

## THE DEBILITATING ILLNESS OF RUSSELLIANISM: A BRIEF REPORT

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The author, editor of *Russell and Analytic Philosophy* and *Bertrand Russell: Critical Assessments*, is also a long-time member of *Russellians Anonymous*, an international charitable organization founded to help combat the debilitating effects of Russellianism. For the record, it's true that while at the Munich conference a speaker did begin his comments with the first two sentences quoted below. No doubt historians will continue to debate exactly what followed afterwards.

One hundred years ago this spring Bertrand Russell, the famous British philosopher, logician and essayist, discovered the paradox that now bears his name.

Unlike many mathematical and scientific results, the paradox can be stated quite simply. Some sets such as the set of all books, Russell observed, are not members of themselves. That is, the set, or collection, of all books is not itself a book. Other sets, such as the set of all non-books, are members of themselves. That is, the set, or collection, of all non-books is itself not a book.

But what about the set of all sets that are not members of themselves? Such a set will be a member of itself if, and only if, it is not a member of itself. But this is impossible.

Exactly how to solve this paradox remains a matter of controversy, even today.

To mark the centenary of Russell's discovery, the University of

Munich recently held a conference on the theme “One Hundred Years of Russell’s Paradox”. The four-day event was attended, not just by Russell scholars, but also by many of the world’s leading logicians and set theorists.

Among those attending was an internationally known and universally admired UCLA professor. In front of a capacity crowd, and to the amazement of everyone in attendance, he took the opportunity to reveal for the first time his courageous battle against a creeping, debilitating illness—*Russellianism*.

“Hello, my name is David Kaplan”, the speaker began, “and I’m a recovering Russellian. It’s been 56<sub>c</sub> days since I last read Russell, and every day continues to be a challenge.”

After helping himself to a tankard of German beer, he continued. “Years ago, like many of you, I was just a social reader. Thinking that it would give me something to talk about at parties, I began reading Russell. But the more I read, the more my life began to deteriorate.

“It all started innocently enough. After a long day of reading mathematicians such as Cantor and Frege, I’d read 2<sub>c</sub> or 3<sub>c</sub> chapters of *In Praise of Idleness* just to relax. Then I’d read a few pages from *Nightmares of Eminent Persons* before going to bed. Soon I was alternating erratically between *The Principles of Mathematics* and *Has Man a Future?*”

“And of course there was Russell’s paradox. I couldn’t get it out of my mind! Secretly I began to read Russell during my lunch breaks, thinking that somewhere in either *Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy* or *Logic and Knowledge* I’d find the answer. But I didn’t.

“I could tell that my wife was becoming suspicious when she confronted me with a copy of *Sceptical Essays*. I began to hide Russell’s books in places I knew she’d never look—my sock drawer, the cat’s litter box, the kitchen. Secretly, I knew I had a problem, but I refused to admit it. ‘I read Russell because I want to, not because I need to’, I’d tell myself as I devoured page after page of *War Crimes in Vietnam*, as if any healthy person would *want* to read about war crimes in south-east Asia.

“By then I was also reading Russell before almost every lecture. ‘It’s just to help me prepare’, I’d tell myself. But I knew it was a lie. My students did too. After all, even undergraduates know that there’s no connection between ‘Mathematical Logic as Based on the Theory of Types’, *German Social Democracy*, and *The Wit and Wisdom of Bertrand Russell*, but I lectured on them all, often to the same ancient philosophy class.

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“Inevitably, I moved on to the hard stuff—*Principia Mathematica*. ‘How else will I ever be able to solve the paradox?’ I asked myself. When I was in North America there were plenty of suppliers: Ken Blackwell, Nick Griffin, Herbert Hochberg, Peter Hylton, Gregory Landini, Bernie Lynski, John Slater, Alasdair Urquhart, Russell Wahl. The Canadian product was particularly pure.

“When I couldn’t get what I needed in North America, I went abroad. Francisco Rodríguez-Consuegra was my Spanish connection, and Ivor Grattan-Guinness and Ray Monk gave me what I needed when I was in Britain. In Germany, Godehard Link was a godsend. For the *really* hard stuff, I contacted Sol Fefferman, Hugh Woodin, Charles Parsons, John Bell, or Harvey and Sy Friedman. I had a standing order for each new volume of Russell’s *Collected Papers*. They were delivered to me in plain brown wrappers, so my Department Head wouldn’t know I was hooked. I always paid the delivery man in cash. When he asked for a tip I suggested he read *The Practice and Theory of Bolshevism*.

“In order to support my habit, I began teaching Russell full-time. Soon I was forcing more and more Russell onto my students. *The ABC of Atoms* was followed by *The Analysis of Matter*, which was followed by *Human Knowledge: Its Scope and Limits*. One young girl broke down when I told her that ‘On Denoting’ was mandatory reading for every class. When she couldn’t stop crying, I suggested she read *The Conquest of Happiness*. I’d become a pusher and I hadn’t even realized it.

“Of course my wife wondered why I was getting home later and later each week. ‘I’m sure I’ve got time for just one more chapter of *Marriage and Morals*’, I’d tell myself before leaving the office, but I could never stop at just one.

“My low point came when I began skipping night classes to walk the streets reading *Satan in the Suburbs*. When I couldn’t remember the title of my favorite Russell book—*Portraits from Memory*—I knew it was time to call Russellians Anonymous.

“Today things are a lot better. I’ve admitted to myself that I have a problem and I’ve apologized to everyone I’ve hurt—my wife, my children, and especially my students. Who knows how many young minds I harmed by forcing them to memorize *An Essay on the Foundations of Geometry*? I’ve also given up trying to solve Russell’s paradox.

“Of course, the most difficult step for any recovering Russellian is admitting that there is a higher power, but one day I hope to be able to

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donate my copy of *Why I Am Not a Christian* to my local Humanist Association. Although I haven't read it in almost a decade, I haven't yet found the courage to part with it.

"Even today, after more than 2<sub>c</sub> years of therapy, my longing to read Russell is still strong. I try to fight it by reading Rorty, Foucault and Derrida—nothing too addictive. But sometimes the desire for rigour and clarity becomes just too much to bear. That's when I phone my sponsor, Ian Hacking. His record of avoiding Russell is much stronger than mine. 'Russell-free since '93!' he tells me, and I believe him.

"The last time I gave in to temptation I told myself that I would read just one chapter of *New Hopes for a Changing World*, but soon I was skipping back and forth between *Unpopular Essays*, *Authority and the Individual*, and *Bertrand Russell's America*.

"When Ian found me the next morning I was passed out in the Senior Common Room with a copy of *The Problems of Philosophy* half read by my side. The first book I asked for when I woke was *An Outline of Intellectual Rubbish*. I was as confused as if I'd been on a blind date with George Eliot and Evelyn Waugh.

"I know that the desire to read Russell will never completely go away. I also know I can never again run the risk of reading *A Free Man's Worship* without descending into the uncontrollable nightmare of continuous Russell reading. But as long as I continue to take things one day at a time, I know I'll be all right."

At this point, the audience gave Professor Kaplan a very supportive round of applause.

For my part, I've reported Professor Kaplan's comments as accurately and as faithfully as possible, in part so his many friends and supporters around the world will be able to learn of his situation. But I've also done so to warn other Russell readers that, unless they read responsibly, they too may end up in the grip of this insidious illness.

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