

RECONSTRUCTING THE LOGICAL CONSTRUCTION OF THE WORLD

GRAHAM STEVENS

Philosophy / U. of Manchester

Manchester M13 9PL, UK

GRAHAM.P.STEVENS@MANCHESTER.AC.UK

Omar W. Nasim. Foreword by Michael Beaney. *Bertrand Russell and the Edwardian Philosophers: Constructing the World*. (Series: History of Analytic Philosophy.) Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008. £50; US\$89. Pp. xiii, 208. Hardcover: ISBN-13: 978-0-230-20579-6. ISBN-10: 0230205798.

Russell's method of logical construction, whereby ontological commitment to certain metaphysically objectionable entities may be withheld by demonstrating that they can be constructed from simpler elements whose ontological status is less objectionable, is often viewed as the most important doctrine of his philosophy. The most famous instance of the method was, of course, the 1905 theory of definite descriptions. In *Principia Mathematica*, the theory of descriptions is appealed to as the model on which the logical construction of classes is based. Thus the method provides Russell with the means for his proposed solution to the paradoxes and, thus, for the foundation of mathematics. Discussion of this aspect of Russell's philosophy has often studied it in isolation from the philosophical context in which Russell was working. Mathematical influences on Russell have often been noted, such as Frege and Dedekind, but philosophical ones have seldom been noted. This has led to a rather ahistorical picture of Russell's development. Nasim's book exposes the inaccuracy of that picture with an exemplary historical examination of Russell's immediate philosophical surroundings during the period in which he produced much of his most important work on logical constructions. The result is a fascinating reappraisal of Russell's motivations and influences that significantly advances our understanding of Russell's philosophy.

The key event that Nasim identifies as a crucial force motivating Russell's work is an extended debate (Nasim grandly dubs it "the Controversy") conducted by several British philosophers between 1900 and 1916. Apart from Russell and Moore, the protagonists in this debate are seldom read nowadays. At the

time, however, they were at the forefront of British philosophy. The other key figures in question were G. F. Stout, Samuel Alexander, T. P. Nunn, and G. Dawes Hicks. The Controversy surrounded the epistemological problem of the external world and our relation to it. It was this debate, Nasim suggests, which provided the impetus for much of Russell's thinking about logical constructions and, in particular, for his application of the method to the philosophy of perception. If Nasim is right, then without the Controversy, Russell may not have developed his distinctive epistemology that distinguished knowledge by acquaintance from knowledge by description and which was so influential. Twentieth-century philosophy, in other words, may have been very different if it were not for the Controversy.

Aside from throwing new light on Russell's philosophical development, Nasim's book also illuminates an interesting period in British philosophy that is rarely studied in such depth. The impact of Russell, Moore, and Wittgenstein on subsequent generations has encouraged a tendency to treat the history of British philosophy in this period as the history merely of these three. Nasim's book serves as a reminder that there were many other figures that were as, if not more, prominent at the time. History may have made the correct judgment about the merits of those figures it has subsequently overlooked, but the fact remains that ignoring the contemporaries of those, like Russell, who we are still in process of learning from, can only hinder our understanding. This is shown admirably by Nasim in the way that he carefully reconnects Russell's notion of sense-data with the Controversy. Having explicated the details of the Controversy and the individual contributions made to it by Stout, Nunn, Alexander and Cook Wilson in the first three chapters, Nasim then contextualizes Russell's notion of sense-data in relation to these in Chapter 4.

The importance of the Controversy for Russell's work is most evident in Chapter 5. Here Nasim demonstrates that Russell's attempt to provide a construction of the external world from something more basic or immediate such as sense-data was not, in itself, new. Many others involved in the Controversy suggested methods of construction to solve the problem of the external world. What made Russell distinctive was his insistence that the required construction should be a *logical construction*. Thus Russell came to bring his momentous achievements in mathematical logic to bear on epistemology. This is not a new interpretation of events, but it has a level of historical sophistication in the details that is rare. Chapter 6 nicely concludes matters with an in-depth study of Russell's method of logical construction that connects the original interpretation developed in the previous chapter with the more common interpretation of the method as coming from exclusively mathematical influences on Russell.

This book is a very original study that genuinely deepens our understanding of Russell by presenting new insight into his motivations and concerns at the time when he was engaged in some of the most important work of his career.

What it shows is that contrary to popular myth, Russell's philosophical development in the first decade of the twentieth century was not purely the product of a single-minded investigation into mathematical logic, conducted independently of the surrounding philosophical context of the period. Rather, Russell's "Edwardian" philosophical contemporaries exerted a significant influence on him. This in itself is good reason for looking again at what they had to say. Nasim's book is an excellent place to start looking.
