

ADDRESS DELIVERED AT THE UNIVERSITY OF COPENHAGEN ON THE OCCASION OF THE AWARD OF THE SONNING PRIZE TO BERTRAND RUSSELL, 19 APRIL 1960

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[In 1960 Bertrand and Edith Russell went to Copenhagen for his award of the Sonning Prize on 19 April. They made a three-day trip of it. On the first day they enjoyed a drive around Copenhagen with Vice-Chancellor Carl Iversen as their guide. Next day was the ceremony at the University of Copenhagen. They departed on the 20th. By all accounts the trip was a welcome break from Russell's usual round of speaking, writing and meeting on nuclear disarmament. The prize helped, too, for it was a monetary one: 100,000 kroner, of which Russell donated five percent, or £250, through Mrs. Niels Bohr, to the Anne Frank Committee in Denmark's fund for refugee children in Israel. Soon after the Russells' return occurred the U-2 incident, and then the failure of the Paris Summit on 16 May. With the deterioration in international relations their lives became more hectic.]

Russell kept two speeches in his honour from the event: the speech introducing him at the prize-giving ceremony, and the vice-chancellor's shorter speech in presenting the award. Russell referred to the latter as "very delightful" and told Iversen that he and Edith "looked forward to reading these at leisure". They are kept with the Sonningprisen award bound in red leather along with related photographs.

*Russell was only the second recipient of the Sonning Prize. He followed Albert Schweitzer, with Niels Bohr succeeding Russell in 1961. The prize is awarded to a Dane or foreigner who has "accomplished meritorious work for the advancement of European civilization". Russell was asked to give a talk and attend a dinner hosted by the Danish Minister of Education. Russell readily agreed to both (but was anxious not to wear either tails or a dinner jacket at the dinner). He also turned down several other invitations to speak, including to students, but he did request that students be able to attend the ceremony. He was asked to reflect on the present state of European civilization for his talk. He titled it "Old and Young Cultures" (printed in *Fact and Fiction*), and it was to be his last paper before an academic audience. "Old and Young Cultures" ranges over the major civilizations both in time and place, building seamlessly to a dire warning that nuclear warfare could snuff out all cultures because of the European development of science.*

Russell's introducer, Louis Hjelmslev (1899–1965), Professor of Comparative Linguistics at Copenhagen and a prominent Danish Humanist, was to give "a short lecture giving a brief outline of your work as a writer, emphasizing in particular the importance of your writings to the European civilization" (Iversen to Russell, 3 March 1960). A member of the Sonning Prize Committee, Hjelmslev was the author of many works, including Prolegomena to a Theory of Language (translated into English, 1953). He rarely refers in them to Russell's writings, although on one occasion he cited An Outline of Philosophy on there being no means of deciding whether speech or writing is older. The lecture is printed here, with the permission of Dr. Hjelmslev's niece, Susanne Agersnap, as a fine commemoration of Russell's achievements before the last great period of his life.—K.B.]

Lord Russell, Lady Russell, Mr. Vice Chancellor, Ladies and Gentlemen,
The Sonning Prize committee of the Senate of this University has assigned the task to me of opening this ceremony and of giving expression to our feelings.

First and foremost these are feelings of gratitude. Our thanks are due to Lord Russell, not only for having expressed his willingness to accept the Sonning Prize, but, even more, for having consented to come in person and address this audience. For this kindness we tender our heartfelt thanks.

Lord Russell's personal presence gives an added value to this meeting. It is true that it can safely be assumed that Bertrand Russell is well known to all those present. Bertrand Russell is known to be a brilliant and stimulating writer and an extremely productive and fertile writer at that, on a very large scale ranging from the exact sciences and linguistic theory through philosophy in all its aspects on to social science, including educational and political problems. Not only is he well-known as an interesting writer. To describe his writings as being merely interesting would indeed be an understatement. Throughout his writings no reader can fail to be constantly aware of the character that makes its presence strongly felt in the background. The strict logical reasoning which he imposes on himself and on his reader, the deliberate severity that mostly predominates in his style and which sometimes entails some pungent remarks to dispose of what he likes to call muddleheadedness, all this does not prevent him from revealing that he is not only engrossed by his subject, but personally engaged in it, not so much for his own sake, but for the sake of the humanity whose fate he shares. Nor does the logical severity prevent him from expressing good-humoured sympathy with professional or other fellow-creatures. The reader feels that he is in good company with a fine representative of the human

species, not only a universal and versatile intellect, not only a great thinker, but an engaging personality entitled to take as his motto as far as knowledge is concerned, but also ethically: *homo sum, humani nil a me alienum puto*.¹

It is beyond doubt that for these reasons Bertrand Russell enjoys much popularity in academic circles and is familiar to the world. It may be pardonable to add: familiar to us in Denmark and in the Danish capital. In addition, there are quite a few people in this city to whom Bertrand Russell is a personal acquaintance and who recall the time when he lectured here.²

These, then, are some of the reasons why we have been looking eagerly forward to seeing Lord Russell and to listening to him.

This is bad logic. Admittedly. If it were not for the friendly attitude he is taking towards us, the sharp intellect of Bertrand Russell might now produce a logical razor and turn the tables against me, saying that if we know him so well as I have just said this would not be a reason for listening more, but for listening less to him. Fortunately for us, however, Bertrand Russell would be more likely to admit that there are more things in the human mind than are dreamt of in formal logic. If the logical razor were produced, I might have answered that we believe we know Bertrand Russell as a writer and as a scientific personality, and we believe we know him quite well, but we feel convinced that we do not know him sufficiently well. And to this last statement we expect Lord Russell to subscribe whole-heartedly. Incidentally, it so happens that it is founded on experience: reading and re-reading Bertrand Russell's numerous writings shows that there is always something new to be found and that there are surprises in a good many pages and hidden between the pages.

No single person would venture to undertake a complete survey of Bertrand Russell's numerous activities. Since an incomplete survey would be a contradiction in terms, I am not going to give any survey. What I am giving you is far from being an academic or professorial lecture. This, I hope, will appeal to Lord Russell and meet with his approval. He has told us that Aristotle is the first European to write like a professor. But several reasons make me believe that he did not mean this as a flattering observation.

Of all great thinkers mentioned by Bertrand Russell, Aristotle is perhaps the one who appeals least to his mind. He gives us to understand that Aristotle's work has had a detrimental, disastrous effect on his successors. We learn, incidentally, that "a science which hesitates to forget its founders is lost."³ Aristotle is one of these founders, though by no means the only one. Thus, to some

¹ ["I am a man, I regard nothing that is human as foreign to me" (Terence).]

² [Two friends were Elias Bredsdorff (1921–2002) and Niels Bohr (1885–1962). Russell had lectured in Copenhagen in October 1935.]

³ [A. N. Whitehead, *The Aims of Education* (New York: Macmillan, 1929), p. 108.]

extent, others are consigned to the same fate. One feels that Bertrand Russell speaks with much more sympathy of Plato than of Aristotle. But he refutes—and, I think, on perfectly good grounds—Plato’s theory of ideas according to which (to quote Bertrand Russell) “there is laid up in Heaven an ideal cat and an ideal dog ... and ... actual cats and dogs are more or less imperfect copies of these celestial types.”⁴ It is to the metaphysical part of this doctrine that Bertrand Russell takes exception rather than to its logical part since it seems respectable enough to admit in some way the logical existence of a universal semantic content underlying, say, the linguistic form “cat”. “Language cannot get on”, says Russell, “without general words such as ‘cat’, and such words are evidently not meaningless. But if the word ‘cat’ means anything, it means something which is not this or that cat, but some kind of universal cattiness. This is not born when a particular cat is born, and does not die when it dies. In fact, it has no position in space or time; it is ‘eternal’.”⁵ The Aristotelian theory of universals by which he intended to overcome some of the metaphysical implications involved in Plato’s theory of ideas is, according to Bertrand Russell—and he may be right again—“a common-sense prejudice pedantically expressed”, and so has to be rejected, at least in the form adopted by Aristotle.

Now, here is Bertrand Russell on Aristotle:

He is the first to write like a professor: his treatises are systematic, his discussions are divided into heads, he is a professional teacher, not an inspired prophet. His work is critical, careful, pedestrian, without any trace of Bacchic enthusiasm. The Orphic elements in Plato are watered down in Aristotle, and mixed with a strong dose of common sense; where he is Platonic, one feels that his natural temperament has been overpowered by the teaching to which he has been subjected. He is not passionate, or in any profound sense religious. The errors of his predecessors were the glorious errors of youth attempting the impossible; his errors are those of age which cannot free itself of habitual prejudices. He is best in detail and in criticism; he fails in large construction, for lack of fundamental clarity and Titanic fire. [*HWP*₃, pp. 174–5]

Thus far Bertrand Russell. One shadowy thought might perhaps steal its way into the reader’s mind, as far as Aristotle and professors are concerned: Is it really as bad as that?

There is no denying, however, that large constructions, based on fundamental clarity and nourished by Titanic fire—and this is exactly what we find in Bertrand Russell—should not be watered down by professional teachers. Bertrand Russell is a wonderful teacher himself, and it is far from us to make a second-hand textbook of his theories. Suffice it to say that Bertrand Russell’s achievements inspire us with admiration. This is self-evident, and on my part it

⁴ [*The Scientific Outlook* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1931), p. 43.]

⁵ [*HWP*₃, p. 137.]

is nothing but a preliminary statement which I shall have to amplify in my final remarks.

But you will permit me now to stress a few points which may have particular bearings on to-day's situation, the award of the Sonning Prize.

The Sonning Prize is awarded for an outstanding achievement for the benefit of European Civilization.

I should prefer to refrain from definitions, those slippery things. But sometimes there is no getting round them. Anyhow I feel it incumbent on me to make it clear how the purpose of the award may be said to be fulfilled in the present case.

Let me state first that by Europe we understand Great Britain and the continent (including, of course, some adjoining islands such as the Greek and the Northern archipelago). We Danes do not conform to the British usage, according to which Europe is taken to mean the continent (with adjoining islands) as opposed to Britain.

May I state next that it may be very hard to find a justification for the term European Civilization.

I should think that the only available clue to a definition is to be found in the tradition transmitted from Ancient Greece through the ages up to the present day. Indeed, nowhere in Europe is education more strongly influenced by classical tradition than in Great Britain, Britannia, which in effect shared with most of the rest of Europe the fate of being under the sway of Rome long before Great Britain created an empire of her own—and Rome in its turn would hardly have existed as a metropolis of European civilization, had it not received a strong impact from Greek civilization.

It is not a question of admitting this dependence on ancient tradition or of rejecting it. It is a question of being in its power or not. The fact of combating it is a sufficient sign of feeling its strength.

A moment ago I happened to speak at some length of Bertrand Russell's views on Greek philosophy. Whether Lord Russell agrees or disagrees, his attitude may serve as an illustration. In his *History of Western Philosophy* where his critics have not failed to notice that some philosophers of good repute have been tacitly left out, ancient Greek philosophy plays an important part. On the other hand, in his book *The Scientific Outlook* and elsewhere, Bertrand Russell makes a distinction between science and philosophy. Scientific method, as he understands it, does not really come into the world until Galileo. In this connexion we are told as follows:

The Greeks ... did surprisingly little for the creation of science. The great intellectual achievement of the Greeks was geometry, which they believed to be an *a priori* study ... not requiring experimental verification.... The Greeks observed the world as poets rather than as men of science, partly, I think, because all manual activity was ungentlemanly, so

that any study which required experiment seemed a little vulgar. Perhaps it would be fanciful to connect with this prejudice the fact that the department in which the Greeks were most scientific was astronomy, which deals with bodies that only can be seen and not touched. [*The Scientific Outlook*, pp. 18–19]

This is what Bertrand Russell wrote in 1931. Alas, could the Greeks have seen what human beings are *now* tampering with, they might, accordingly, have given up their astronomical research and failed to make their glorious astronomical discoveries!

Without the unbroken tradition from the ancient Greeks with all its good or bad qualities, I fail to see how we could define European Civilization. The Dialectics of Plato are being continued in all European civilization and do not cease to leave their mark on the European mind. If they were given up, and only then, European Civilization would cease to exist as such. In all other respects it may prove difficult or impossible to speak of a common European Civilization. East and West are very different worlds in our time. Hardly any European thinker has done so much as Bertrand Russell to grasp the nature of these two worlds, to bridge the gap between them, and to promote a policy designed to save the future of mankind in a true European spirit.

Civilization is not necessarily nor exclusively science only, even if science is taken in a wider sense. Art in all its aspects has merits of its own and forms part of civilization. It is, as Bertrand Russell points out, much older than science. We may add that art, as a time-honoured tradition, is not found in Europe only. It is older than Europe and much more widespread. So is Philosophy, particularly if Philosophy is taken to include speculative cosmology or other kinds of metaphysics.

As opposed to Art and to speculative Philosophy, Science seems to me to be the hallmark of European Civilization. Only sporadically is Science found outside the European tradition and its later offshoots. If we take scientific method in its narrower sense and define it by induction and experience, Greek astronomy may well be included. But the scientific method need not necessarily be opposed to the deductive method, but only to metaphysics and speculative philosophy. In that case even Greek geometry can be included. Not only Aristarch the Samian, but also Euclid and Archimedes seem to be typical Europeans in the sense I am here advocating.

What is really characteristic of European thinking at its best is, to my mind, the combination of scientific research with general philosophy. As one great linguist of our time has said, the ancient Greeks had the gift of wondering at things that other people take for granted. In the Introduction to his *Inquiry into Meaning and Truth*, Bertrand Russell rightly points out that “the first difficulty is to see that the problem is difficult” [*IMT*₁, p. 9]. This is, if I may be allowed to say so, a very Greek and a very European remark.

All deeply rooted European Civilization tends towards philosophy through strictly scientific research, including induction and deduction, experimental observation and constructive hypothesis.

In the same way as the notion expressed by the Greek word *politics*, this philosophy, purely theoretical in its essence, tends to become an applied philosophy. We can hardly choose any better example to show this than that of Bertrand Russell, the scientific and theoretical and, at the same time, realistic πολιτικός κατ' ἐξοχήν.⁶

Bertrand Russell carries with him a good many marks of genuine Greco-European traditional civilization.

He is, like the ancient Greeks, an entirely independent mind. Faced with authority this may make him a rebel, a revolutionary. Faced with narrow-minded traditionalism this may make him something of a *gamin*, like Galileo according to Bertrand Russell's own statement.⁷

He has, like, the Greeks, a noble respect for the individual and for other people's opinions although he would, like Socrates, want them to state, dialectically, the reasons for their judgments before deeming them worthy of attention.

He has, like the Greeks, the courage of his convictions. It is highly meritorious to have submitted ancient idols to merciless criticism and to have pointed out emphatically what he does not hesitate to call the "two millennia of muddleheadedness"⁸ to which some fundamental errors of the so-called founders have given rise. It takes courage to do this, and it needed a man like Bertrand Russell to accomplish this task. He has hit the Greeks with their own best weapons. He is the boldest dialectician since Socrates. Indeed, his war against the Greeks is extremely Greek.

If European thinking tends towards a general philosophy based on objective research, it can hardly be true as it is often maintained that science—in the wider sense of the word—is becoming constantly more specialized. What is really becoming specialized is not science, but scientific technique. In all our efforts to reach an intimate understanding of the basis on which experimental data are founded, the various branches of human knowledge are more dependent upon each other than ever before.

This is why not only analysis, so often mentioned by Bertrand Russell as one of the characteristics of the scientific method, but even synthesis is an important element in European thinking. No better example could be found than that of Bertrand Russell. The scientific progress would consist, according to him, in

⁶ ["*politikos kat' exochen*", i.e. a preeminently political man.]

⁷ [*The Scientific Outlook*, p. 24.]

⁸ [*HWP*, p. 785.]

making “successive approximations to the truth, in which each new stage results from an improvement, not a rejection, of what has gone before.”⁹

Such improvements can often be achieved through the discovery of complementarities to replace contradictions, that is: through a synthesis which enables us to view conflicting aspects as complementary.

It is a great achievement on the part of Bertrand Russell, who perhaps at first saw an insurmountable barrier between deductive and inductive methods, to have combined them in the logical empiricism of which he is the originator. In the era of “two millennia of muddleheadedness”, “logical empiricism” would seem to be an obvious contradiction in terms. It has proved to be just the opposite.

Other efforts to achieve synthesis have followed.

Just as through Einstein space and time combined into space-time, so Bertrand Russell, in his endeavours to find a solution of the old dualism “mind versus body”, following and refining the great idea of William James, arrived at the neutral monism, the discovery of a possible “neutral stuff” mind-body.

In the final chapter of *An Inquiry into Meaning and Truth*, Bertrand Russell suggests the possibility which is not quite expressly stated, but nevertheless seems clearly inferential: that there may well be a complementarity between verbal and non-verbal structure, or, in other terms, between the structure of language and the structure of the world.

Finally, it is worthy of notice that through a synthesis of logic and metaphysics, Bertrand Russell here also arrives at stating the possibility, or even necessity, of a metaphysics on purely logical grounds.

I said before that Bertrand Russell inspires us with admiration. But not only do we admire him: we think much of him—just as he himself states about Plotinus: “Whatever one may think of him as a theoretical philosopher, it is impossible not to love him as a man.”¹⁰ But we think much of Bertrand Russell as a man *because* we think much of him as a theoretical philosopher. We think much of him because he inspires us with confidence in Europe, in European tradition, in European Civilization. He is one of the exponents of European Civilization at its very best, and one whose example gives us confidence in the future.

In his *Scientific Outlook*, Bertrand Russell gives some examples of scientific method. They are: Galileo, Newton, Darwin, and Pavlov. All these are Europeans. Others might be added, all Europeans. The examples given are nothing but examples. If this is true, I suggest that we add one name which could hardly have been included by the author: that of Bertrand Russell.

⁹ [HWP, p. 789.]

¹⁰ [HWP, p. 291.]