RUSSELL AND CRITICAL THINKING

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In 1910 John Dewey published a book entitled *How We Think* in which he distinguished a type of thinking which he called "reflective thought", characterized as "*active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it, and the further conclusions to which it tends.*"[1] Dewey proposed that the education of children develop the habit of this kind of thinking, which he associated with the scientific method. His construct has become a widely recognized educational ideal, under the label "critical thinking". An ideal "critical thinker" is characterized not only by certain skills but also by dispositions to use the skills appropriately; see for example the characterizations in Ennis and Facione.[2]

In a paper presented at the Twentieth World Congress of Philosophy,[3] William Hare pointed out that, although Russell does not use the term "critical thinking",[4] this ideal is central to Russell's philosophy. Hare extracted from Russell's social, political and educational writings a rich conception of critical thinking, which includes not only skills and dispositions but also attitudes. Among the skills required for what Russell called "judicial habits of thought" (*PfM*, p. 131) are the *abilities* to form an opinion for oneself, to find an impartial solution, and to identify and question assumptions.[5] Among the constitutive

[1] John Dewey, *How We Think* (Boston, New York and Chicago: D. C. Heath, 1910), p. 6; italics in original.

[2] Robert H. Ennis, "Critical Thinking: a Streamlined Conception", *Teaching Philosophy*, 14 (1991): 5–24; Peter A. Facione, *Critical Thinking: a Statement of Expert Consensus for Purposes of Educational Assessment and Instruction* (research findings and recommendations prepared for the Committee on Pre-College Philosophy of the American Philosophical Association; *ERIC* document ED–315423).

[3] William Hare, "Bertrand Russell on Critical Thinking", *Proceedings of the Twentieth World Congress of Philosophy*, http://www.bu.edu/wcp/Papers/Educ/EducHare.htm [visited 16 December 2002]. Also published in the *Journal of Thought*, 36 (2001): 7–16.

[4] Nor is Dewey's book in Russell's personal library in BRA, McMaster University.

[5] Hare, *op. cit.*

dispositions are the *habits* of impartial inquiry, of weighing evidence, of attempting to see things truly, and of living from one's own centre (Hare, *ibid.*), and a *readiness* to act in various ways: to admit new evidence against previous beliefs, to discard hypotheses which have proved inadequate, to adapt oneself to the facts of the world (*ibid.*). Russell further identified a *critical attitude*, which includes a realization of human fallibility, open-mindedness, a refusal to think that our own desires and wishes provide a key to understanding the world, and a tentativeness which proportions one's confidence in one's beliefs to the evidence warranting them. In his World Congress paper, Hare argued that Russell's conception of critical thinking anticipates many insights in the recent literature on critical thinking and avoids many objections which have been raised against recent accounts of critical thinking. In particular, Russell's emphasis on judgment embodies the insight that critical thinking cannot be reduced to a formula which can be routinely applied. Russell urges that critical thinking must include critical thinking about our own attempts at criticism, and that it should be constructive rather than destructive. Russell is well aware of the fallibility of rationality. Further, Russell does not advocate complete suspension of judgment or complete detachment.

Subsequently, Hare invited a number of Russell specialists to contribute to a special issue of the journal *Inquiry* devoted to Bertrand Russell and critical thinking. Besides an introduction by Hare, a caricature of Russell by Antony Hare and an abridged version of Russell's essay "A Philosophy for Our Time" (1953; *Papers* 11), the issue includes essays by Paul Hager, A. D. Irvine, Howard Woodhouse, Ian Winchester, Sheryle Bergmann Drewe and Nicholas Griffin.

In "Russell's Conception of Critical Thinking: Its Scope and Limits", Hager points out that Russell himself did not regard the complex of skills, dispositions and attitudes identified by Hare as a comprehensive elixir for all situations. Russell's list of ten commandments for the conduct of life[6] includes much else. So does his philosophical method, as Hager analyses it.[7] Similarly, scientific method as Russell understood it requires skills and dispositions for designing, carrying out and interpreting experiments which are more specific than those which constitute critical thinking. And Russell's brief description of creative thinking[8] points to a skill strategy which goes beyond the critical thinking complex.

[6] "My Ten Commandments", *Everyman*, 3, no. 62 (3 April 1930): 291, 296.

[7] Paul Hager, *Continuity and Change in the Development of Russell's Philosophy* (London: Kluwer, 1994).

[8] Russell answered a questionnaire on creative thinking in E. D. Hutchinson, *How to Think Creatively* (New York, Nashville: Abingdon-Cokesbury P., 1949), pp. 110–12. Excerpted in B&R, 3: 487–8.

Irvine, in "Russell on Indoctrination", explains how Russell reconciled the fact that education must instill beliefs with his opposition to indoctrination. The solution is that the educator must propound beliefs for acceptance within what Russell called a liberal or scientific outlook: one which proportions beliefs to the strength of the evidence for them. A key part of education is thus to inculcate such intellectual habits as curiosity, observation, belief in the possibility of knowledge, patience, open-mindedness and even courage. Russell argues in many places that knowledge advances only through the toleration of alternative points of view, a position which echoes that of Milton, Locke and John Stuart Mill. The critical attitude which Russell recommends is compatible with holding beliefs, but people with this attitude hold them tentatively, in proportion to the evidence for them, and are always willing to consider new evidence and to subject their beliefs to the standards of reason.

Woodhouse's "In Praise of Idleness: Bertrand Russell's Critical Thinking about the Global Market" elicits from Russell's collection of essays *In Praise of Idleness* (1935) a critique of the contemporary global market ideology similar to that of the Canadian philosopher John McMurtry.[9] In these essays Russell celebrated the contemplative habit of mind which values knowledge for the immediate enjoyment it brings, as opposed to an exclusively instrumental view of knowledge as serving goals of efficiency and money-making. He advocated a reduction of the work week with no loss of pay, as a means to allow all people to enjoy the leisure activity of acquiring useless knowledge. A corollary of this goal is an education of all children in "fearless freedom" (*OE*, p. 248) which would enable them to question all knowledge claims critically.

In "Russell's Practice of Science vs. His Picture of Science and Its Place in Liberal Education", Winchester argues that Russell's practice of scientific method was much more interesting and original than his rather derivative description of it as an activity of accumulating observations and inferring general laws from them. Russell's own practice, for example in his work *The Foundations of Geometry* (1897) and his classic paper "On Denoting" (1905; *Papers* 4), was to analyse the work of his predecessors in depth so as to bring out its unsuspected presuppositions, and then to replace those presuppositions with ones that seemed to be better. Winchester notes that the same method was used by Einstein in developing his special theory of relativity. The implication for education is that knowledge of the history of science is much more important for the development of a scientific outlook than Russell acknowledged. This implication can be questioned, however, on the ground that the disciplines of

[9] John McMurtry, *Unequal Freedoms: the Global Market as an Ethical System* (Toronto: Garamond P., 1998).

geometry, logic and theoretical physics in which the method of identifying presuppositions and altering them proved so fruitful are sciences of a different sort than such disciplines as organic chemistry, animal ethology and volcanology, where careful empirical observation under controlled conditions is very central.

Drewe, in "Russell in Context", points out that what Russell called "the critical outlook" corresponds in many respects to current conceptions of critical thinking. The skills and dispositions extracted by Hare from Russell's writings, and listed above, overlap extensively with the skills and dispositions of a critical thinker identified by Ennis. Russell's advocacy of a habit of impersonal thinking which enables one to view the belief of oneself and one's groups with detachment corresponds to the advocacy by noted critical thinking theorist Richard Paul of what he calls "strong sense" critical thinking, i.e. critical thinking which is not egocentric or sociocentric.[10] Russell's recognition of the need for judgment sensitive to the details of a particular case corresponds to the emphasis by Matthew Lipman on the sensitivity of critical thinking to context.[11] Russell's inclusion in the liberal or scientific outlook of both a component of assessing reasons and a contemplative habit of mind parallels Harvey Siegel's characterization of a critical thinker as someone who is able to assess reasons and has a critical spirit.[12] Russell's recognition, pointed out in Hager's contribution, that one needs specific knowledge as well as general skills and dispositions corresponds to the emphasis by John McPeck on the subject-specificity of critical thinking[13]; this correspondence, however, is rather slight, since Russell did not share McPeck's denial that there are general critical thinking skills, dispositions and attitudes, and did not reduce the "critical outlook" to the epistemology of the disciplines.

In a brief final note, "Russell at McMaster University", Griffin describes the Russell Archives at McMaster University and the work of the Bertrand Russell Research Centre.

There is no evidence that Russell's writings had a significant influence on contemporary work in the philosophy of education on the conceptualization of critical thinking, or conversely that early work on this conceptualization influenced Russell's thinking. But there is certainly a striking overlap of views about education, well brought out by Hare in his 1998 paper and by the contributors to this special issue of *Inquiry*.

[10] Richard Paul, *Critical Thinking: What Every Person Needs to Survive in a Rapidly Changing World* (Santa Rosa, Calif.: Foundation for Critical Thinking, 1993).

[11] Matthew Lipman, *Thinking in Education* (Cambridge: Cambridge U. P., 1991).

[12] Harvey Siegel, *Educating Reason: Rationality, Critical Thinking, and Education* (New York: Routledge, 1988).

[13] John McPeck, *Critical Thinking and Education* (New York: St. Martin's P., 1981).