

## BERTRAND RUSSELL IN 90 MINUTES

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Paul Strathern. *Bertrand Russell in 90 Minutes*. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2001. Pp. (2), 94. US\$14.95; pb, \$6.95.

Paul Strathern's *Bertrand Russell in 90 Minutes* is the most recent addition to his "in 90 minutes" series. The book is engaging on Russell the man; but it's not worth much on Russell the philosopher.

Strathern's account of Russell's life, though sketchy, is generally accurate, and his psychobiographical speculations, even if not always verifiable, make for entertaining reading. Russell is presented as an important thinker and activist who "could see into the depths of the world (both philosophically and political-ly), but he was often blind concerning his own inner world. Yet it was this psychological unknowingness which appeared to drive him, giving emotional force to even his most intellectual inquiries as well as his affairs of the heart" (p. 9).

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Strathern's introduction describes Russell as a passionate and highly principled philosopher (despite being, at times, "an emotional loose cannon") on a "driven quest for love and knowledge" whose "pity for suffering humanity ... brought him back to earth ... and would again and again stir him to quixotic action." He assures us that "... if Russell's logical philosophy can be said to have failed, his political philosophy arguably succeeded" (presumably in spite of its "quixotic" nature), because his work "laid the foundations for nuclear disarmament" and influenced the social mores of the Western world (p. 10).

Yet in the heart of the book—his 60-page section on "Russell's Life and Works"—there is surprisingly little discussion of Russell's ethics and politics: his pacifist activity in World War I gets less than a page; likewise his opposition to nuclear weapons and Vietnam; and his battle over his denied appointment at CCNY is not mentioned. Unsurprisingly, his "affairs of the heart" are robustly represented, though fairly and without rebuke. There is one place where Strathern seems to go beyond the pale, however. He says that Russell fell in love with Evelyn Whitehead and "suffered considerable guilt over these affairs" (p. 43). There is evidence that he fell in love with her, but not that they had an affair.

There is a very readable presentation of Russell's early childhood at Pembroke Lodge and of his experience at Cambridge, including the influence of McTaggart, and his rebellion, with G. E. Moore, against neo-Hegelianism. He portrays Russell's early love for mathematics as part of his need to recover his departed parents and the "fading picture of certainty, sweetness and light" that their absence created: "He believed in the abstract world of mathematics and was driven to search in it for the certainty that had, during his early childhood, vanished from his life" (p. 18). It also, he says, provided him with a quasi-religious mysticism that displaced his traditional theism and helped sustain him for several decades. Wittgenstein gets ample billing, and his early relationship with Russell is fairly presented, and with some humour. When the young Austrian, contemplating suicide, came to seek the great logician's advice on his choice of career (philosopher or aeronaut?), Strathern writes that Russell "advised against suicide or becoming an aeronaut", adding parenthetically, "two not dissimilar activities in those days" (p. 46). Wittgenstein's pursuit of logic was "arrogant, persistent, and unbending", while Russell the mentor was "gently insistent" (p. 47), but "eventually dazzled" by the "almost insane passion of Wittgenstein's onslaughts on his philosophical position.... In this philosophical battle of wills between two giants, there was no doubting who had won." But he thoughtfully adds: "How much this was due to force of personality rather than relevance of philosophical argument is open to question" (p. 57).

Most of the book is concerned with Russell's life and work before 1918. But while the account of his personal life is engaging and reasonably accurate, his accounts of Russell's philosophical doctrines are confusing, muddled and in-

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complete. Strathern devotes a large chunk of his little book to Russell's philosophy of mathematics as developed in *The Principles of Mathematics* and *Principia Mathematica*. He says that, armed with Peano's postulates, Russell showed that "the notion of class could be used to generate the concept of number" (p. 28). But the summary he sketches is inaccurate. He omits Peano's important fifth postulate (the mathematical induction principle), and in the course of presenting the definition of number, he seems to confuse Russell's method with that of a set theoretician like Zermelo. Russell's (and Frege's) famous definition of number as a class of similar classes is never mentioned.

His account of Russell's theory of types is unacceptable. He correctly says that the theory "distinguished a hierarchy of ascending classes, or types of classes" (p. 35). But then he goes on to explain: "Thus there was a class of cats and a higher class of animals", revealing a confusion between being a member of a class and being a subclass of a class. Classes have different types than their members, but not their subclasses. Thus the class of cats has a type higher than Felix, but the class of cats and the class of animals, of which it is a subclass, have the same type. The basic idea of the theory of types is to exclude expressions of the form "*X* is a member of *Y*" where *X* and *Y* are of the same type, and thus avoid the formulation of Russell's Paradox. And it is simply wrong to say, as Strathern does, that "A class could be a member of itself" (p. 35).

The account given of the theory of descriptions—which he gives as an example of Russell's logical analysis, without ever mentioning the theory by name—is far off the mark. He says of "the present king of France is bald":

This appears to state a simple relation, which can be either true or false. But in reality ... it is neither true nor false—it is nonsensical. Why? Because there is no such thing as "the present king of France". (P. 53)

But Russell's conclusion is not that the proposition is nonsensical. Its apparent subject–predicate form misleads us into thinking that there must be some named entity (the king of France) standing in some relation to the predicate (baldness). The real form is shown to be what logicians call "multiply general". But it is nonetheless false for that.

There is nothing about Russell's philosophy after 1918, and Strathern's treatment of Russell's epistemology, especially his views of the external world, is unduly brief and sloppy. He runs together, without mentioning either work by name, the *ding-an-sich*-like conception of material objects in *Problems of Philosophy* (1912) and the phenomenalist-constructionist view of *Our Knowledge of the External World* (1914). He writes:

We can speak of ordinary objects—such as an apple—but our acquaintance with such an object is made up of individual sense data. (Pp. 48–9)

In *Problems*, material objects are the hidden causes of sense-data, but they are not “made up” of sense-data, and we don’t have acquaintance with them. In the 1914 work, they are constructions, but as such they are logical fictions and are not objects of acquaintance. A few pages later, where it is reasonably clear Strathern intends to describe Russell’s 1914 theory, he says “sense data were functions of the object” (p. 51), although Russell explicitly says that his theory was to exhibit physical objects as functions of sense-data.

One of the most annoying features of this book is that it has very few Russell quotations; and worse, none of them are referenced.

The best that can be said about Strathern’s little book is that it gives a readable and entertaining picture of Russell the man, but does little to enable the reader to understand Russell the philosopher.

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