RUSSELL'S INFLUENCE ON INGEMAR HEDENIUS

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Svante Nordin. *Ingemar Hedenius. En filosof och hans tid* [Ingemar Hedenius. A philosopher and his time]. Stockholm: Natur och Kultur, 2004. Pp. 563; 31 photos. 298 kr.

Ten years ago I wrote a review article about Gunnar Fredriksson's book about Bertrand Russell for *Russell* called "Russell's Influence in Sweden".[1] In it I mentioned two Swedish philosophers who introduced and established analytic philosophy in Sweden. The oldest, Ingemar Hedenius (1908–1982), was professor in practical philosophy in Uppsala from 1947 to 1973; the younger, Anders Wedberg (1913–1978), was professor in theoretical philosophy in Stockholm from 1949 to 1976. Together they had an enormous influence on the development of Swedish philosophy, since—among other things—they had the

[1] See the review of *Bertrand Russell: en intellektuelli i politiken*, *Russell*, n.s. 5 (1985): 169–74.

power to influence most of the new professors in philosophy. And they can both be called disciples of Bertrand Russell.

The formal division between theoretical and practical philosophy goes back to Aristotle and Kant and consists in a distinction between the philosophy of thinking and the philosophy of acting. In practice it means that the former subject includes metaphysics, epistemology, philosophy of language and philosophy of mathematics and logic, while the latter deals with ethics, aesthetics, social philosophy and philosophy of religion.

It was Wedberg who introduced Russell as a logician and a philosopher of mathematics and for a long time theoretical philosophers primarily wrote about logic and tried to apply the symbols of mathematical logic to classical philosophical problems. Russell's influence on Hedenius was of a more general character that showed itself in his writings on ethics and religion, but also in his general attitude to life.

In 1949 Hedenius published a collection of essays called *Tro och Vetande* [Faith and Knowledge] that started a public discussion about the truth of Christianity that went on for years. The book was an undisguised attack on Swedish theology and Swedish theologians that caused a lot of hard feelings and undermined the reputation of theology as a legitimate academic subject. It was such a knock out that still today many Swedish theologians suffer from a "Hedenius complex". (One could call it a "Russell complex".)

There is only one reference to Russell in Hedenius' book and that is to *Sceptical Essays*, where Russell writes: "I wish to propose for the reader's favourable consideration a doctrine which may, I fear, appear wildly paradoxical and subversive. The doctrine in question is this: that it is undesirable to believe a proposition when there is no ground whatever for supposing it true" (*SE*, p. 11). Of course, Russell was not the first philosopher to endorse such a doctrine, which can be traced back to the spirit of Socrates and the old Greek sceptical philosophers, but Hedenius seems to have been impressed by Russell's humorous and elegant way of formulating it. He took it to his heart and called it "den intellektuella moralens maxim", which translates into "the maxim of intellectual morality" and sounds like an echo of Kingdon Clifford, although Hedenius might not have heard of him. Anyway, Hedenius thought that it was *morally* wrong to believe any proposition without having good reasons.

With this maxim in mind he examined the major tenets of Christianity and found that very few—if any—passed the test, although he never seems to have doubted that Jesus existed, which he might have done, if he had examined the reasons for believing so more critically.

From now on Hedenius was the best known and feared philosopher in Sweden. Another professor in Uppsala with a big sense of humour said: "There is no God and Ingemar Hedenius is his prophet." Hedenius took an active part

in many public discussions and wrote hundreds of newspaper articles, essays and close to 30 books that could be read by anyone. The influence of Russell is obvious in many of them, although he is seldom mentioned by name.

Svante Nordin's book about Ingemar Hedenius is a very interesting and well-documented work about one of Sweden's most influential philosophers during the twentieth century. Although Nordin of course builds his book on the published works of Hedenius, he also makes ample use of expert statements and appeals, but most of all he relies on an extensive number of private letters that show that he was as passionate in his beliefs as the people he criticized, whether they were Christians, Marxists, Fascists or Existentialists.

Russell is one of the most often referred to persons in the book and Nordin does not hesitate when he points to Russell as the major influence on Hedenius:

> If one wants to find a real ideal for Hedenius in his conduct on the intellectual scene one also has to turn to the Anglo-Saxon sphere. Bertrand Russell appeared to his Swedish follower not only as the greatest contemporary philosopher but also through his struggle against injustices, prejudices and follies as an almost through and through admirable public figure. Russell's radicalism, lack of respect, contempt for religion and conventional moral ideals were things that Hedenius could accept. Russell was more over (besides Moore) the pioneer of the analytic philosophy that Hedenius from the beginning of the '40s endorsed. Not even the fact that Russell during his last decade became a supporter of the new left, which Hedenius despised, led to any repudiation. (P. 514)

Hedenius was himself for a long time considered a radical and the young people listened to him. In the spring of 1967 he spoke at an artistic evening in honour of the Russell Tribunal at the Modern Museum in Stockholm and said that: "USA is responsible for the Vietnam war." This caused Russell to send him a letter (until now unknown) in which he said:

> Dear Professor Hedenius
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> I am writing to thank you for your generous support of the International War Crimes Tribunal during its Stockholm session. I am especially grateful for your initiative in helping to organise the writers' appeal in support of the Tribunal. The great success of the first session was made possible by the work of our many friends in Sweden. I hope you will express my appreciation to all who worked with you.
>
> With all good wishes,
>
> Yours sincerely
> Bertrand Russell

Nordin ends his excellent book by pointing to another resemblance to his idol:

> The longing for another reality than reality never abandoned him, in so far he was of a religious nature. The realization that there is no reality except reality never left him, in so far he was an atheist and a pessimist. During all his life he looked for the impossible,

reconciliation with the basic conditions of existence. He never found it. (P. 524)

Although this is perhaps not totally applicable to Russell, there is no doubt that Hedenius resembled Russell in many ways and acted as his apostle in Sweden and all of Scandinavia for many years. Hedenius and Wedberg have been replaced by less colourful philosophers, but on the whole thanks to them the spirit of Bertrand Russell still flourishes among Swedish philosopher whether they are practical or theoretical. And Nordin has done a very good job in conveying this spirit.