

DEFINING RUSSELL

DUSTIN Z. OLSON
Philosophy / McMaster U.
Hamilton, ON, Canada L8S 2C8
OLSONDZ@MCMASTER.CA

Rosalind Carey and John Ongley. *Historical Dictionary of Bertrand Russell's Philosophy*. (Historical Dictionaries of Religions, Philosophies, and Movements, no. 93.) Lanham, Maryland: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2009. Pp. xlvii, 287. US\$85.00 (hb). In pb as *The A to Z of Bertrand Russell's Philosophy*. (The A to Z Guide series.) US\$29.95.

Bertrand Russell scholars know that to call Russell prolific is an understatement. Indeed, it is almost surreal to consider the production of this one individual. Russell published over 70 books, wrote enough papers to fill 35 volumes in the *Collected Papers of Bertrand Russell*, and the Russell Archives house over 30,000 of his letters. He had a lot to say.

Recognizing the vast number of topics Russell addresses throughout his illustrious philosophical career, one can only begin to imagine the daunting task of providing a definitive summary of all the major points Russell contributes to the discipline, in addition to the significant events, people, and publications surrounding his work. This job is undertaken by Rosalind Carey and John Ongley in the 93rd installment of Scarecrow Press's Historical Dictionaries of Religions, Philosophies, and Movements series: *Historical Dictionary of Bertrand Russell's*

Philosophy.¹ These authors are charged with the overwhelming commission of providing an exhaustive summary of the philosophically interesting aspects of Russell's life and works.

There are a number of reasons why this project would be difficult, of which three stand out: first, the aforementioned amount of work that Russell produced is immense; secondly, Russell's philosophy underwent numerous alterations and amendments throughout his life; and thirdly, knowing where, for Russell, his philosophy ended and his extra-philosophical works began is not exactly clear. Russell, it seems, is much like the Apostle Paul—everything for everyone. Russell was a polymath: philosopher, mathematician, logician, polemicist, social-theorist, public intellectual, historian, and ethicist are all titles he could rightly be attributed. It is difficult, therefore, amongst all of these different intellectual endeavours, to demarcate what is rightfully philosophical in Russell's work, and what is not. The difficulty for our current considerations lies in determining which entries should and which should not be included in a dictionary dedicated to one person's eclectic philosophy.

The *Dictionary* begins with a chronology of Russell's life. It is a joy to read these entries as they reveal the number of hats that Russell wore, how prolific he was, and some interesting biographical glimpses into his life. Consider a few examples:

1905 In June, Russell reads "The Nature of Truth" to the Jowett Society. In July, he publishes "The Existential Import of Propositions". In October, he publishes his most famous essay, "On Denoting", followed in November by "On the Relation of Mathematics to Symbolic Logic". By this time, he has drafted "On Some Difficulties in the Theory of Transfinite Numbers and Order Types" and is experimenting with a method of preventing paradoxes that does not involve type-distinctions, inspired by the techniques described in "On Denoting". (P. xix)

1914 Between March and May, Russell teaches two classes at Harvard University, one on logic, the other on epistemology. He also gives the Lowell lectures there, which are published in August as *Our Knowledge of the External World*. World War I begins. Russell throws himself into antiwar, pacifist work. In November, he delivers "On Scientific Method in Philosophy" as the Herbert Spencer lecture at Oxford University. (Pp. xx–xxi)

1927 In April, the pamphlet *Why I Am Not a Christian* is published, followed by *The Analysis of Matter* in July and *An Outline of Philosophy* in November. After *Analysis of Matter*, Russell does not publish another book of academic philosophy until 1940. Russell and Dora open the Beacon Hill School in September. Throughout October and November, Russell lectures in New York to raise money for the school. (P. xxiii)

¹ Hereafter the *Dictionary*.

1956 In March and April, Russell protests the conviction and imprisonment of Martin [*sic*] Sobell, an accomplice of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg. In August and throughout the year, Russell protests when French, British, and Israeli forces attack Egypt. In September, *Portraits from Memory* is published, followed by *Logic and Knowledge* in October. During this year and every year thereafter, Russell writes extensively on the threat of nuclear war. (P. xxvii)

The scholarship of the authors is evident. They provide nice examples of the diversity and depth with which Russell performed his many functions. They further provide insight into the directions Russell's interests had led him from the beginning of his intellectual endeavours in mathematics and logic, to his focus on science and epistemology, as well as his eventual dedication to more social and political concerns, all peppered with interesting life occurrences throughout. One slip of the pen must be addressed, however: in the entry for 1929, it is said that Wittgenstein's PHD examination at Cambridge was performed by Russell and Whitehead, which, of course, is not the case; Wittgenstein's examiners were Russell and G. E. Moore.

Supplementing the main purpose of the *Dictionary* is an introduction to Russell's life, cultural background, and thought. This segment of the *Dictionary* is a welcome addition as it provides the reader with further insight into the man behind the work. What is more, not only is this section informative, it is a pleasurable read in both style and content.

Another noteworthy aspect of this book is the Bibliography (pp. 259–86). This is an excellent resource in itself, for both its primary source entries concerning Russell's own works, and the excellent list of secondary sources for the different aspects of Russell's life and works. The sections in "Works by Russell" include Books: Monographs and Collections of Essays, Fiction, and Letters, Collected Papers of Bertrand Russell, Articles, and Pamphlets: Social and Political.

The "Works about Russell" sections include Bibliographies and Archives, Journals, Biographies and Memoirs, General Surveys, Russell and the History of Analytic Philosophy, Logic and Logicism, Russell's Paradox and the Theory of Types, Acquaintance, Descriptions and Reference, Propositions, Judgments, Beliefs, and Facts, Constructions, Logical Atomism and Ontology, Neutral Monism, Psychology, and Naturalism, and Moral, Social, and Political Philosophy. Providing an exhaustive bibliography of all writings about Russell would be a virtually impossible task for any two people, but Carey and Ongley's secondary entries are extensive, thorough, and a laudable addition to Russell scholarship.²

² There are two other significant secondary bibliographies of Russell: in Nicholas Griffin, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Bertrand Russell* (2003); and in Andrew Irvine, ed., *Bertrand Russell: Critical Assessments* (1999).

We come now to the main purpose of the book. In the series editor's foreword we are told

... it is no small task to write about such a complex, multifaceted figure as Russell. Yet a historical dictionary is the ideal format for doing just that, where it is possible to deal with each concept, fact, theory, essay, book, person, influence, place, and event one at a time, entry by entry. (P. xi)

According to this quotation, the reader can expect an exhaustive account of these categories as entries in the *Dictionary*. Perhaps the series editor is unfamiliar with the breadth of Russell's influence in all facets of philosophy, in addition to his astoundingly full and busy life; for surely if he were familiar with the scope, diversity, and breadth of Russell's work and activities, he would know that to complete his list would be a task so extensive for two people that its timeline for completion would equal that of the development of *The Principles of Mathematics* to the completion of *Principia Mathematica*. It is for reasons like this that the task of producing an account of "each concept, fact, theory, book, person, influence, place, and event" in Russell's life is an unreasonable expectation for any two people, regardless of their evident expertise.

Given that I find the project, as portrayed above, too daunting and unreasonable for any two people to do justice to, I will limit my discussion to entries in the *Dictionary* worth mentioning, and omissions that are too obvious to overlook. Concerning the omissions, I address three things: first, I acknowledge some topics whose omission is strange due to their seemingly obvious need for an entry, although their lack of entry is merely questionable and not detrimental to the overall project. Secondly, I discuss omissions that almost certainly must have an entry, which leads to the third point: the book displays a standard bias in Russell scholarship that one hopes would be avoided in a book devoted to this man's life works—*viz.* the lack of entries regarding Russell's later works in metaphysics and epistemology.

Beginning with notable entries, I will highlight the excellent explanation of Russell's ethics in the **ETHICS** entry.³ It has only been rather recently in Russell scholarship that people have taken seriously the nuances and importance of Russell's ethical and moral works. It is commonly known that Russell dismissed ethics from serious philosophical inquiry, yet this entry reveals how ethics remained important to Russell and how this topic has more philosophical import than Russell himself seemed to admit. *Principia Mathematica* and Russell's earlier work are quite well represented in the entries, providing excellent access to some of the most important contributions Russell made in logic and philosophical mathematics. Also particularly well done are **PHILOSOPHY**, **RUSSELL'S**

³ Actual entries are in bold small capitals, while my suggested entries are not bolded.

PRACTICE OF and PUBLIC PHILOSOPHY. These entries explain the difference between Russell's philosophy in the sense used academically and Russell's philosophy in the colloquial sense. These entries are particularly helpful in also revealing how we can understand "philosophy" as used in the title of the *Dictionary*—in both senses as these entries explain. On the whole, most of the entries that are included are well done and quite helpful.

Coming next to notable omissions, as stated above, I distinguish two categories: (1) omissions that are surprising, but not detrimental to the overall project, and (2) omissions that *are* detrimental. Closely related to (2) is what I find to be the most problematic aspect of the *Dictionary*: the bias towards Russell's earlier philosophical works, or neglect of Russell's later philosophy.

Noticing that the *Dictionary* includes entries such as **PUGWASH CONFERENCE, RUSSELL–EINSTEIN MANIFESTO, RUSSELL AS A PUBLIC INTELLECTUAL** and numerous others pertaining to Russell's social, political, and public work, I find it interesting that his Nobel prize is overlooked. On a similar note, the ordeal of Russell's dismissal from CCNY is a curious omission. These events had direct impact on future philosophical endeavours and the course of Russell's life; one would hope to find them in a volume of this type.⁴ Along the same justification given for why the above people and events should be included, one would expect **ANALYTIC PHILOSOPHY** or **ORIGINS OF ANALYTIC PHILOSOPHY** in the *Dictionary*. Its omission may not take away from the project as a whole, but given Russell's central—and *essential*—role in the history and development of twentieth-century philosophy, one would hope to find it in a dictionary dedicated to him. Other missing entries in the same vein include **NUCLEAR DISARMAMENT, BERTRAND RUSSELL PEACE FOUNDATION, ORDINARY LANGUAGE PHILOSOPHY, MYSTICISM**, and perhaps more. Again, however, omitting entries on these topics does not, I think, create any unacceptable gaps in knowing about Russell's philosophy, although one would expect to find these topics in a survey of important concepts and events in Russell's life and works.

For the omissions that I address next—omissions that are unacceptable—I am more concerned with traditional philosophy rather than the more social areas of Russell's work, as, for the most part and where otherwise noted above, the entries in this area are thorough and well done. As I suggested above, most of the unacceptable omissions reveal a bias towards the earlier philosophy. Thus find that the majority of omissions that are unacceptable can be attributed to this concern. Russell's later philosophy was predominantly concerned with the epistemology and metaphysics of scientific explanations of the universe. As a result of these concerns, Russell developed theories on space-time, the philoso-

⁴ Noticing further the entries dedicated to Russell's four wives, it is curious that Lady Frances Elliot and Lady Ottoline Morrell are omitted, as both of these women had profound effects on Russell's life.

phy of mind, perception, ontology, and knowledge in general. Russell clearly embraced forms of scientific and structural realism in this period (1927–59), while rejecting his previously held phenomenalism. Entries on each of these of these topics—STRUCTURAL REALISM, SCIENTIFIC REALISM, PHENOMENALISM—should be included in a dictionary of Russell’s philosophy. Furthermore, concepts central to Russell’s later work are missed: PERCEPTS, EVENTS, RELATIVITY THEORY, THEORIES OF PROBABILITY, IMAGES, a survey of his EPISTEMOLOGIES, METAPHYSICS/ONTOLOGY, NATURAL KINDS, SCIENTIFIC LAWS, and, almost unforgivably, POSTULATES OF NON-DEMONSTRATIVE INFERENCE. While I admit that scholarship regarding Russell’s later works is still in its incipient stage, each of these topics needs to be included in a book that considers itself the definitive collection of Russell’s philosophical concepts.

Another area severely lacking in the *Dictionary* is entries on some of Russell’s major philosophical works. Russell’s very important earlier works are present: *The Principles of Mathematics*, *Principia Mathematica* and *The Problems of Philosophy*. However, *all* of the major publications of the philosopher should be included in a book of this type, not just the early stuff. There are no entries for *Our Knowledge of the External World*, *The Analysis of Mind*, *The Analysis of Matter*, “On Propositions”, *An Inquiry into Meaning and Truth*, *History of Western Philosophy*, and *Human Knowledge*. This is, quite frankly, unacceptable, and I think again shows a bias for the earlier works while neglecting the later, and most certainly important, works from the second half of Russell’s philosophical career. Reading the *Dictionary*, one may think that Russell’s importance as a philosopher diminished significantly after 1920—a common misconception in the history of twentieth-century philosophy. Perhaps this is what is most disappointing about a book that purports to be an account of this man’s philosophy; it slights the better part of 30 years of work and supports the false notion that Russell’s later philosophy was uninteresting. Certainly the authors do not hold this view, but if an outsider were to peruse the *Dictionary* with this in mind, there would be no good reason for him or her to think otherwise.

Does the *Dictionary* achieve its aims? If its aims are what we discussed above regarding “each concept, fact, theory, book, person, influence, place, and event”, then no. This conclusion is not a charge against the authors, however, as the goal is an unreasonable one. Concerning the strictly philosophical and important social and political aspects of Russell’s life, however, I must again admit dissatisfaction, for the reasons given in the preceding paragraph. I would not claim that the *Dictionary* would not be a valuable addition to one’s library; nor do I suggest that the entries included in it are unhelpful or uninformative; on the contrary, the majority of entries *are* both helpful and informative. Granted this admission, the *Dictionary* is incomplete. Much more could—and should—be added, specifically concerning Russell’s later work, if we are to get a comprehensive picture of the entirety of his philosophy.
