

THE RECEPTION OF RUSSELL'S *A HISTORY OF WESTERN PHILOSOPHY*

RUSSELL WAHL

English and Philosophy, Idaho State U.

Pocatello, ID 83209, USA

WAHLRUSS@ISU.EDU

Russell's *History of Western Philosophy* was a commercial success and generally popular with the overall public. There were many reviews written of the work; most were not favourable. In this paper I examine a selection of the reviews which shed light on how Russell was perceived as a historian of philosophy. Among the many philosophers who reviewed the work and are discussed here are Isaiah Berlin, C. D. Broad, Martial Gueroult, C. E. M. Joad, H. J. Paton, Karl Popper, Joseph Ratner, Yorick Smythies and Paul Weiss.

Russell's *History of Western Philosophy* was a departure from his other works in philosophy and very much a departure from his most important work in the history of philosophy, *A Critical Exposition of the Philosophy of Leibniz*. In the Preface to the latter, Russell had outlined two starkly different approaches to the history of philosophy. The one sort paid attention to the relations of the various philosophies and the cultural and causal forces operating on the philosophers. Russell's primary complaint about this method of doing history of philosophy was that the philosophy, and perhaps what was valuable in it either as a good example or as a caution, was lost. The other method involved looking at the philosophy and analyzing it for what is true and what is false within it: "[I]n such inquiries the philosopher is no longer explained psychologically: he is examined as the advocate of what he holds to be a body of philosophic truth" (*PL*, p. xii). In his book on Leibniz Russell advocated this second method.

Yet in his *History of Western Philosophy* Russell appears to be following the kind of history he had belittled in his book on Leibniz. Russell said that the later work was designed to "exhibit philosophy as an

integral part of social and political life: not as the isolated speculations of remarkable individuals, but as both an effect and a cause of the character of the various communities in which different systems flourished" (*HWP*, p. ix¹). Consequently, there are entire chapters on such topics as "The Roman Empire in Relation to Culture", "The Papacy in the Dark Ages", and "The Eclipse of the Papacy", just to mention a few. There is very little discussion of philosophers or even philosophy in these chapters. Despite Russell's earlier interest in early modern philosophy, there are just eleven pages on Descartes, and the same number on Spinoza, but the above mentioned chapter on "The Papacy in the Dark Ages" merited twelve pages, although not one philosopher is mentioned there. There are 40 pages on Locke, which Russell justified not because he thought Locke a good philosopher, but because of the influence that Locke had on philosophy. Despite Russell's previous work on Leibniz, his chapter on Leibniz merited only fifteen pages. There are very broad treatments of the intellectual history of Greece, Rome, the mediaeval period and the Romantics, among others. These sections are entertaining and have flashes of insight, but are rather lightweight as history goes. The general tone of the book is captured well in this passage from the section on Plato, where he felt compelled to take a swipe at Plato's Socrates:

Unlike some of his predecessors, he was not scientific in his thinking, but was determined to prove the universe agreeable to his ethical standards. This is treachery to truth, and the worst of philosophic sins. As a man, we may believe him admitted to the communion of saints; but as a philosopher he needs a long residence in a scientific purgatory.

(*HWP*, pp. 142–3)

The section on Aristotle is almost entirely negative. Of his ethical theory Russell wrote, "... there is an emotional poverty in the *Ethics*, which is not found in the earlier philosophers.... Even his account of friendship is tepid.... [A]ll the more profound aspects of the moral life are apparently unknown to him" (*HWP*, p. 184). In the section on Aristotle's logic he says that the Aristotelean doctrines are "wholly false, with the exception of the formal theory of the syllogism, which is unimportant" (p. 202). In the section on Aquinas, Russell admitted

¹ Page references are to the Simon and Schuster edition (1945), which is still in print.

that Aquinas had an attempt at fairness in stating opposing positions and that he carefully distinguished the arguments from reason from those from revelation, but says, “The appeal to reason is, in a sense, insincere, since the conclusion to be reached is fixed in advance” (p. 462). Pursuing this theme, Russell’s concluding remarks are harsh:

There is little of the true philosophical spirit in Aquinas. He does not, like the Platonic Socrates, set out to follow wherever the argument may lead.... Before he begins to philosophize, he already knows the truth; it is declared in the Catholic faith.... The finding of arguments for a conclusion given in advance is not philosophy, but special pleading. I cannot, therefore, feel that he deserves to be put on a level with the best philosophers either of Greece or modern times. (HWP, p. 463)

Given what he had said about the Greek philosophers and even most of those in modern times, this level is low. It is curious that Socrates, who had been criticized for similar vices, comes up for praise only in contrast to Aquinas.

In the remainder of the paper, I will not review the *History*, nor discuss its interesting origin or its own historical context. Instead I will discuss highlights from a selection of the many reviews of the work, written for the most part between 1945 and 1947.

When I began looking at reviews of Russell’s *History of Western Philosophy* I was expecting that most of the professional philosophers would give negative reviews, while more popular venues would have more positive reviews. Russell’s book, after all, sold quite well and has considerably more entertainment value than comparable histories of philosophy. The work was also mentioned among others by the Nobel Prize committee. Nonetheless, what I found was far more critical than I had expected, both in the popular press and in the philosophical journals. I also found some inconsistency among the reviews.

When speaking of comments on student papers, my colleagues often speak of a “criticism sandwich”. The idea is always to find something to praise to soften the blow of the negative criticism which is sandwiched between the praise. Several of the reviews followed this pattern. For example, in his review in the *New Republic*, Paul Weiss (admittedly a philosopher and not a public critic) begins with praise of Russell as a philosopher who changed his mind. Weiss also applauded the idea of connecting the philosophy to the social and

political contexts. But he criticized Russell for relying “too much and without sufficient acknowledgement on secondary and tertiary sources such as *Britannica*, the *Cambridge History*, and Gibbon.”² This is a theme one finds in many of the reviews. Weiss goes on to praise Russell’s treatments of Leibniz and Bergson and also the long discussion of Locke. He then returns: “But it would be hard to find a more incompetent account than Russell’s presentation of Parmenides and Kant and of the metaphysics of Plato, Aristotle, and Hegel” (Weiss, p. 762). Daniel Sullivan, in *Commonweal*, remarked that the section on Greek philosophy was a “smooth rehash of secondary sources, Cornford, Burnet and Benn in particular”.³ Gibbon “uncritically used as a historical base for the later Roman Empire and the Dark Ages” (Sullivan, p. 314). The review ends with praise: “His treatment of modern philosophy ... is fresh, lucid, and sprinkled with illuminating insights.... His treatment of German philosophy is excellent ... and here ... connecting the philosopher to his time pays its best dividends” (*ibid.*, p. 314). Apparently Sullivan disagreed with the assessment Weiss gave of the section on German philosophy.

There are four longer substantial reviews which give us a good sense of how the work was received by the philosophical community. The most sympathetic of them is by Isaiah Berlin, in *Mind*.⁴ Even this one, while praising Russell’s overall philosophical acumen and literary style, finally presented a negative view of the overall enterprise. With regard to the plan to exhibit the philosophers in their historical and cultural contexts, Berlin wrote:

The historical interpolations remain largely detached from the history of ideas save in chapters on the Middle Ages, where the interpretation grows somewhat thin and mechanical and obscures the rest of the story; when we get to the post-Renaissance period, which is more sympathetic to the genius of the author, such information grows progressively scantier....
(Berlin, p. 151)

Berlin went on to say that in the later chapters on Bergson and logical analysis, for example, this historical interpolation is completely lacking. Berlin also criticized Russell for the lack of space provided to

² WEISS, *The New Republic*, 3 Dec. 1945, p. 760.

³ SULLIVAN, *Commonweal*, 4 Jan. 1946, p. 313.

⁴ BERLIN, *Mind*, April 1947.

those things that actually interest Russell. He criticized the short treatment of Leibniz, for example, and the very brief discussion of logical analysis in the end, as well as his light treatment of problems of induction in the section on Hume. In the end, Berlin said of the book as a whole that its principal interest “resides in the light which it casts upon the views of its author” (*ibid.*, p. 152).

Another review, by Joseph Ratner in the *Journal of Philosophy*, is far more critical. Ratner’s critical sandwich has only one slice of praise, beginning with the remark that the plan of the work “deserves the highest praise”.⁵ But then, after questioning Russell’s interest in the history of philosophy and criticizing his biased selections and sketchy digests, Ratner went on to state that the book fails miserably in the execution of the plan:

In the overwhelming majority of cases, the socio-cultural relations are presented as external and tangential circumstances, their externality being further emphasized by the physical segregation of almost all socio-cultural material in separate chapters which are used as “Introductions” to the various periods and movements into which the *History* is divided.

(Ratner, p. 39)

Ratner suggested that the very attempt to set the philosophers in their socio-cultural context is at odds with Russell’s view that logic is the essence of philosophy. In fact he appears to have thought it inconsistent with this approach.⁶ Ratner finished the review with a harsh criticism of the chapters on Spinoza and James, both of which he found very distorting. Ratner’s remarks on Russell’s discussion of William James are quite hostile. Russell’s relationship to James was far more complicated than is generally thought. Russell was critical of

⁵ RATNER, *Journal of Philosophy*, 16 Jan. 1947, p. 39.

⁶ This is echoed in FELIX KAUFMANN’s critical review in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* where he says that what Russell gives are not guides to the philosophy but warnings, which he says has to do with Russell’s general view of philosophy, particularly the view that philosophy really just is syntax in Russell’s discussion of Carnap. See *HWP*, p. 830. Russell did say that he thought Carnap’s position was an overstatement. In a review in the *American Historical Review*, GEORGE SABINE of Cornell says, “Indeed the aim of this book is so remote from his dominant interest in the subject and his interest is so little compatible with sympathetic historical understanding that one wonders why he should have been willing to undergo the vast labor of producing a book so comprehensive” (SABINE, p. 486).

much of James's pragmatism and put the criticism more carefully in his polemic works, particularly those collected in *Philosophical Essays* (1910). Much of Russell's own remarks on James's theory of truth appears to be based on these works, but Ratner gives an interesting argument that turns Russell's own pronouncements on ethics and social justice against his critique of James. Ratner points out that James's pronouncements were directed to those questions which he thought science couldn't answer. Ratner then points to Russell's own discussion, at the end of his chapter on Nietzsche, where Russell gave an imagined dialogue between Buddha and Nietzsche. At the end of the imagined dialogue, Russell said he agreed with Buddha, but could not prove that he is right by an argument such as can be used in a mathematical or scientific question, and said "I think the ultimate argument against [Nietzsche's] philosophy, as against any unpleasant but internally self-consistent ethic, lies not in an appeal to facts, but in an appeal to the emotions. Nietzsche despises universal love; I feel it the motive power to all that I desire as regards the world" (*HWP*, p. 773). Ratner likens this very claim to James's remark that deciding these questions cannot be by "intellectual grounds" but that our choices must be made by "our passional nature" (Ratner, p. 47). Ratner then goes on to argue that James, unlike Russell, thought that the decision required a sort of lawfulness of passional decisions, which is absent in Russell's emotivism. The suggestion Ratner leaves you with is that Russell's accusation, levelled at several philosophers that they are of victims of "the subjectivistic madness which is characteristic of most modern philosophy" (*HWP*, p. 818), applies more to Russell in this instance than to James.

The review by G. Watts Cunningham, in *The Philosophical Review*, allowed that the summaries of the systems are "clear and straightforward" and the critical comments are "everywhere challenging and enlightening in respect to fundamentals".⁷ But then comes a series of quotations from the work which suggest that pretty much the entire history of philosophy exhibits "only perennial confusion and sophistry." Cunningham attributes this view to Russell's acceptance of the view that a great part of philosophy "can be reduced to something called 'syntax' and the part which cannot thus be reduced is

⁷ CUNNINGHAM, *Philosophical Review*, 1946, p. 695.

nonsensical or at least not amenable to the procedures of the intellect ...” (Cunningham, p. 696).⁸

C. D. Broad’s review, in *Philosophy*, is written almost in the style of the *History of Western Philosophy* itself. Broad is breezy and writes of Russell’s work in the tongue in cheek manner Russell had adopted. After quoting Russell’s tirade against Plato for dishonesty he mentions Russell’s remark that the *Parmenides* contains the most remarkable case in history of self-criticism. Broad comments: “I suppose this must have been one of Plato’s rare lapses into intellectual honesty.”⁹ After pointing out that Russell liked Plotinus, Broad continues: “I think it ought to strike Russell as odd that a man like Plotinus, who was steeped in Plato’s works, should have had such a reverence for Plato if the latter were what Russell represents him as being.” Broad’s harshest criticism is reserved for Russell’s discussion of Kant, which seems to Broad “the worst in the book. It is inadequate and inaccurate” (Broad, p. 262). Broad quotes some distortions from the chapter on Kant, but complains at the end that “no one whose knowledge of Kant was confined to this chapter would be able to understand why Kant has been *thought* by many highly competent persons to be one of the greatest European philosophers” (*ibid.*).

Broad also suggests that the chapter on Bergson was largely taken from Russell’s 1912 *Monist* article. He points out (as Russell himself does) that one of Russell’s criticisms of Bergson, namely that he confuses the act of knowing with the object known (see *HWP*, p. 808), was a point Russell rejected later. In fact, four pages after this remark, in the chapter on William James, Russell praised James for having rejected the distinction. There Russell wrote: “I am convinced that James was right on this matter.... I had thought otherwise until he, and those who agreed with him, persuaded me of the truth of his doctrine” (*HWP*, p. 812).

Broad’s criticism of the section on Kant is echoed in many other

⁸ The reviews by ROBERTS in *Isis* and BOAS in the *Journal of the History of Ideas* are almost entirely negative, with Roberts characterizing *HWP* as the worst book Russell has written, and Boas lamenting among other things the remarks on Aristotle and the mediaeval philosophers. Boas thought Russell’s lack of awareness of Cherniss’s work on Aristotle hurt his account. In a symposium on Russell’s work in *Franciscan Studies*, MERCIER *et al.* were highly critical of Russell’s treatment of the mediaeval period in Book II, “Catholic Philosophy”.

⁹ BROAD, *Philosophy*, Nov. 1947, p. 257.

reviews. It is mentioned at the end of a highly critical review by Leo Roberts in *Isis*.¹⁰ In a brief review in *Books Abroad*, Gustav Mueller criticizes Russell's remarks on Kant, along with pretty much most everything in the book.¹¹ In his review in *International Affairs*, H. J. Paton quotes a few of Russell's misstatements concerning Kant (that Kant is said to have derived the categories from the forms of syllogism instead of the forms of judgments, and a typical but faulty mischaracterization of the application of the categorical imperative). He suggested that Russell may have been misled by another mischaracterization of Kant's categorical imperative.¹² But that mischaracterization, Paton said, was "the bright invention of a commentator who apparently discussed Kant without taking the trouble to read him" (*ibid.*).

This passage led to a rebuke by no less than Patricia Russell, who suggested the remark as tantamount to libel and assured Paton of her assisting Russell in reading and rereading the philosophers over the previous sixteen years. In his response Paton in turn assures Patricia of his admiration for Russell as a philosopher and for other aspects of the *History*.¹³

There are two reviews in French journals worth mentioning. One is by Georges Le Roy, in the *Revue philosophique de Louvain* and the other is by Martial Gueroult, in *Revue philosophique et de France et de l'étranger*. Le Roy spends most of his review outlining Russell's project but makes very few critical judgments on Russell's discussion of the works, although he does suggest that Russell's discussion of the doctrines of the Latin church fathers was a little superficial.¹⁴ Russell's discussion of the entire history of western civilization can only offer a "rapid synthesis," he says, but it brings to light the essentials (Le Roy, p. 357). His main criticism is that Russell left out many important French philosophers, with little reference to Pascal and Malebranche and none to Condillac, Maine de Biran or even Auguste Comte.

¹⁰ ROBERTS, *Isis*, Feb. 1948, p. 270.

¹¹ MUELLER, *Books Abroad*, spring 1946.

¹² PATON, *International Affairs*, Oct. 1948, p. 567. The first mischaracterization was that one shouldn't borrow money because if everyone did there would be no money left to borrow (*HWP*, p. 711). The other mischaracterization was that if everyone committed suicide there would be nobody left to do so. Paton should have noted that Russell did not reproduce this reasoning and instead said Kant's imperative doesn't succeed against suicide—that utilitarian considerations are required.

¹³ This exchange occurred in the April 1949 issue of *International Affairs*, pp. 247–8.

¹⁴ LE ROY, *Revue philosophique de Louvain*, 1947.

Le Roy was reviewing the English edition. Gueroult, in 1954, reviewed the French translation by Hélène Kern.¹⁵ There is no criticism sandwich here. Gueroult briskly lists many remarks from the work which indicate distortions, oversimplifications or other mischaracterizations of the philosophers' work, focusing particularly on the remarks concerning modern philosophers. He too adds a list (much of it overlapping with LeRoy's) of omitted French philosophers, and ends with the very negative remark that the translation was a waste of time.¹⁶

Most of the historians, we have seen, thought Russell's overall approach to philosophy was antithetical to doing the history of philosophy. In a completely negative review, Wittgenstein's close friend Yorick Smythies had a somewhat different take.¹⁷ Smythies on the one hand wanted to say that Russell was arrogantly dismissive of the great philosophers, but on the other hand he, in a sense, recognized that Russell was not a logical empiricist since Russell held that a scientific approach could shed light on philosophical theories. Asking questions very much in Wittgenstein's style, Smythies called into question the very possibility of there being philosophical problems (or worse, philosophical theories). In the end he would probably have been even more dismissive of all these figures in the history of philosophy than Russell was.

There are two reviews which do not contain any of the criticisms found in the others. One strange review by C. E. M. Joad (in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*) is an example.¹⁸ After praising Russell as not being content to write esoteric works only for university professors, Joad discusses Russell's overall structure of setting the philosophy into its social context. But rather than criticize what Russell said about other philosophers and their times (even while giving detailed examples which had come up for criticism in other works), Joad wants to extend the analysis to the present, and in particular apply it to Russell's own logical atomism (which is presented with an emphasis on its affinities to logical positivism). In the *History*, Russell had

¹⁵ GUEROUT, *Revue philosophique et de France et de l'étranger*, 1954.

¹⁶ Gueroult was not always so dismissive of Russell. In his book, *Leibniz: dynamique et métaphysique*, he criticized some of Russell's views on Leibniz, but it is clear he takes them very seriously.

¹⁷ SMYTHIES, *The Changing World*, summer 1947.

¹⁸ JOAD, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 1946–47.

presented many philosophical positions, such as those of Plotinus's mysticism and the German philosophers' idealism, as a kind of escapism; Joad sees logical atomism, with its constructions and emphasis on conventions, also as a kind of "metaphysical escapism" from the world of hard facts. "The world of Logical Analysis seems to perform for the twentieth century a service equivalent to that of Plotinus's Other World, with the difference that nobody supposes the logical analysts' world to be either good, true, or beautiful" (Joad, p. 97).

Finally, Popper's brief remarks, which were apparently given in a radio broadcast from Austria in January 1947,¹⁹ consist only of praise. Popper praises Russell for forthrightly giving his biased opinions and not pretending to be objective:

... other books seek earnestly to be objective, but they never achieve it. What they achieve is only that they seem to be objective, and with that give a false impression to the reader. Russell does not attempt to be objective. He permits himself *to state his opinion* simply and openly—and he makes it quite clear that this is *his personal opinion*. ... (Popper, p. 20)

One might wonder at this as praise from Russell's own point of view, but it seems that what Popper says he likes most about Russell was that "he was the first philosopher since Kant who ventured to alter his opinion, openly and without beating further about the bush. The only philosopher who *did not pose as infallible*, but who openly admitted that he could *err* ..." (*ibid.*, p. 21). So here we have Popper praising Russell for recognizing the superiority of Popper's programme.

Many of the reviewers followed Berlin with praise for Russell's style and the freshness of his approach to the subject, but on the whole the reviews were solidly negative. The reviewers were aware that this was not intended to be a scholarly work. Their complaint was not the lightness, but the distortions as well as finally not following the plan to set the philosophical works in the cultural settings in the way promised. I mentioned at the outset the contrast between the two styles of the history of philosophy Russell had set out in *The Philosophy of Leibniz*. Most of these critics were happy with the second way of doing the history of philosophy. It is just they didn't think Russell actually succeeded in that programme. Most of the reviewers were historians

¹⁹ POPPER, "Broadcast Review of *History of Western Philosophy* (1947)".

of philosophy and somewhat sceptical of Russell's own attitude towards philosophy. Popper, of course, was an exception to this. Many took the view that Russell's logical atomism was no different from a positivism which would eliminate the concerns of most philosophers of the past as meaningless confusions. Had they read his most recent philosophical work of the time, *An Inquiry into Meaning and Truth*, they would have realized there was a fairly large gap between Russell's views and those of the positivists.²⁰

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²⁰ An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 2019 meeting of the Bertrand Russell Society at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst.