

Russell's History of Philosophy

Review of Bertrand Russell, *A History of Western Philosophy*, *Mind* 56 (1947), 151–66

The purpose of this long and remarkable book is, Lord Russell tells us, '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'.¹ He considers that this purpose demands a fuller account of general history than is generally given by historians of philosophy. The canvas is vast and the design is correspondingly ambitious. The work is divided into three main sections: the first deals with ancient, the second with Catholic, the third with modern philosophy. It is not, and does not claim to be, a work of original historical or philosophical scholarship, nor is it intended as a treatise for philosophers, exposing the inadequacies of tradition and systematically applying new methods to old problems. It is a popular work, designed for the general reader, and since it is written in clear and elegant and vigorous prose, with that peculiar combination of moral conviction and inexhaustible intellectual fertility which in some measure characterises all, even the most ephemeral, of Russell's writings, the general reader may be accounted fortunate.

The book is not, as was said above, intended for the professional philosopher, and it may therefore seem captious and irrelevant to complain that he would often find it loose in texture and unsystematic, full of omissions and tantalising evasions, a rich and chaotic amalgam of unfinished beginnings, dogmatic assertions unsupported by argument, and again of argument abandoned precisely where he might well expect conclusions of an arresting and crucial kind to emerge; all this interspersed with *obiter dicta*, often of memorable brilliance and insight, but usually left to

¹ Bertrand Russell, *A History of Western Philosophy* (New York, 1945), Preface, ix.

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find for themselves in an ocean of historical or sociological description; and that for these reasons it is scarcely likely to be of great help to him in his own thinking.

Nor does it wholly fulfil its undertaking from the point of view of even the semi-philosophical reader or sophisticated layman: a background of historical facts is indeed provided, but the selection of such facts sometimes seems arbitrary; nor are they woven into the narrative sufficiently closely to perform the explanatory function for which ostensibly they are introduced. 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, and by the time we get to the nineteenth century tends to peter out altogether, and we are left to face philosophical views, e.g. those of Bergson, or of the logical analysts, virtually without the benefit of social or historical background.

But it may well be that to press objections such as these is to misconceive the nature and point of this work. It is not, nor does it claim to be, a systematic history of Western thought. Its principal value and interest – the reason for which it will, in the main, be read – resides in the light which it casts upon the views of its author. For by this time few would wish to deny that Russell's work has probably had a greater general influence upon philosophy in our day than that of any other living writer. His successes and his failures have radically altered the content and direction of European (and American) philosophy, both by attraction and repulsion, and he shares with the great classical philosophers the cardinal property of rendering obsolete and archaic types of reasoning and attitudes of mind which in his youth had been fashionable and influential, of converting apparent paradoxes into well-established platitudes, of inventing new methods which have transformed the history of thought. Russell's reputation as a great innovator in logic is sufficiently secure; his technical writings are sufficiently important to entitle any work by him to the attention of philosophers in its own right; and although the book under review is intended as a popular exposition, even the table talk of so eminent a thinker is of value. He might indeed

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have attempted a systematic history of philosophy on the German or French model; or he might have selected a group of specific topics and treated these historically, examining their genesis and fate at the hands of various thinkers of the past; or he might have written a general account of certain selected theories or 'attitudes', and examined these historically and critically, stating his own reasoned conclusions. But he has chosen to do none of these things. He has preferred a leisurely progress from one philosopher to another, from one period to the next, sometimes merely telling the story, sometimes, when his eye is caught by something which particularly attracts or repels him, stopping to give the reader some of his reasons for accepting or rejecting a particular thesis or proposition. Sometimes he does this lightly and casually, not to say superficially, sometimes with a sharpness and insight reminiscent of his best work. Unless one reads the book steadily and reads it whole – and it is well over 900 pages long² – one can never tell when a green oasis of criticism and discussion may not suddenly reward the reader a trifle wearied after some long and arid stretch. It is difficult to give an adequate description of so long a journey in the space at my disposal. Nevertheless I shall do my best to offer some guidance to the prospective professional reader.

The book starts with a brief general sketch of the interplay of political and social history and philosophical speculation. Philosophy is described as a kind of no man's land between, on the one hand, dogmatic certainty, and on the other the intellectual and moral paralysis which comes from excessive scepticism. Philosophy is distinguished into (*a*) technical argument the validity of which is largely unaffected by social circumstances – thus the ontological argument, for example, or the problem of universals can, it is urged, be discussed without reference to the character and circumstances of the philosophers who have treated these topics – and (*b*) philosophy in the sense in which it conveys a general attitude towards the world; it is only concerning (*b*) that, in the ultimate analysis, no rational argument is possible, and it is mainly in this sense that philosophy is so largely conditioned by character and environment.

² [In the first (US) edition, cited in the previous note, the main text of the book runs to 835 pages. In the UK edition, published a year later, this figure is 916 pages.]

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After a sketch of primitive civilisations, interspersed, with illuminating observations on the part played by 'forethought' and 'custom' as curbs to barbarian spontaneity, we come to the Greeks. The account begins with Orphism, the Presocratics, and an account of Greek culture during the classical period. The treatment of the Ionians, which is exceptionally vivid, seems mainly to be based on Burnet, but something is said about the economic 'centralism' of Miletus and the play of social influences on abstract speculation. Pythagoras is singled out as the author of the fatal union of mysticism and mathematics which is held responsible for many of the cardinal errors embodied in traditional metaphysics and theology. 'The influence of mathematics on philosophy', Russell observes, 'has been both profound and unfortunate.'³ Unfortunate because it has led to the search for a system in the external world – a 'structure of the facts' as certain and intelligible as the abstract systems of geometry and arithmetic – to the false ideal of a quasi-mathematical universal criterion, unattainable because inapplicable, by which valid empirical methods of investigation were all too long judged and misjudged. Interesting remarks follow on theology as a blend of supernaturalism and mathematics, derived from the notion of ideal numbers in the mind of God. The familiar distinction traditionally drawn between superior or intellectual and inferior or sensible knowledge, which Russell regards as one of the major disasters of philosophy, is traced through Plato, the Roman Church, the rationalists of the seventeenth century, and Kant. There is elegant analogy between the flux of Heraclitus, twentieth-century physics, which dispenses with metaphysical substance, and the Bergsonian Continuum. But there are also several original and useful excursions into what he considers to be true and what false in the often cryptic remarks of various Presocratics. Thus Parmenides presents logical puzzles which Russell very felicitously uses as an occasion for brief remarks on his own doctrines, e.g., on the theory of descriptions and on the denotation of names. The discussion of Parmenides is perhaps one of the best illustrations of the advantages and limitations of the method which the author employs throughout this work. In spite of promising to try to see the world as far as possible through the eyes of any given thinker whose views he chooses for discussion – if only in order to throw

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light on how the thinker in question could have come to hold the more peculiar views attributed to him – Russell does nothing of the kind. He discusses the views of, e.g., Parmenides with the particular freshness and imagination which comes from speaking of him almost as if he were a semi-contemporary or a vaguely timeless thinker. This may shock the historically minded, but here, at any rate, it illuminates the topics discussed far more successfully than faithful 'historicism' is apt to do.

Russell is situated at the exact opposite pole to, say, the late Professor Collingwood, who came near to saying that truth and falsehood – our notions of them – were irrelevant criteria to apply to thinkers of the past. Our task was rather to try by a great imaginative effort to see their problems as they saw them, remembering always that their solutions could not *ex hypothesi* answer the questions of our own time, or consequently be true or false, or indeed possess clear meaning, in terms of these latter. This view, if pushed to its logical extreme, is self-stultifying, since it would entail a total inability on our part to recognise the existence for past ages and thinkers, let alone understand, or examine, the validity or truth, of answers or problems formulated in languages belonging to experiences radically different and, as it were, hermetically sealed off from our own. Nor, on the other hand, does Russell's approach bear any affinity to that of such German polymaths as, e.g., the late Ernst Cassirer, in whose flowing periods, filled though they are with the most scrupulous and suggestive philosophical scholarship, distinctions are softened and blurred and controversial differences charmed away, until Leibniz is almost transformed into Hegel, and Kant is at times scarcely distinguishable from Einstein. Russell is temperamentally averse from historicism of either kind. His own views and attitudes are never long in doubt; he tacitly or explicitly judges all his predecessors in terms of them, and this gives a certain unity to his treatment. Whether he deals with political thought or metaphysics, he remains a descendant – perhaps the last illustrious member of a distinguished line – of the Encyclopedists of the eighteenth century (with the closest affinities to Voltaire and Condorcet), and of the equally honourable tradition of liberal, rationalist, atheist, humanism in England. So positive an outlook, which, for all its efforts to remain fair and even sympathetic to the opposition, firmly measures the value of all views and institutions by its own

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very definite standards of truth and value, is not the ideal intellectual equipment for the historian of thought, but it does at least possess the rare and very important virtue of treating the great thinkers of the past as exceptionally intelligent persons who uttered rational propositions of sufficient intrinsic interest to be still worthy of discussion on their own merits. Thus the views of Parmenides, as treated by Plato, turn out to be a natural peg on which to hang later logical discoveries with refreshingly illuminating results.

Russell does not seem interested in a mystical theology, and his discussion of transcendentalist philosophers, in both ancient and mediaeval worlds, often flags. But when his curiosity is stimulated as, e.g., in early physics and mathematics, there is a flow of bright sparks which cast a glow upon the subject: as when he throws out a suggestive idea about the similarity of the controversy about absolute space between Aristotle and the Greek atomists on the one hand, and that between Newton and Leibniz (followed by Einstein) on the other. The all too brief discussions of this type are worth all the conscientious pages duly devoted, as the scheme of the work requires, to the social or religious or artistic history of Athens, derived from Gilbert Murray or Jane Harrison, although these are composed with much characteristic elegance and wit.

Having laid it down that he wishes to pay greater attention to historically influential views and personalities than to those which may be veridical or profound, Lord Russell devotes a chapter to the history of Sparta, because he considers that the notion of it was a persistent myth, powerful not among the Greeks alone; the picture presented by Plutarch of an idealised heroic society has had a vast and disastrous effect on European thought, and before Plutarch on the Platonic Socrates. Socrates is considered to have been fearless and impressive, but dishonest, unctuous and morally biased in argument. '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.'⁴ Plato, to whose genius Russell pays reluctant homage, is, as might be supposed, and for reasons too obvious and familiar to detain us here, the arch-fiend. After suggesting that Plato does not himself realise the full force of Thrasymachus' argument in the first book of the *Republic* because he takes the objectivity of ethical characteristics for granted, the

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author takes this as an occasion for confessing his own puzzlement about the objectivity of ethics. He treats the *Phaedo* as a typical example of the way in which acute anti-empiricism leads to a combination of mathematics and mysticism. He lingers over the *Meno* in order to refute Plato's maieutic or anamnestic theory of knowledge: all knowledge must be either empirical or logical; it is obviously absurd to expect anyone to 'recollect' empirical facts which they cannot in the ordinary sense be said to know; as for the argument about mathematical 'absolute equality' which the slave-boy is 'caused' to 'recollect', that demonstrates nothing, because such a concept cannot in any case apply to material objects or therefore in any sense be a discovery about their properties. Plato is throughout treated to a kind of running fire of refutation as perhaps the most formidable of the enemies of the true philosophy, although this is not done with anything like the thoroughness with which, e.g., Dr K. Popper has recently performed this task. No better example of this application of the anachronistic methods so harshly denounced by the late Mr Collingwood could well be imagined. We are not therefore surprised when the *Timaeus* is thought so queer that it is merely summarised, because it is plainly thought quite incapable of discussion; anything too uncompromisingly metaphysical Russell instinctively seems to avoid. On the other hand, the *Theaetetus* offers an admirable occasion for a discussion of the relation of knowledge to perception which the author puts to excellent advantage. His method consists in revealing his own views by contrast to those which particularly irritate him in Plato. Thus he discusses the problem of the perception of similarity, and replies to the ancient rationalist conundrum 'Do we see or hear the difference between a sound and a colour?' by suggesting that direct perception is not confined to the media of the traditional five (plus kinaesthetic etc.) senses, since all sensible differences are sensed directly (through, e.g., the operation of the cortex). Similarly, he treats the 'perception of existence' in this dialogue as an occasion for explaining his theory of logical constructions and the refutation of the ontological argument thereby. But this is done in so compressed and allusive a manner that despite some further exposition of this most crucial topic in the last chapter of the book the lay reader could scarcely be expected to grasp it adequately, while the professional Platonist might find some difficulty in

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recognising the applicability of the argument in the form in which it is presented. In this connection it may perhaps be asked by Russell thinks that the proposition 'My present percept exists' makes empirical sense, while 'this exists' does not; is 'this' a proper name in some sense in which 'my' is not? This, and other similar, and equally important, questions, are left by Russell in suspense precisely at the point at which they begin to be of interest to contemporary philosophers. There is, still as part of the case against Plato, an admirably clear and sharply argued discussion of numbers and the law of excluded middle which is a model of the application of modern methods to ancient arguments. As might be expected, Russell makes it very plain that his sympathies throughout lie with Democritus and the atomists, and, for that matter, with the much maligned Sophists, hostility to whom, it is suggested, was perhaps due mainly to their love of truth and their intellectual courage. After offering a tentative definition of philosophy as 'the sum-total of those inquiries that can be pursued by Plato's methods'⁵ if only as the measure of Plato's influence on subsequent philosophy, he suggests that the teleological and ethical preoccupations of Socrates and Plato, and the growth of mysticism, introspection and self-criticism characteristic of both Platonic and Aristotelian, not to mention later Greek, schools, is the first sign of defeat and decay in Greek society, of a profound and irremediable failure due to social, political and economic causes, of which a waning curiosity about the external world is always the first fatal symptom. The general portrait of Plato provided by the author is that which is now increasingly and perhaps justly coming into fashion – of the splendid, magical but wicked literary genius, the man of profound insight into life and character, of limitless artistic capacity, capable of noble eloquence, but dishonest on a vast scale, prone to suppress the truth because of ethical prejudice, the first and greatest enemy of freedom, the patron saint of all forms of totalitarianism.

The student of Russell's writings will by now hardly need to be told of the attitude adopted to Aristotle. He is called the 'Stagyrite', and is treated with the care, and accorded the position, due to an enemy second in power to Plato alone. His metaphysics is given a curiously Hegelian interpretation. The 'divine soul' or reason is spoken of in language reminiscent more of Bradley – perhaps a

⁵ 93.

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trace of Russell's early infatuation – than of the more orthodox interpreters in the Middle Ages and modern times, of whose works Russell must have a fresh if not an admiring recollection. The *Nicomachean Ethics* moves him to one of the most direct avowals of his own faith to be found in this volume. It is described as an elderly book which 'to a man of any depth of feeling cannot but be repulsive': a sentiment not felt perhaps by most students of that work, though by more than care to admit it. This outburst, taken in conjunction with Russell's warm sympathy with Spinoza and, to some degree, William James, serves to divide him in this respect from the cooler exponents of eighteenth-century rationalism with whom otherwise he has so much in common.

Consideration of Aristotle's *Ethics* leads him to an excursus on ethics in general, and he offers three criteria whereby moral philosophies in general may be tested: (1) internal logical self-consistency, which Aristotle's work is on the whole held to satisfy; (2) consistency with other, e.g. metaphysical, views of the philosopher – this test also Aristotle passes; (3) acceptability to the critical reader or to the prevailing sentiments of his society or group. It is by this Humean test that Aristotle is held to fail so utterly as a moralist. Throughout the examination of Aristotle's ethical doctrines Russell applies what turns out to be his most characteristic critical method. There is a rapid survey of a few salient points interspersed with brief discussion of points of interest, and criticisms of them in wholly modern terms, surrounded by impressionistic comments of various degrees of definiteness, relevance and suggestiveness. The whole is then rounded off by a neat, clear, slightly ironical summary in the manner of Voltaire: the *Ethics* is pronounced to be an insipid compilation and hence 'lacking in intrinsic importance' – there is, for instance, no room in Aristotle's system for serious treatment of strong emotions, or for states of possession by God or the Devil. Aristotle's contributions to the analysis of mental activity, such as his original and very important treatment of intellectual, emotional and 'practical' dispositions, are unduly passed over. Instead we find an amusing excursus on usury. Aristotle and the Church condemn it because they speak for the landowning classes – modern philosophers display no similar animus because the universities to which most of them belong 'thrive on investments'. Aristotle's logic naturally brings out the most combative instincts of the

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author. Russell provides good examples of its most notorious deficiencies, but, as so often, a valuable comparison with, e.g., Kant's treatment of analytic propositions is too 'telescoped' to be intelligible to the lay reader. As the account continues the tone grows harsher.

Aristotle's logic is represented as an unmixed disaster. His views on substance and essence are verbal confusions which have misled human thought for two thousand years. His logic is wholly false save for the analysis of the syllogism and other trivialities. Teleology is denounced as a concept long rejected by modern physical theory, but no formal argument is offered against it. Since the denial of teleology is central to the whole of Russell's thought, and the most telling arguments against it, used in the past by himself and many others, must be excessively familiar to him, this omission is an unfortunate defect of the book. The texture of the thought here, as elsewhere, presently becomes loose and meandering, and epigrams on philosophy in general begin to occur in an apparently haphazard manner, perhaps none the less welcome when they come in the middle of relatively arid historical disquisitions. Thus, for example, we are told, apropos of Aristotle, that all philosophers really conceive a basically simple picture of the world, in terms of which they say what they have to say, and their theories are then buttressed against attack with sophisticated refutations of actual and possible refutations attempted by their opponents; but these elaborate defence works upon which intellectual reputations often depend cannot prove anything positive.

There follows a rapid sketch of Stoics, Epicureans, Sceptics and Cynics. Although Russell complains of Aristotle's lack of emotional imagination, he may himself perhaps be charged with an equally complete psychological blindness to the quality of the 'deontological' attitude common to Jews, Stoics and Christians, to Chrysippus, Calvin and Kant, with its emphasis on the pursuit of the right for its own sake, of the unconditional nature of duty, of virtue as its own reward. This, one of the deepest of all Western modes of feeling, is for him merely crabbed puritanism. He looks on Stoicism as in part springing from a sense of frustration and 'sour grapes' which surrounds the thought that although we cannot always be happy, we can at any rate always be good; therefore if we are good perhaps it will not matter so greatly about

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happiness. This is indeed unhistorical rationalism with a vengeance. No wonder Russell's critics complain of a lack of moral insight on his part.

Russell takes little notice of Hellenistic logic: he notes the invention by it of disjunction, but not of material implication. Since the Romans according to Russell produced no philosophers at all, they too get very short shrift, but not as short as Byzantium. Plotinus, on the other hand, appeals to Russell, though his reasons for liking him are somewhat nebulous. Pure mysticism, not adulterated with metaphysical – i.e. pseudo-philosophical – argument appeals to him as an intense form of genuine personal experience.

In the second book Russell comes manfully to grips with the, to him, profoundly repugnant Middle Ages. Conscientiously and with a sincere attempt to give each man his due, he gives an account of popes and emperors, saints and heresiarchs, the fathers and doctors of the Church, and attempts to account for their strange beliefs and stranger disagreements. It is a painstaking but unsympathetic account such as Helvétius, or Condorcet, or perhaps in a later age Heine, might have given, and almost too obviously influenced by Gibbon; the attitude of a highly civilised, detached, ironical observer, roaming up and down dark, unfamiliar, desperately twisted mazes of a depressingly dark, cold and windowless basilica, lighting up now this, now that dark corner with the temperate, even, thin flame of his rationalist lamp; the last sane, civilised, reasonable voice of declining liberal culture, conspicuously not at home in a world of fanatical faith and barbarous superstition. Every belief and attitude is required to justify itself before the bar of reason: the critical intelligence is not to be taken in by systems built on, and held fast by, faith or revealed mysteries. It is an approach to the Middle Ages which writers influenced by the 'historicist' categories of Saint-Simon and Hegel have long made unfamiliar; its consistency, candour and intellectual probity make it particularly welcome today; but it is capable of oversimplifying to a prodigious degree.

With Aquinas Russell reaches what is perhaps his nadir. He gives a dry catalogue of Thomist views, refutes a casual selection of points, and scarcely troubles to conceal a hostility too strong for argument. The account is too mechanical and lifeless to confute believers or provide effective weapons for their opponents. It

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would surely have been more useful if Russell had averted his gaze from Aquinas himself and had chosen to outline his specific arguments against the central doctrines of Thomism. Or alternatively if, faithful to his promise, he had tried to paint a picture of the intellectual climate in which a student of philosophy in the thirteenth century found himself, and had emphasised the most significant and interesting differences between it and, let us say, our own time. He does neither of these things, and prefers to follow Gibbon. Like Gibbon he dismisses Byzantium (the culture of which was not literary) as having given nothing to the world but a style in art, and Justinian's code. But, for better or for worse, it created an Eastern European civilisation, spiritual as well as material, the impact of which (and historical influence is, as we are told, the criterion of selection) in its Russian form we feel only too strongly today. On this there is here not a word. Instead, in the midst of various historico-theological obscurities, we suddenly come out of the medieval wood with an illuminating fragment on the principle of individuation. The occasion is the philosophy of Duns Scotus, but the discussion is interesting in itself. On the other hand, William of Ockham, on the plea that he has been over-modernised by others, and was really a fairly orthodox Peripatetic, is not given the due appropriate to a direct ancestor of modern nominalism; nor, for that matter, is Sextus Empiricus. Nominalism is, after all, of all medieval doctrines, the liveliest issue in our day, and no one is more directly responsible for this than Russell himself; yet little honour is done by him to the boldest of its early champions.

The rise of the Renaissance is scarcely 'explained'. It bursts in suddenly as a great flood of light, very much as Macaulay must have seen it, the beginning of the inevitable victory of the forces of light over those of darkness. The historical background is not too vividly or carefully selected, nor is there much effort to trace intellectual development. The only theme consistently reiterated is the continued suppression of free opinion and penalisation of individual thinkers for endangering orthodoxy or the position of some 'vested interest' (with modern and highly relevant analogies from the United States). The beginning of the end of this phase, i.e. the Quattrocento, is welcomed with an enthusiasm which directly corresponds to relief from the strain of trying to do justice to the unintelligible and repellent Middle Ages. There is an

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interesting and very vivid account of the views of Machiavelli, whose attitude to Caesar Borgia is however, given what seems a strangely misleading twist. Machiavelli's emphasis of the need for political unification and organisation as such – the respect in which he is an early precursor of, e.g., Hegel, Lassalle, Marx, Lenin etc. – is not accorded its due. For a history of philosophy there is perhaps here too little attempt to trace the complicated pattern of influences. But, on the other hand, there is one vast compensating advantage, namely the absence of those anachronistic attributions with which modern writers occasionally excite and mislead their readers; and just as Plato is mercifully nowhere described as an 'organic' political philosopher, so the philosophers of the Renaissance and of later periods, although forced to reply to modern questions and treated to much modern criticism, are not made to talk in quasi-modern terms, or anticipate Victorian thought in so felicitous and surprisingly accurate a fashion.

Russell's general treatment of the seventeenth century is valuable on the change of intellectual temper precisely because he does not exaggerate it. Thus the medieval residues in Kepler and his contemporaries are recognised and allowed for. There are fleeting references to the vast differences recently made to Newtonian physics by quantum mechanics and the theory of relativity, e.g. with regard to conceptions of time and space. This merely serves to tantalise the reader who looks to precisely such scientifically minded (and intelligible) authors as Russell to explain precisely such developments as these, so misleadingly interpreted by metaphysically or theologically minded popular scientists or philosophers. But nothing is treated at length – the author's breath seems curiously short. His observations seem to grow briefer as they become more interesting. One of the most terse occurs in Russell's reply to Burt's thesis that seventeenth-century scientists harboured ideas as prejudiced and fanciful as any in the Middle Ages, but that these were merely more fruitful as hypotheses, a matter as it were of luck and not of superior insight: Russell's point is that the difference between science and dogmatism resides merely in the fact that the former but not the latter is tentative and content to abide by empirical tests, and not in the origins of its ideas: that an initial hypothesis may spring forth in as queer and irrational a fashion as it pleases; its importance rests on its capacity

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to relate experiences, no matter how queer its psychological origins may turn out to be.

There is an interesting and full account of Hobbes, who is criticised for disregarding the war between economic classes as well as the need of international no less than of national security. As for the rationalist philosophers, they are treated with greater sympathy and understanding than the empiricists, possibly because Russell, although he accepts the premisses of the later, so far as his own intellectual processes are concerned, has a greater kinship with the formal architecture of such systems as that of Descartes and Leibniz than with the disconnected introspective description of Locke and Berkeley. He admires Spinoza, and expresses deep respect for his ethical views, which, oddly enough, he considers to be lacking in passion. Spinoza belongs to the martyrs and the minorities – ‘a good man’, says Russell with much feeling, ‘hence accused of immorality’.⁶ The exposition of his system, although it is scarcely likely to satisfy Spinozists, is a scrupulous and in places moving attempt to reconstruct the vision of man and the universe provided by rationalism at its best and purest. On Leibniz Russell is today probably the greatest living authority, and it is therefore a pity, from the point of view of the common reader with an inclination towards metaphysics, that Russell should have devoted so little space to the consideration of the ontological argument, which he finds best expressed by Leibniz, and upon the refutation of which the whole of modern anti-metaphysical empiricism so securely rests; nor is the treatment of the argument from design wholly adequate. The account of Locke, the degree and area of whose influence are recognised, is correspondingly extensive but somewhat inconclusive. The section devoted to Locke’s political doctrines is easily the best. Berkeley’s views, oddly enough, are none too clearly described. Here again Russell’s various theories make appearances too brief to be profitable. The student of modern philosophy will recognise arguments in favour of realism, neutral monism, a non-phenomenalist analysis of the entities of physics, *universalia in rebus*, etc., but far too condensed to be intelligible to the layman, and too lightly sketched for the professional philosopher. Berkeley’s rejection of ‘matter’ is approved of, but the familiar argument from illusion e.g., the

⁶ 578? [not a verbatim quote?]

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different sensations of the cold and warm hands in water of the same temperature, is described as unconvincing. The water may be colder than my left hand and warmer than my right, but this does not prove that it has not such qualities in its own right (the argument is, I take it, that Berkeley's argument commits the same fallacy as that of Plato, who did not see how a given length could be a half and a double at the same time). While Russell's argument may be valid enough in itself, the force of the argument from illusion, once raised, deserved more elaborate and thorough discussion; here it is inconclusively abandoned in mid air.

Berkeley's nominalism is held to fail because even the use of symbols presupposes 'real' universals in some sense, e.g. the given mark on paper only performs its function as a symbol in so far as it is a token of a type (although Russell does not use this terminology). This is a version of a view which Russell has long held and to which he has returned in his recent writings, and seems to rest on a view which dates from Plato, that to be aware of sensible similarities is, even at its most primitive level, an act not of mere sensing but of knowing, i.e. of comparison involving the conscious classification of particulars under universals which cannot therefore themselves, without a vicious regress, be reduced to particular – sense-perceived – similarities. This seems to me to be a scholastic and psychologically fallacious account of how recognition of similarities occurs, a curious survival of a priori reasoning about matters of fact. But this is not the place in which to argue this point. In any case, Russell could well have sacrificed much of the dead philosophical wood in his work to develop his original ideas on this crucial issue. As for phenomenalism, it is dismissed as being 'odd'. Too little is said about the problem of material objects in the absence of observers, and we emerge with something like an implied and undefended theory of unsensed *sensibilia* (or *sensa*). There are some interesting and very timely remarks on the confusion of empirical and logical propositions by Berkeley, although it is not wholly clear that Russell is entirely innocent of this himself.

Hume, if only in virtue of his cardinal importance in the genesis of the author's own ideas, deserves less cavalier treatment. Russell takes what seems to me far too pessimistic a view about Hume's scepticism as incompatible with the affirmation of the rationality of induction. But then there is no effort to work out what on

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Hume's view the meaning of the terms 'rational' and 'irrational' must be. In view of the fact that valuable original work on this very topic has been done by Russell's own most gifted disciples, e.g. Ramsey and Nicod, it is strange to find no reference to contemporary doctrine on this subject. A history of philosophy is perhaps no place for an extensive analysis of the Humean or indeed any other theory of induction, but it is surely misleading to suggest that Hume's scepticism makes scientific induction wholly irrational, with its implication that Russell thinks that there is some recognised sense of the term 'rational' in which induction could be shown to be rational, although Hume's views mistakenly lead to the opposite conclusion; this seems to be based on the view (though no reason is advanced for it) that if 'rational' is defined in terms of such essentially Humean concepts as 'regularity' or 'reliability', as later empiricists have tried to do, this will not satisfy the requirements of induction. The 'status' of induction, rational inference, etc. may indeed be in great need of clarification, but Russell's whole contribution to philosophy would be seriously undermined if, as he here implies, Nicod's or Ramsey's views of induction are vicious in principle. A further gap in Russell's treatment of Hume is his omission of that philosopher's view of memory, upon which also his own work has drawn so fruitfully. This is scarcely compensated for by his timely, and much merited, exposure of the illicit manner in which Hume, having expelled cause and necessity from the external world, seems to re-introduce it into his account of psychology.

Kant is treated in greater detail, and once more Russell follows his preferred and somewhat Napoleonic method of concentrating his fire against the position on which he regards the enemy as strongest, leaving the rest to collapse and vanish of itself. In this case the doctrines of space and time are selected as the principal target, and after complaining that Kant gives no adequate explanation to account for the particular order or characteristics in time and space of particular material objects (which Kant might have regarded as a metaphysical, i.e., in some sense illegitimate question), Russell seems to assume that in Kant's system space and time must either be subjective, i.e. in some sense be empirically given, or, if not, that they must in some sense derive from, or belong to, things in themselves. This does not so much refute as ignore the central doctrine of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, according

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to which material objects (in space and time) are neither things in themselves (which according to Russell in the end would amount to a metaphysical transcendentalism of a Neoplatonist type), nor yet a set of (or logical constructions out of) sense data, at any rate not in the ordinary phenomenalist sense. How exactly the 'categories of the understanding' or the 'forms of intuition' 'presupposed by' objects are to be described is notoriously obscure, nor does the argument of the First Analogy (not touched on by Russell) make this at all clear, but no Kantian, however free from any taint of realism, could fail to observe that Russell's criticism of his master starts from the unproven and undiscussed assumption that the only alternatives to Berkeleyan phenomenism or 'verificationism' (of however 'weak' a variety) are either some sort of direct realism (as in Reid), or else a theory which assumes the possibility of cognition of things in themselves, as Leibniz or Wolff thought, i.e. precisely in the sense in which Kant thought he had disproved all three possibilities. Kant certainly neither infers the entities of e.g. physics inductively, nor 'logically constructs' them, nor is sensibly acquainted with them or any part of them, but claims to 'presuppose' or 'deduce' their natures; this may be a confused or meaningless claim, but is here left unrefuted. For whatever kind of process or system of logical relations the 'transcendental deduction' may be thought to be, it is not a formal deduction from definitions, by means of 'rules of logical syntax', nor is it inductive, nor a direct inspection of either an empirical or of a 'non-sensuous' character, which e.g. modern phenomenologists (whose existence, despite his debt to Meinong, Russell ignores) attribute to it; but is perhaps an attempt to invent or formulate a new philosophical technique. In any case, Kant's effort to describe such non-deductive quasi-entailment represents a prodigious, and far from sterile, intellectual effort, to which less than justice is done. The history of the synthetic a priori judgement and of its critics is, after all, in large part the history of the theory of knowledge in the nineteenth century, and to a lesser degree of our own day; it was Russell's own original work as much as any factor that weakened the extraordinary hold of this concept over modern Western philosophy. It is therefore to be regretted that he did not take this opportunity of setting himself in a serious fashion to clear his readers' minds on this most crucial and obsessive issue.

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The remaining anti-Kantian arguments rest on firmer ground. Russell denies that empty space is in principle imaginable; points out that the notion of parts of space is meaningless save on a view of absolute space which for reasons now familiar there is no ground for holding; and in this way touches on but never pursues many important and interesting topics, which are left in indefinite suspense. Nor is justice done to Kant's original ethical theory, which broke the ascendancy of Greek views, and the influence of which has surely been very deep and lasting. As for aesthetics, that forms no part of Russell's sphere of interest at any stage. It is doubtful whether any reader hitherto sunk in dogmatic slumber, pre- or post-Kantian, would be awakened by these rambling and inconclusive pages.

The sections devoted to eighteenth-century French enlightenment, with their brief notice of Helvétius, Condorcet etc., give little impression of this remarkable group of writers, with whom Russell has so much in common: their doctrines, as opposed to those of Rousseau, are the foundation of European liberalism, and have surely had at least as great an influence on thought and events as Byron, to whom an elegant and interesting chapter is devoted. Nor is there anything to commemorate the French Utopians, Saint-Simon, Fourier and their schools, although such notions as social and economic planning, technocracy, the economic interpretation of history, the denial of natural rights and individual liberties etc., are due to them more than to Godwin or the Utilitarians. If influence rather than intrinsic intellectual merit is the criterion of selection, it is surely arguable that Fourier, at whose shrine American and Russian social reformers knelt, was at least as influential as the minor medieval figures who litter the middle section of the great survey.

In his treatment of the later nineteenth century, Russell shows a breadth of imagination and freedom from pedantry in deciding to treat of Schopenhauer, Nietzsche and Marx in preference to the Lotzes, Sigwarts and Renouviere (and for that matter the British Idealists too), since the intrinsic interest, originality and influence of the doctrines of the former was clearly greater than that exercised by the academic philosophers of the period. Nevertheless, if Byron and Nietzsche are thought worthy of inclusion because the violent impact of Romanticism must not be overlooked, cannot this and more be said with equal justice of

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Burke or Tolstoy or Freud? No doubt any historical survey which lays no claim to being comprehensive must to some degree involve a greater or lesser degree of arbitrary selection and compression, but although this must in the end remain a matter of personal judgment, Russell's choice sometimes seems almost too light-hearted, and that even at its most interesting. As for specific figures, the treatment of Bentham and of Marx is remarkably vivid, and while leaving an account of their views to more academic histories of ideas (and to his own *Freedom and Organization*, which contains a masterly account of this topic), provides instead those sharp generalisations and shrewd and ironical aphorisms of which Russell is the greatest living master. The account of Nietzsche and of his view of life, which Russell finds unattractive, is a distinguished essay. The attack on Bergson which seems derived almost wholly (as Russell points out) from his own earlier article on the subject (in the *Monist* of 1912),⁷ is a magnificent display of the author's polemical virtuosity at its best. At the same time, although this essay may well have struck a noble blow for reason in 1912, and probably prevented much specious talk from gaining currency, the omission of Bergson's later work, e.g., *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, vitiates the account given here of Bergson's ethical views; nor is any attempt made to explain the causes, or provide the historical background, of Bergson's at one time immense influence (with which M. Julien Benda's lethal essay, *Sur le succès du Bergsonisme*, has dealt so faithfully).

William James is naturally accorded more sympathetic treatment. 'Radical empiricism' is in general favoured, although reasons are given for rejecting (1) the doctrine that 'experience' is inseparable from, or identical with, 'the stuff' of which everything is made; (2) the pragmatist interpretation of what is meant by believing propositions of ethics and religion, which is ruled out as substituting a 'psychologism' which as an analysis of such notions is not satisfactory, i.e. is not an adequate account of what those who use ethical or religious terms normally wish to convey; and (3) the pragmatist definition of truth which is condemned as involving a vicious infinite regress, since (if I have grasped Russell's argument correctly) if 'X is true' is equivalent to 'belief in X is

⁷ 'The Philosophy of Bergson', *Monist* 22 (1912), 321–47.

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good (for me)', this will hold only if my belief that X is good (for me) is correct, i.e. true.

Dr Dewey's position is described with courtesy and fairness, although full justice is not perhaps done to the doctrine of instrumentalism. Russell's own later doctrines and those of his followers in the fields of philosophy proper (i.e. logical positivism), of 'semantics', and of mathematical logic are treated inadequately – no reader of this book could possibly discover from it how great was the part played by Russell himself in the discovery and dissemination of these new and revolutionary doctrines, nor of the profound effect which his disciples, by modifying or attacking his doctrines with the very weapons which he was among the first to provide in their modern form, have had, and continue to have, in many fields of knowledge besides that of technical philosophy.

To summarise this already over-lengthy notice: this work possesses outstanding merits; it is throughout written in the beautiful and luminous prose of which Russell is a great master; the exposition and the argument are not merely classically clear but scrupulously honest throughout. Important problems are sometimes omitted, or mentioned only to be passed by, but they are never obscured or blurred, never provided with the appearance of solutions which both author and reader feel not to be answers to any genuine question. The author's bias is open and avowed, deriving as it does from liberal rationalism, faith in the ability of the intellect to solve all theoretical problems, and of rational compromise to compose all practical difficulties so far as this is humanly possible – a view for which he has stood, and indeed fought, all his life. Russell shows a deeper abhorrence of obscurantism and tyranny, particularly that exercised by clerical bodies and individuals, than of any other human attitude, and his book among other things tends to emphasise how few and far between are the lucid intervals during which reason is allowed to function freely, and how fruitful it is, and how beneficent its works can be, when it is freed from fetters. Russell's own intellectual achievement is so remarkable that future historians of thought will in due course begin to apply to his thought and personality all those canons of scrupulous historical and philosophical scholarship to which the most eminent among his predecessors have been submitted. This book provides a rich source of evidence for his attitudes towards the philosophical ideas of others, and in

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this, as well as in the dry light and unflagging intellectual stimulus which the common reader may obtain from it, its value and its interest reside.

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