RUSSELL'S METAETHICS

Ray Perkins, Jr.
Philosophy / Plymouth State U.
Plymouth, NH 03264–1600, USA
perkrk@earthlink.net

Michael K. Potter. *Bertrand Russell's Ethics*. London and New York: Continuum, 2006. Pp. xiii, 185. ISBN 0826488102. £55.00; US$110.00. Hardcover.

This book is a very illuminating examination of Russell's emotivist ethics. In his Preface, Potter acknowledges a large debt to Charles Pigden's groundbreaking work.[1] Potter builds on that work and extends our understanding of Russell's ethics in several areas.

In the first two thirds of the book Potter gives the reader a plausible account of Russell's transition from the objectivist ethics that he shared with G. E. Moore during the first decade of the last century into a "proto-emotivism" inspired by Ottoline Morrell and the onset of World War I. This immature form of emotivism, he says, can be found in Russell's writings from 1913 to 1922 until it emerged in a more mature ("enlightened") form in the mid- to late 1920s and full-blown in *Religion and Science* (Chapter 9) in 1935. Potter helps us to see the essential elements in this "enlightened emotivism" and shows us the similarities and differences with the better-known versions of emotivism put forward later by Ayer and Stevenson. He argues persuasively that Russell's version, properly interpreted, though not without problems, is superior to theirs.

The key to understanding Russell's mature theory lies in his notion of the compossibility of desires. Desires *A* and *B* are compossible just in case both can be satisfied; they are in harmony. This allows Russell's ethics to build up the idea of interpersonal subjectivity by invoking the notion of the universality of desire (or wish) as the essence of moral judgment ("*X* is good" means "Would that *everyone* desired *X*"). A significant degree of moral objectivity is attainable in so far as desires are (or are not) universalizable, i.e. the satisfaction of our desires is (or is not) compatible with the (general) satisfaction of the desires of others. As Potter puts it: "To say a desire can be universalized is to say that it does not conflict with the general desires of most human beings, it is in har-

[1] Charles Pigden, *Russell on Ethics: Selections from the Writings of Bertrand Russell* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999).

mony with them, it can be realized alongside them …" (p. 94).

In the last third of the book Potter undertakes an original exploration into Russell's ethics by importing Russell's earlier theories of impulse and desire found in *Principles of Social Reconstruction* (1916) and *The Analysis of Mind* (1921). In this way Potter shows how the infusion of these ideas into Russell's normative ethics can enrich his practical ethics, although he says the concepts of desire and impulse want clarification and the behaviouristic nature of his notion of desire needs radical modification.

As Potter explains, Russell's early emotivism was likely the product of many influences, including Santayana's *Winds of Doctrine* and the First World War, which later caused Russell to doubt both the objectivity of good and the desirability of belief in such a thing—he thought it led to irresolvable conflicting claims of moral truth and fostered human cruelty and even violence. Potter, borrowing from Nick Griffin's work (*SLBR*, 1: 399), also suggests that Ottoline Morrell, Russell's lover and confidant in the years leading up to WW1, may have played an important role in getting him to think of ethics non-cognitively. Potter refers to a 1912 letter to Ottoline in which Russell discusses ideals and their connection to religion and writes approvingly that "Man can imagine things that don't exist … [which] are better than things that do exist" (pp. 8–9). Potter takes this (following Griffin) as evidence that Russell must have been speaking of good in a non-cognitive sense, otherwise Russell's own theory of descriptions—according to which statements purporting to refer to non-existent objects are false—would have him writing falsehoods to his sweetheart. I think this is possible, but a bit of a stretch. The values Russell refers to, like the Moorean good and universals in *The Problems of Philosophy* (1912), could be subsistent even though non-existent. And à priori knowledge, as based on the connection of universals, could guarantee the truth of our moral judgments even if those universals lack existents which instantiate them (see PP_2, pp. 76, 78–9). But in the letter he does go on to say that values come from us, not from God (*SLBR*, 1: 413). And this (that they come from us) does suggest a break with Moorean objectivism, although it's not necessarily evidence of true emotivism with its essential non-cognitivist claim that moral judgments lack truth-value.

Potter says that Russell "clearly" gave up the idea that moral judgments have truth-values during the First World War, at least in one 1915 article (p. 60). But I don't think it's obvious that he did. Potter himself seems to have doubts, or should have, given his apparent agreement with Pigden's observation that until 1935, "it is not quite clear whether he was a subjectivist or an emotivist or whether he distinguished between the two positions" (p. 59). Indeed, he admits that Russell's early theory is "a muddle" and appears in confusing bits and pieces "if we can call it a theory at all" (p. 73).

Potter does show convincingly how Russell's mature emotivism, appropriate-

ly interpreted, can make sense of ethical disputes. Russell was a utilitarian for most of his philosophical career, so that once there's agreement on what is good as an end, we can, in principle, settle the question of whether a particular action is right. But what about disputes concerning ends? I say, "*X* is good"; you say, "*X* is not good". On Russell's theory, I'm saying, "Would that everyone desired *X*"; you are saying, "Would that no one desired *X*". The question, on Potter's interpretation of Russell's emotivism, becomes something like "which desire (or wish) is more compatible with the maximum satisfaction of human desires?" If *X* is love, presumably my desire (or wish) is more compatible with it than yours, and that fact constitutes a reason for agreeing with me and my judgment. As Russell says in *What I Believe* (1925): "That is why love is better than hatred."[2] Indeed, as Potter argues, the good life, as "one inspired by love and guided by knowledge", is intimately connected to the doctrine of the compossibility of desire and the closely related notion of universalizability: universalizable desires turn out to be those which are inspired by love and guided by knowledge (p. 111).

This is all very well argued, and it shows persuasively that Russell's version of emotivism, appropriately interpreted, is superior to its rivals, largely because it secures a place for reason and objectivity in ethics. My worry, however, is that Potter's interpretation of Russell may be *too* good, i.e. it may render Russell's emotivism more objective than Russell himself would have been willing to accept. One notices that there is no discussion of Russell's brief (and unsuccessful, according to Pigden) attempt in *Human Society in Ethics and Politics* (1954) to "inject a little objectivity" into his ethics (Pigden, p. 23). The reason seems to be that Potter thinks that Russell's emotivism was *already* objective. Potter, in effect, makes the universalizability of desire—a desire's satisfiability by all or most of humankind—something like an intrinsic good. For example, he says (in the context of explicating Russell's meaning of "good" in *Religion and Science*), "Although he claims otherwise, Russell obviously believes that desires can have a quality that makes them *worthy of respect*: universalizability" (p. 94, my emphasis).

Potter may be right about this. I think Russell *does* countenance objective value before 1935 in a sense that allows moral knowledge; at least that's how I read his work of the mid-1920s in *What I Believe* and *An Outline of Philosophy*.[3] I think they both appeal to something like the intrinsic value of the

[2] "What I Believe", *WINC*$_2$, pp. 64, 85.

[3] See *An Outline of Philosophy* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1927; New York: Meridian, 1960), p. 241, where Russell compares a pair of desires that are both satisfiable and a pair that are not, and he concludes that "the former pair is *socially preferable* to the latter." (My emphasis.) And he goes on to say: "It is evident, therefore, that there can be more good in a world where the desires of different

satisfaction of desire in the following way: desires that are universalizable, i.e. harmonious with those of our fellows, are better than those that aren't. And this is apparently because the satisfaction of desire is *intrinsically* good;[4] and more good, which harmonious desires foster, is better than less. It's also true, however, that Russell seems to officially reject such values in both works.[5] But in these works, I would suggest, *pace* Potter, that Russell has not yet arrived at his mature emotivism. Nevertheless, if Potter is right about Russell's mature emotivism, Russell had nothing to "fix" in *Human Society*, and we seem forced to conclude that Russell misunderstood his own *mature* form of emotivism.

I suspect that Russell's emotivism was still very "proto" until its mature articulation in 1935, and he was, until then, ambivalent on the issue of the objectivity of value. Indeed, as late as 1917—several years after his supposed abandonment of the Moorean good—he writes concerning the changes in his ethics since the appearance of his famous essay, "The Free Man's Worship", in 1903: "In theoretical Ethics, the position advocated in "The Free Man's Worship" is *not quite identical with* that which I hold now [1917]: I feel *less convinced than I did then* of the objectivity of good and evil."[6] The implication here, of course, is that in 1917 Russell still subscribed, though with some doubt on his part, to the objectivity of moral value.

One might think of Russell's mature emotivism as an extension of his brief 1922 idea that our ordinary moral discourse embodies an error: we mistakenly assert that some things are *good*, i.e. that there is a property (goodness) which some things have. But there is no such property; so, our assertions are false.[7] He never published this paper, and, if I am right, he never quite succeeded in abolishing reference to moral qualities from his own moral discourse—until 1935 when he identifies the error somewhat differently. By then the mistake is not that we falsely assert that some things are good, it's that we mistakenly *claim to assert* that some things are good. The mistake lies in the fact that our "asser-

individuals harmonize than in one where they conflict" (p. 242).

[4] "[I]n themselves all desires, taken singly, are on a level, i.e. there is no reason to prefer the satisfaction of one to the satisfaction of another" (*ibid*., p. 241).

[5] See "What I Believe", *WINC*$_2$, p. 60, and *An Outline of Philosophy*, p. 238. In the latter he says that, partly due to Santayana's *Winds of Doctrine*, he abandoned some of the ethical views that he held with Moore, including the doctrine that "we know *a priori* certain general propositions about the kinds of things that are good on their own account" (p. 238). This would seem to rule out any knowledge that the satisfaction of desire is intrinsically good, unless, perhaps, there is such knowledge à posteriori.

[6] Preface, *ML*, p. v; *ML* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1957), p. v. My emphasis. But see his new Preface to the 1929 edition (New York: Norton), where he says that, due to Santayana's *Winds of Doctrine*, "I no longer regard good and evil as objective entities wholly independent of human desires."

[7] "Is There an Absolute Good?", *Papers* 9: 345–6; reprinted in Pigden, pp. 119–24.

tions" are not assertions; they are expressions of wishes in the optative mood, which lack truth-value. This theory not only seems to rule out the possibility of moral truth and moral facts, it also seems to rule out (any) moral knowledge. And, if beliefs are the sort of things that essentially have truth-value, as they seem to be for Russell after 1910, the theory even rules out the possibility of moral *belief*. Consider the following:

(1) Torturing babies is wrong.
(2) I know that torturing babies is wrong.
(3) I believe that torturing babies is wrong.

On Russell's mature emotivism, (1) is really a sentence in the optative mood and, so, is neither true nor false.[8] But both (2) and (3), as claims to knowledge and belief, respectively, seem to be false. This is at serious odds with common sense, and it may partly explain Russell's dissatisfaction with his mature theory in his later years. It's true that he modified his theory in *Human Society* to restore truth-value to our moral discourse while grounding ethics in feelings. But he had his doubts about this modified theory too and soon reluctantly reverted to his 1935 version of emotivism (see Pigden, pp. 23, 165).

So an important question arises: can Russell's mature emotivism really secure some ethical objectivity without countenancing intrinsic values? I'm not sure, but Russell himself, despite his explicit denials in *Religion and Science*,[9] may have left the door open for such a possibility. Russell is clearly frustrated by the apparent irresolvability of ethical disputes, and he claims that the "chief ground" for his theory is the "complete impossibility of finding any arguments to prove that this or that has intrinsic value". But he immediately adds: "*If we all agreed* [about what things have intrinsic value], we might hold that we know values by intuition" (p. 238; my emphasis). Russell is apparently thinking of the conflicting opinions regarding the things that have been claimed to have intrinsic value, e.g. love, knowledge, virtue, etc. But there may be other candidates on which virtually all could agree. Might not the satisfaction of a desire—or least the accompanying *feeling* of satisfaction—be such a candidate?[10]

[8] On Russell's utilitarian normative ethics, to say that an act A is wrong would likely be rendered as roughly: A has consequences C, and C are not as good as consequences C' of something else, A', the agent could have done instead. This is in the optative mood because the second conjunct—C' is better than C—is in the optative mood, viz. "Would that everyone desired C' rather than C."

[9] *Religion and Science* (London: Thornton Butterworth, 1935; New York: Oxford U. P., 1997), pp. 230, 237–8.

[10] I am thinking here of intrinsic value understood as roughly what is worth having for its own sake, apart from its consequences or whether it is conducive to other things of value. This seems to be approximately the sense in which Russell and other ethicists have used the term.

None of this need undermine Potter's thesis. Indeed, he is fully aware that Russell's emotivism may have contained more objectivity than Russell realized (p. 170) and that Russell himself might not have been happy with the objective implications of his enlightened emotivism. He was, after all, long convinced that the doctrine of the objectivity of moral values led to persecution and cruelty, and even to war. But I agree with Potter's suggestion (p. 172) that the connection in Russell's mind was not a necessary one, but one that could be broken if ethics could be separated from religion in the public mind—or, perhaps, if religion could assume less credal forms.

Potter's enrichment of Russell's emotivism through the infusion of his ideas of desire and impulse is very interesting and original. But, as Potter shows, it probably creates as many problems as it solves, even if Russell's behaviouristic theory of desire in the *Analysis of Mind* is dropped. As he says, "Russell's failure to provide standards for the correct characterization of desires and impulses is a serious defect nonetheless—one that has an enormous impact on the ability of his theory to provide a basis for moral criticism and decision-making" (p. 168). I think Potter is correct about this. Russell's concepts of desire and impulse are pretty fuzzy, and his notion of the universalizability of desire turns out to suffer from some of the same difficulties that one encounters in trying to apply Kant's categorical imperative (pp. 114, 161, 171). Still, one must be careful about combining elements of Russell's philosophy, especially those elements developed at different times, possibly even prior to the onset of his genuinely emotive phase.

Russell admitted to dissatisfaction with his theory of desire as formulated in the *Analysis of Mind* (Schilpp, p. 698; *Papers* 11: 31), and he did, as Potter notes, modify his early behaviourism in later years (p. 143). As to the doctrine of impulse set forth in *Principles of Social Reconstruction*, Russell would probably agree with the criticism that his concepts are vague, but he would likely remind us (again) that this work wasn't written to bear the weight of philosophical scrutiny. As he once put it to V. J. McGill, who had strongly criticized his concept of impulse in *Principles*: "I did not write [the book] in my capacity as a 'philosopher'; I wrote it as a human being who suffered from the state of the world, wished to find some way of improving it, and was anxious to speak in plain terms to others who had similar feelings" (Schilpp, p. 730; *Papers* 11: 57).

Finally, just a minor point of disagreement. Potter refers in many places to Russell as a psychological egoist. There's no doubt that Russell regards self-interest as a powerful motive in human behaviour and as the basis of the enlightened self-interest which makes human society possible. But a psychological egoist is usually understood to be one who holds that humans are motivated *solely* by self-interest. Since Russell is clear that humans can have, and do have, impersonal desires and impulses, I think it's at least misleading to describe him as a psychological egoist.