

DISCARDED PREFACE TO A CRITICAL EXPOSITION OF THE PHILOSOPHY OF LEIBNIZ

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There is a puzzle about the dating of the preface to A Critical Exposition of the Philosophy of Leibniz that was actually published in the first edition. As published, the preface is dated “September 1900” though the manuscript for it is dated “August 1900”. There is nothing untoward there: the date was merely moved forward to reflect when the book actually went to press. The proofs for the preface and the other front matter are date-stamped 15 August and nothing seems untoward there, except that on 31 July Russell left for Paris to attend the International Congress of Philosophy at which he first came across the work of Peano. He was at the conference from 1 to 5 August and then travelled on holiday in France from 6 to 15 August, returning to England on the 15th. The only way the date on the proofs and that on the manuscript could both be correct is if Russell wrote the preface in France, and probably at the congress (to allow enough time for the manuscript to travel to Cambridge and be typeset by 15 August). Alternatively, Russell wrote the preface in late July and post-dated the manuscript to reflect when he expected the book to go to press. It is difficult to decide which of these scenarios is least unlikely.

The preface which appeared in the book would not have taken him long. It’s concerned with the usual business of prefaces: a brief account of the book and acknowledgements. He does start by drawing a distinction between two types of history of philosophy—the historical, which describes a philosopher’s thought, traces its development, and identifies the historical factors which shaped it; and the philosophical, which lays out a philosopher’s views systematically and evaluates which are correct and which mistaken—and he places his own book firmly in the second category. But he does this briskly and unapologetically, as part of the normal task of a preface alerting the reader about what to expect.

The published preface, however, replaced an earlier one, of a very different character, which is printed below. The composition of the rejected preface evidently gave Russell some trouble, to judge at least by the unusually large number of alterations

he made to the text, before he abandoned it, incomplete, mid-page. Indeed, its style, both oracular and oratorical, contrasts oddly, not just with the plain and straightforward style of the published preface, but with the style of the whole book. Compared to the book, it seems rather old-fashioned and Victorian—though Russell used similar rhetorical language a few years later in works such as “The Free Man’s Worship” and “On History”.

As in the published preface, Russell begins by distinguishing the two types of history of philosophy, but in the rejected preface he attempts, against “the historical spirit” of the age, a full-fledged apologia for the philosophical kind of history of philosophy that he had undertaken. It is not clear what Russell meant by “the historical spirit”. He may have meant nothing more than the tendency of late nineteenth-century historians of philosophy, especially those in Germany where the art was practised on a scale not approached in the English-speaking world, to concentrate on describing the development of philosophical positions rather than critiquing them. But his subsequent argument suggests that the fashionable approach he is rejecting is one which not merely avoids critiquing the philosophies it describes, but holds that critique is impossible, for he goes on to defend his approach against the charges that it was quixotic to seek truth and presumptuous to think one had attained it. It is more than a little odd to find that the author of any book on the history of philosophy feels compelled to defend his work against such charges as these. Why, if truth is virtually unobtainable, would one write the book in the first place? And why, by the same token, would the reader have started to read it?

It may seem that Russell is merely indulging in a little hyperbolic grumbling about the intellectual infirmity of the age, in particular perhaps about some (unidentified) tendency to historicist relativism. In fact, however, I think he has in mind something much closer to home: the failure (which he had come to see as he prepared his work on Leibniz) of essentially all the philosophical projects he had undertaken as an idealist. That truth was unobtainable was not a doctrine that was widely proclaimed by philosophers in 1900, but one which, Russell thought, would be widely proclaimed if only they drew the logical consequences of their other doctrines. For most of his career as an idealist, Russell had maintained a form of monadism which, he thought, admitted the possibility of genuine scientific and philosophical knowledge. But one of the things of which his study of Leibniz had convinced him was that this monadism was inconsistent. He states this early in the book, not only as “[t]he fundamental objection to Leibniz’s philosophy”, but as a “general objection to Monadism” (PL, p. 4), and elaborates it at length subsequently. But if monadisms of all kinds are inconsistent, the only idealist alternative was some form of Bradleyan monism, and, according to that, all thought involved some degree of falsification, so truth was once again unobtainable. A similar negative conclusion came from Russell’s use of transcendental deductions. When he had first used them, in *An Essay on the Foundations of Geometry*, he had maintained that they were logical, rather than psychological, arguments and had bracketed the question of whether the

knowledge which arose from them (e.g., about the nature of space) was subjective or not. In 1898 he had come to think that it was subjective, that transcendental deductions were inherently psychologistic, and that the propositions about space that were arrived at by such arguments did not represent how things truly were but how we necessarily think of them as being. As regards the subjectivity of space, Russell made parallel criticisms of Leibniz¹ and extended them to Leibniz's treatment of relations in general. Though Leibniz denied that monads actually had relations, he nonetheless held that God (and the monads themselves) think of them as related and that the propositions which express these thoughts have "a mental truth". Thus, according to Russell, Leibniz was driven to "the Kantian doctrine that relations, though veritable, are the work of the mind" and thus to the preposterous view (which Russell takes to constitute "a large part of Kant's Copernican revolution") that "propositions may acquire truth by being believed" (PL, p. 14).

All this was very bad news for Russell's idealist enterprises, or indeed for any of the idealist enterprises that dominated the late-Victorian philosophical scene. But Russell, by the time the rejected preface was written, had found a way around all these impasses. Indeed, the confidence with which he critiques Leibniz's position in the book gives the unmistakable impression that he was confident he had found a superior position from which to do so. And indeed he had and, ironically enough, almost certainly as a result of his study of Leibniz.² He had concluded that all the obstacles in the way of obtaining genuine philosophic truth depended upon a single doctrine, that all propositions were of subject-predicate form, and upon its corollary, the doctrine of internal relations, that putatively relational propositions supervened on subject-predicate propositions which attributed properties to their terms. In 1898, in conjunction with G. E. Moore, he had rejected this view and adopted the view that relations were real, external to their terms, and not the work of the mind. In the first place, this made it possible to admit relational propositions as straightforwardly true; but, secondly, it made it possible to conceive knowledge as a relation between the knower and known which (contrary to Kant) did not in part determine the nature of the known. The search for truth was no longer quixotic but (as Russell maintains in the rejected preface) an essential part of the vocation of a philosopher, and even for a purely historical approach to the history of philosophy, which aims merely to describe the views of past philosophers accurately and to trace the influence of one philosopher upon another. This, Russell argues, cannot be done without an evaluation of their positions, for we are more apt to infer an influence when we think both are mistaken than when we think both are right. Moreover, even if they both use the same words, it has still to be determined whether they mean the same thing by them, which "can only be decided by a knowledge of philosophic ideas". Most generally, Russell maintains that, in order to understand a philosopher's views, it is

¹ Cf. PL, pp. 74, 99, 119, 122, 163; "Notebook", p. 53.

² See GRIFFIN, "What Did Russell Learn from Leibniz?" (2013).

necessary to know “what views are tenable, and this is knowledge of a philosophic truth”. Thus “even the barest historical pronouncement on the views of past philosophers” requires a grasp of philosophic truth.

These views of Russell’s owe much to G. E. Moore’s second fellowship dissertation, “The Metaphysical Basis of Ethics” (1898), which Russell had read in November 1898. In his dissertation, Moore did for Kant’s views on freedom and reason something of what Russell subsequently did for Leibniz. In it there were four main chapters: two critically explaining Kant’s views on reason and freedom, respectively, and two giving Moore’s own views on reason and freedom.³ As a result it was hard to tell whether the dissertation was a contribution to the history of philosophy or an independent contribution to philosophy itself.⁴ Accordingly, Moore attempted, in the Introduction to the second dissertation, to justify his approach with some remarks on the historian of philosophy’s task. His initial account falls very much on the historical side of Russell’s historical/philosophical division: it is simply to give a true account of a philosopher’s thought. But the problem was that there was no sure way of determining what the philosopher’s thought was, and this inevitably led the historian of philosophy to undertake the tasks of philosophy itself:

It is impossible to give an account of any man’s ideas, without a knowledge of the facts to which alone his ideas can refer.... What these facts are ... is a question which only a philosopher can answer. Hence a historian of philosophy is necessarily involved in all the uncertainties from which philosophy itself has never emerged. He must relate the ideas of his author, if his account is to be anything more than a bare repetition of his author’s words, by reference in the last resort to ideas which seem to him to represent the actual truth.... [B]eyond somewhat narrow limits, there seems no ground for determining what a philosopher actually thought except a judgment of what it is right to think.

(Moore, p. 130)

Hence the need to alternate chapters on Kant with chapters on Moore’s own views. Russell evidently took Moore’s methodological remarks to heart in his work on Leibniz, but not to the extent of accompanying it with a full statement of his own position, as at least one reviewer complained.⁵

It is not clear why Russell abandoned this preface. He may well have thought that there was neither time nor space for a disquisition on the history of philosophy, let

³ It was the second chapter, called simply “Reason” in the dissertation, which Moore published as “The Nature of Judgment” in *Mind* the following year. As such, it became the first published statement of the new realist philosophy that Russell and Moore were developing in reaction to idealism.

⁴ Edward Caird, in his examiner’s report on Moore’s first dissertation the previous year, which did not have this bifurcated arrangement, had commented on the difficulty of knowing when Moore was describing his own position or what he took to be Kant’s position (cf. MOORE, *Early Philosophical Writings*, p. 99).

⁵ LATTA, *Critical Notice of PL* (1901), p. 527.

alone for an account of the nature and status of philosophy itself, which is what he embarked on in his final paragraph. Or that a preface was not the place to do it. Moreover, as already noted, the style in which the rejected preface is written is very different from that of the book itself: he may simply have thought that the style he had adopted for the preface was inappropriate for the book. The book is certainly better with the preface he eventually gave it. But the preface he abandoned—written as a personal philosophical statement just after his new account of relations had shown him a way out of the difficulties which had stymied his idealist efforts and produced a form of realism which offered prospects of making philosophic truth attainable—gives an unusual glimpse of what he took his task to be both as a philosopher and as a historian of philosophy. In *My Philosophical Development* Russell said that when he abandoned idealism he felt that he had escaped “from a hot-house on to a wind-swept headland” (p. 61). The optimistic and confident rejected preface to his book on Leibniz gives us some sense of what that was like.

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- . *MPD*.

Preface.¹

In the present work, a somewhat unusual task is attempted. Leibniz’s philosophy is examined, in the following pages, not in respect of its origin, its growth, or its influence, but in respect of its truth or falsity. I am aware that, with the growth of the historical spirit, such an examination has become unfashionable. Merely to consider desirable an enquiry of such a nature is held by many to mark a man

¹ The MS (RA 210.006554–F1) is written mostly in ink on three leaves of paper (c. 223 × 287 mm.), foliated 1, 2–3 in the top right corner. Textual notes are by K. Blackwell.

as antiquated. But actually to undertake an enquiry into the truth or falsehood of a past philosopher's views, is held to be at once quixotic and presumptuous. To pursue truth, we are told, is quixotic, to believe it attained is the height of presumption. But this quixotism, this presumption, I must maintain, are the very spirit and life of Philosophy. Passionate devotion to truth—the “intellectual love of God”—may be quixotic; but who, without it, would dare to call himself a lover of wisdom? And what but this has been the motive of philosophers? What but the distant hope of this lends interest to the historical study of their systems? Why do we bestow more attention upon the great philosophers than upon the opinions of the vulgar, if it be not that they give more help towards the truth?

And with regard to presumption, a similar answer may be made. If the love of truth alone makes us philosophers, the belief that we, however partially, can attain it, is equally necessary to even the barest historical pronouncement on the views of past philosophers. The comprehension of a philosopher's views is only possible to one who knows what views are tenable, and this is knowledge of a philosophic truth. To judge—what is specially attempted by the modern historian of philosophy—the influence of one philosopher on another, is an even more difficult task, a task whose execution will depend always upon our own philosophy. When two philosophers agree in what seems easy or self-evident, we shall be less liable to infer a mutual influence than when they agree in what seems abstruse and difficult. When they agree in what we think error or confusion, we shall be more apt to infer a connection than where the truth may be the ground of both their views. When their words agree, we may question whether they attach the same meaning to these words; and this can only be decided by a knowledge of philosophic ideas—a knowledge which must always be the most difficult part of the philosopher's meditations. Thus we are involved, as soon as we ask ourselves what a philosopher means, in all the difficulties and uncertainties of Philosophy, and in all the presumption required to attempt their solution.

But, it may be said—and this is the opposite of the sceptical objection which I have just discussed—the world advances in knowledge and wisdom, and the views of one who lived two centuries ago cannot, at this date, deserve a serious refutation. They must, as attempts at truth, be antiquated, and of purely historical interest. This is a view appropriate enough in Science, but wholly out of place in the study of

Philosophy. Science proceeds by accumulation of facts, and of inferences from those facts. It has data and results. Philosophy has, and should have, nothing of this kind. Philosophy is, properly, the investigation of ideas which are indefinable and of propositions which are indemonstrable. What can be defined or proved is subsequent and derivative; it is not fundamental, and not worthy of the true philosopher. But where definition and proof are inapplicable, we are left to intuition, to something which, though presupposed in all proofs and definitions, is itself attainable only by what may be called imagination. And thus philosophy—though we must, if we are to believe any proposition whatever, suppose it capable of attaining some truth—is, in its method, more akin to poetry than to science. It depends rather upon individual genius, than upon the slow accumulation of patient labours. We should scoff at one who assured us that Shakespeare, Dante, or Homer had been superseded. In philosophy, likewise, those who have been great remain great, and are as likely to contain truth, in what is truly philosophical, as their more instructed but not wiser posterity. And so philosophers, if they have excellence, do not become antiquated, and we may hope, if we ourselves are philosophers and not men of science, to learn from them in proportion to their genius, and not merely to their proximity to this enlightened age.

TEXTUAL NOTES BY LINE NUMBER

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| 2 In] <i>replaced</i> I have attempted, in | 20 ¶[And] ¶] <i>inserted</i> |
| 2 is attempted] <i>inserted</i> | 25 tenable] <i>above deleted</i> possible |
| 3 pages] <i>before deleted</i> parado | 37 meditations.] <i>above deleted</i> thought. |
| 3 not] <i>inserted in pencil and deleted after</i> | 41 opposite of] <i>replaced</i> opposite objec- |
| respect <i>in next line</i> | tion to |
| 6 unfashionable] <i>un inserted</i> | 48 those] <i>inserted</i> |
| 6 consider] <i>after deleted</i> attempt | 50 of propositions] <i>of inserted</i> |
| 7 enquiry] <i>written over</i> inquiry | 58 rather] <i>inserted and deleted after</i> genius |
| 8 antiquated.] <i>replaced</i> either antiquated | <i>in next line</i> |
| or paradoxical. | 60 We] <i>after deleted</i> And |
| 8 But] <i>inserted</i> | 61–2 those who have been great] <i>replaced</i> |
| 10 , we are told,] <i>inserted in pencil</i> | though we may point to those who are |
| 13 Passionate] <i>inserted before</i> Devotion | great |
| <i>now lower-cased</i> | 65–6 if we ourselves are philosophers and |
| 16 the historical] <i>the inserted</i> | not men of science,] <i>above deleted</i> in |
| 18 than] <i>corrected from BR's</i> that | what is truly fundamental, |