he has been quoting Russell, with minor word changes, all along. The very next paragraph reads as follows:

He has given three reasons for his passion for love. First, he sought it because it brings ecstasy—ecstasy so great that he would often have sacrificed all the rest of his life for a few hours of this joy. Second, love relieves loneliness. Third, in the union of love he had seen, "in a mystic miniature, the prefiguring vision of the heaven that saints and poets have imagined". (P. 3)

Anyone who loves Russell's *Autobiography*, especially its beautiful prologue, will recognize these words, which Basak would like us to believe are his own. And so it goes for the next two paragraphs, until there is no more of Russell's prologue left to plagiarize.

A minor oversight? Here's Basak's description of anarchism:

The modern Anarchism is associated with belief in the communal ownership of land and capital. In this respect it is akin to Socialism. Socialism and Anarchist Communism alike have arisen from the perception that private capital is a source of tyranny by certain individuals over others. The difference in them is that whereas orthodox Socialism believes that the individual will become free if the state becomes the sole capitalist, Anarchists do not subscribe to this view. Anarchists fear that in that case the state might merely inherit the tyrannical propensities of the private capitalists. Accordingly, it seeks for a means of reconciling communal ownership with the utmost possible diminution in the powers of the state, and indeed ultimately with the complete abolition of the state. (P. 27)

And here's Russell's description of anarchism in *Roads to Freedom*:

The modern Anarchism ... is associated with belief in the communal ownership of land and capital, and is thus in an important respect akin to Socialism.... Socialism and Anarchist Communism alike have arisen from the perception that private capital is a source of tyranny by certain individuals over others. Orthodox Socialism believes that the

individual will become free if the State becomes the sole capitalist. Anarchism, on the contrary, fears that in that case the State might merely inherit the tyrannical propensities of the private capitalist. Accordingly, it seeks for a means of reconciling communal ownership with the utmost possible diminution in the powers of the State, and indeed ultimately with the complete abolition of the state.¹

Here's Basak developing a line of criticism against Russell's moral philosophy:

There [*sic*] problematic and interrelated ideas, accepted by Moore and Russell, were crucial for later developments in moral philosophy. One is the idea that propositions ascribing intrinsic value, though true or false as the case may be, were incapable of proof, not even open to evidence. The second is that the value property ascribed (intrinsic goodness) was declared to be a unique property, a non-natural property. The third is that this property was held to be indefinable, i.e., it could not be explicated in terms of any other properties. (P. 96)

This same passage appears, with minor differences in punctuation and the like, on page 471 of Ronald Jager's *The Development of Bertrand Russell's Philosophy*.² Only the spelling error is original to Basak.

Finally, here's a passage from the last chapter of Basak's book, alongside a quotation from Benjamin Barber's "Solipsistic Politics: Bertrand Russell's Empiricist Liberalism" (a work Basak never even mentions):

But if solipsism ultimately leads to skepticism and terminates in nihilism ... it was also capable of nourishing assertiveness. In denying our capacity ever to know directly the external world other than through the subjective senses, it brought the self, the subjective preceptor [*sic*], into new prominence. In this it shows us that modesty might have its rewards, that epistemological humility might actually facilitate scientific conquest. Rejecting the epistemologies of revelation, rationalism and naturalism had as its aim the enhancement of certainty, not the cultivation of skepticism. (P. 132)

Yet if solipsism issued in scepticism ... terminating in nihilism, it was also capable of nourishing assertiveness. In denying our capacity ever to know directly the external world other than through the subjective senses, it brought the self, the subjective preceptor, into new prominence.... In this, it promised that modesty might have its rewards, that epistemological humility might actually facilitate scientific conquest. Abjuring the epistemologies of revelation and rational naturalism had, after all, had as its aim the enhancement of certainty, not the cultivation of scepticism.³

And so it goes right up to the very last page of the book, which is lifted pretty

¹ *Roads to Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 46; (London: Allen & Unwin, 1918), pp. 51–2.

² London: Allen & Unwin, 1972.

³ Benjamin R. Barber, "Solipsistic Politics: Bertrand Russell's Empiricist Liberalism", in George W. Roberts, ed., *Bertrand Russell Memorial Volume* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1979), p. 463.

much verbatim from the last page of Barber's essay.

Were Basak one of my students, I would have him hauled before my university's disciplinary committee. As things stand, all I can do is warn people not to read this book. Whatever valuable content the book possesses has already appeared in print under other people's names. And with fewer spelling errors.
