THE CONTINUING IMPORTANCE OF BERTRAND RUSSELL

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To really appreciate the range of his achievements, we need an interdisciplinary effort; we need a carefully researched definitive edition of Russell's work, edited by a team consisting of, among others, philosophers and historians, a journal devoted to studying the various aspects of his activities and a whole army of researchers with access to a well-catalogued archive of his papers.

I am very pleased and honoured to give this inaugural lecture of the newly established Bertrand Russell Research Centre. The Research Centre will, I am sure, further enhance the already considerable reputation of McMaster University as the natural focus for research into Russell's life and work, a reputation it has enjoyed among scholars throughout the world for over thirty years. The various projects brought under its sheltering umbrella have done much during those years both to stimulate interest in this most remarkable of men and to demonstrate that, such is the sheer volume and variety of his output, students of his work need never fear that the last word on him has been, or ever will be, written. As the extraordinary three-volume bibliography compiled by Harry Ruja and McMaster's own Kenneth Blackwell has shown, even the apparently straightforward job of listing all of Russell's published writings is itself a lifetime's work. The merest glance at that bibliography is enough to make ordinary mortals recoil in horror at the scale of the task facing the editors of the heroically well-researched and relentlessly

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well-presented series, *The Collected Papers of Bertrand Russell*, a series which, if by some miracle it is ever actually completed, will surely stand as one of the finest scholarly editions of a writer's work ever produced. The mass of unpublished work awaiting the diligent researcher in the Russell Archives is, if anything, still more daunting. How Russell managed to write so many manuscripts and letters in one lifetime is a deep and abiding mystery. Hardly a day in his long life can have passed without his writing, in one form or another, several thousand words. Future generations, I am convinced, will simply refuse to believe that the name "Bertrand Russell" denotes an individual. Surely, they will insist, it must be the name of a committee. Certainly there is more than enough to keep the commentators who contribute to the journal, *Russell*, and the internet listserve Russell-l—both now under the auspices of the new Research Centre—busy for the rest of their lives.

But the question that must be asked about this mass of material is this: is it noteworthy for anything other than its undoubtedly impressive bulk? No one could possibly dispute that Russell wrote a very great deal, but how much of it is, or should be, of interest to the world outside Hamilton, Ontario? Why should we look upon the various endeavours associated with the Russell Research Centre—the archives, the journal, the *Collected Papers*, the discussion list—with anything other than bemused curiosity and astonishment that anyone should think it worth their while to invest the vast amounts of energy required to store, list, publish and comment upon this huge mountain of work? What is it about Russell that makes him important enough to regard these endeavours as anything other than a species of that strange, compulsive desire to collect, record and list things that produces train-spotters and stamp-collectors?

Where, exactly, Russell's importance lies is a matter about which Russell himself, apparently, was, towards the end of his life at least, in two minds. In an interview he gave in 1964, at the age of 92, he remarked: "My most important work is my share of *Principia Mathematica*." Then, later on in the same interview, he said: "If mankind survives, my work on behalf of this will be the most important thing I have done." Well, mankind *has* survived, so are we, in retrospect, to consider his work on behalf of its survival as the most important thing he ever did? I don't think so. Of course, *if* we regard the work that Russell did in the last two decades of his life as having been necessary for the survival

of mankind, then, naturally, we ought to look upon that as the most important thing he ever did. What, after all, could be more important than saving humanity from self-destruction? But, I am afraid that, here, Russell was succumbing to the self-deception that afflicts many in their extreme old age. In a letter to the philosopher C. W. K. Mundle of 19 June 1967, Russell explained the lateness of his reply to Mundle's earlier letter by saying: "a great deal of work has come upon me, neglect of some of which might jeopardize the continuation of the human race." There is no sign that he was joking. The work he had in mind, one supposes, included the organization of the International War Crimes Tribunal and the sending of Ralph Schoenman and other members of the directorship of the Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation to places throughout the world to lend support to various revolutionary movements. Even if one sympathized with the aims of this work, it is difficult, I think, to regard it as having been essential for the continuation of the human race.

But if not in saving humanity, where does the continuing importance of Bertrand Russell lie? Russell, I think, was closer to the truth on this question in his first remark about what his most important work was. His permanent place in the history of ideas is ensured first and foremost by the work he did on the philosophy of mathematics in the last decade of the nineteenth century and the first two decades of the twentieth. It is not necessary—or, even, given how often he changed his mind, possible—to agree with all his views during this period in order to concede the importance of what he achieved. Even if one agreed with none of the many positions for which he was arguing, however, one would have to recognize that in, for example, *The Principles of Mathematics*, his 1904 essay on the philosophy of Meinong, his seminal 1905 article "On Denoting" and *Principia Mathematica*, Russell was writing philosophy of a subtlety and depth that very few philosophers have managed. What is particularly impressive about this body of work—and what is revealed as never before in the hitherto unpublished drafts of articles now available in *The Collected Papers of Bertrand Russell*—is the relentless way in which Russell subjected his own views to penetrating criticism, never contenting himself with an easy way out of his own difficulties.

Philosophers generally look to their colleagues to find objections to their theories and to scrutinize their work for its weaknesses, a service which, on the whole, those colleagues are only too willing to provide.

But, until he met Wittgenstein, Russell was more or less on his own in this respect. G. E. Moore, with whom Russell enjoyed many fruitful discussions on philosophical logic at the turn of the century, was ill-equipped to follow Russell in his explorations into the nature of mathematical truth, and Alfred North Whitehead, his undergraduate mathematics tutor and his collaborator on *Principia Mathematica*, was equally ill-equipped to follow the nuances of Russell's purely philosophical—rather than mathematical—concerns. Thus, to a very large extent, when we watch Russell struggling to meet objections to his theories, the hardest difficulties he has to face are those raised by himself. In this way, his work stands as a model of intellectual integrity, a paradigm of Wittgenstein's injunction to his philosopher friend Rush Rhees to "go the bloody hard way".

The most striking example of this is provided by Russell's endeavours to overcome the problems presented to his philosophy of mathematics by what has become known as Russell's Paradox. The paradox arises from the following considerations: some classes are members of themselves—the class of all classes, for example, is itself a class and therefore a member of itself—and some classes are not: the class of all men, for example, is not itself a man. Therefore we ought to be able to construct the class of all classes that are not members of themselves. But now, if we ask of *this* class whether it is a member of itself we become enmeshed in an apparently inescapable contradiction, for if it is not, then it ought to be (since it is the class of *all* classes that are not members of themselves), and if it is, then it ought not to be (since it is the class of all classes that are *not* members of themselves). As many undergraduate teachers of philosophy will know, the hardest thing to explain about this conundrum is why it is of any importance at all. Russell himself knew only two people capable of understanding its importance, Alfred North Whitehead and Gottlob Frege, both of whom responded to it with a metaphorical wringing of their hands, Whitehead responding to it with a line borrowed from Robert Browning—"never glad confident morning again"—and Frege with the rather desolate remark "arithmetic totters".

Russell alone could both see why it was important and how to go about repairing the damage. The reason it was important was that it threatened the foundations of mathematics which Russell had constructed in the first draft of *The Principles of Mathematics* and which, until his discovery of the paradox shortly after finishing that draft, he

considered to be definitive. At the centre of those foundations was the thought that numbers could be understood as classes, a thought which, Russell considered, allowed him to show that the whole of mathematics was nothing but logic, thereby revealing, for the first time, the true nature of mathematical truth. But the paradox threatened these foundations by appearing to show that the notion of a class gave rise to contradictions. Russell was therefore faced with the choice of either giving up his claim to have revealed the true nature of mathematics or showing how his theory could withstand the threat posed by the paradox.

He chose the latter course and, between 1901 and 1907, worked extraordinarily hard at the very furthest limits of abstract thought trying to devise a theory that would rescue the foundations of mathematics he had built in the *Principles*. The theory he settled on—the so-called Ramified Theory of Types that lies at the heart of *Principia Mathematica*—has enjoyed very little support, either from philosophers or mathematicians, and, as we now know from Gödel's Theorem, the search for a single theory of logic within which the whole of mathematics could be derived is bound to remain fruitless. However, in searching for such a theory, Russell was led into a series of reflections on the nature of logic, truth and meaning that have had a deep and lasting influence on subsequent philosophy. Indeed, it is not too much to say that the entire tradition of analytic philosophy—a tradition that remains dominant in English-speaking countries—is very largely Russell's creation. That tradition has its detractors, of course, and I, for one, would not deny that it has produced a lot of work that is sterile, overly technical and, in many cases, just plain boring. But it has also—and perhaps it receives insufficient credit for this—done a great deal to keep alive qualities that are essential if there is to be any worthwhile philosophical thinking at all, qualities such as logical rigour, a concern for clarity and, above all, intellectual integrity, all of which qualities Russell's philosophical work exhibits in their purest possible form.

If Russell had stopped working and faded into obscurity after finishing *Principia Mathematica*, he would still have earned himself a permanent place in the history of philosophy. But, of course, he did neither. In 1930, he was asked by a journalist called Hayden Church: "When you look back on your life from your death-bed, by what facts will you determine whether you have succeeded or failed?" In his reply, Russell listed factors by which he would judge the success of his life, the first of which

was his work in philosophy and mathematical logic. The second was his work on social questions, the third the success or otherwise of his children, and the fourth his personal influence on people he had known. With regard to this last, Russell wrote: "I once persuaded a young man to be a philosopher rather than an aeronaut, and he became a first-rate philosopher. I shall think of this with satisfaction on my death-bed." He was thinking, of course, of Wittgenstein, his role in whose development and recognition, though widely, if sometimes begrudgingly, acknowledged, is insufficiently appreciated. If it had not been for Russell, Wittgenstein would never have become a philosopher in the first place, and if it had not been for Russell's introduction, Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* would never have seen the light of day. It is difficult to imagine a university in the world other than Cambridge that would have given Wittgenstein a lecturing position in 1930, and difficult to imagine even Cambridge taking such a step without Russell's support. At almost every stage, Wittgenstein owed his career to Russell, something for which many of Wittgenstein's disciples, following Wittgenstein himself, have given Russell disgracefully little credit. It is doubtful whether Russell really did contemplate his personal influence on Wittgenstein on his death-bed, but it is certainly not the least of his contributions to twentieth-century intellectual life.

His unremitting generosity to Wittgenstein is all the more remarkable, when one considers the almost devastating effect that Wittgenstein had on Russell's own philosophical career. When, in the summer of 1913, Wittgenstein severely criticized a book that Russell was working on, a book called *Theory of Knowledge*, Russell not only abandoned the book but also, for a while at least, lost faith in his own abilities as a philosopher. He tried for a while to carry on with the book, but then abandoned it in despair, writing to his lover, Ottoline Morrell, that in continuing with the book, he felt that he was failing, for the first time in his life, to philosophize with complete honesty and integrity, a feeling that induced in him thoughts of suicide. Three years later, he returned to the subject in another letter to Ottoline in which he told her that Wittgenstein's criticism has been "an event of first-rate importance" in his life. "I saw", he wrote, "that I could not hope ever again to do fundamental work in philosophy."

In fact, Russell wrote a great deal of philosophy after Wittgenstein's attack in the summer of 1913, including, most notably, *Our Knowledge of the External World*, *The Philosophy of Logical Atomism*, *Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy*, *The Analysis of Mind*, *The Analysis of Matter*, "The Limits of Empiricism", *An Inquiry into Meaning and Truth*, *History of Western Philosophy* and *Human Knowledge*. Whether any of these deserve to be regarded as "fundamental work" is a matter for debate, but at the very least one could say that very successful careers in philosophy have been built on much less.

It is a mark of Russell's stature as a philosopher that when he produces work that is merely distinguished, rather than great, we can detect a falling off of standards and suspect that his mind is not fully on the job. And, indeed, after 1914, his mind very rarely was concentrated solely on philosophy. Russell himself has said that his life was governed by three overwhelmingly strong passions, which, he wrote, "like great winds, have blown me hither and thither, over a deep ocean of anguish". These passions, as Russell described them, were: "the longing for love, the search for knowledge, and unbearable pity for the suffering of mankind". The second of these inspired his philosophical work; the third compelled him, in 1914, as on many other occasions, to temporarily abandon philosophy in favour of political activism.

I am one of those—and there are many—who do not believe that in his political work Russell achieved the greatness that he achieved in philosophy. Nevertheless I have a profound admiration for his courage during the First World War, his opposition to which cost him his job at Cambridge and resulted in his being sentenced to six months in prison. Enormous pressure was put to bear on him to keep quiet, but he insisted on listening to his own conscience, which told him that his duty was to oppose the senseless mass slaughter of young men that was being misrepresented as a glorious fight against tyranny. The articles and books he published during the First World War may not establish him as a political analyst of the first rank, but what they do reveal, if nothing else, is his steadfast refusal to accept official propaganda and his brave determination to speak out against something he believed to be an abomination.

Equally admirable, if not more so, in my opinion, is his 1920 book, *The Practice and Theory of Bolshevism*, written after a brief visit to the Soviet Union, in which he saw for himself the nature of the Leninist regime and even had the opportunity to discuss politics with Lenin himself. Russell is often criticized for the frequency with which he was prepared to change his mind, on political questions as well as on philo-

sophical ones, but his reaction to the Soviet Union shows what an enormous strength this flexibility could be. Like many other leading intellectuals—including the Webbs, H. G. Wells and many of the young Cambridge radicals of the 1930s—Russell visited Russia expecting to find there a viable alternative to Western capitalism. "I believe", he wrote, immediately before his visit, "that Socialists throughout the world should support the Bolsheviks." Unlike others who expressed similar sentiments, however, Russell was not blinded by his hopes and expectations. What he saw in the Soviet Union was a cruel and despotic regime that served the interests of only a tiny proportion of Russia's vast population. Almost alone among British left-wing thinkers, he was prepared to record frankly these impressions and to analyse the flaws in Leninist theory that led to the brutality of the Soviet Union's practice. Moreover, he insisted on publishing these impressions and reflections despite knowing that, in doing so, he would be hurting his political friends and gladdening his political enemies. As a consequence he was regarded with some suspicion by the British left for the rest of his life, and it is perhaps only now, after the break-up of the Soviet Union, that he can be given the credit he deserves for being among the first to speak the truth about the Soviet regime.

Unfortunately, Russell's political writing never again reached the height of *Practice and Theory of Bolshevism*. His 1922 book, *The Problem of China*, written after he had spent a year in Peking as a visiting lecturer, is full of good sense and humanity and is eminently likeable, but what it has to say does not have the importance of his expose of the Soviet system, his policy prescriptions distorted by his uncharacteristically sentimental conception of the Chinese as an inherently loveable race of people who prefer wisdom and laughter to money and power.

After his return from China, Russell, turning down the invitation to return to Cambridge, married his second wife, Dora, and became a full-time journalist and public lecturer. His decision to choose this career over that of an academic was motivated partly by financial considerations but partly also by the conviction that, in addressing his work to the general public rather than to the tiny handful of people capable of understanding *Principia Mathematica*, he stood a greater chance of doing some good in the world. And, indeed, it is largely on the basis of the lectures and books he wrote during his second marriage—"Why I Am Not a Christian", *What I Believe*, *On Education*, *Marriage and Morals* and *The Conquest of Happiness*—that Russell acquired his reputation as being a philosopher with something of interest and importance to say on the moral, social and political issues that affect us all. Whether there is anything of enduring importance in these writings is something about which I myself am very sceptical. I believe his reflections on religion to be very superficial, his advice to parents on how to educate their young children disastrous, his views on marriage bizarre and his prescriptions for a happy life pat and unconvincing. However, there is something positive about these works that even a non-believer like myself can say, which is this: that it is refreshing to see a modern-day philosopher step outside the ivory tower and engage himself with issues of general concern. If the result of this is to demonstrate that a philosopher does not necessarily have any better idea of how we should live our lives than other people, then, that too, perhaps, is a valuable lesson.

What is of enduring importance in Russell's political journalism of the 1920s and, especially, of the 1930s, is his refusal to accept a view simply because it is fashionable. In the thirties, it was fashionable to believe that liberalism was dead and that one had to choose between communism and fascism. This led, on the one hand, to a fantastic credulity about the Soviet Union on the part of socialists, and, on the other, to those who should have known better—among them, Ezra Pound, George Bernard Shaw and Wyndham Lewis—speaking well of Mussolini and Hitler. Russell, much to his lasting credit, would have none of this, and, at the risk of confirming the opinions of those who dismissed him as an anachronism, was tireless in pointing out that the death of liberalism had been much exaggerated. As a political theorist, he may have been lightweight, and as a guide to living one's life he may have been flawed, but as a writer prepared to utter timely reminders of the obvious he was unsurpassed. One such timely reminder was his insistence that, after all, one did not *have* to be either a communist or a fascist; another is contained in his superb essay entitled "The Superior Virtue of the Oppressed", in which he reminded his readers that just because a minority is oppressed—and therefore to that extent to be sympathized—it does not follow that the members of that minority are intrinsically any more virtuous than their oppressors. That Russell himself, in his writings on the Vietcong in the 1960s, fell victim to the very fallacy that he had so brilliantly exposed should not blind us to the importance of the warning he had expressed about a form of political

sentimentality that remains, to this day, dispiritingly widespread.

It is my, perhaps controversial, belief that in the 1940s, fifties and sixties, Russell wrote little of enduring importance. This does not mean, however, that I would like to see his work during these decades to go unstudied. I would like to see, for example, a study of his philosophical writings of the forties and fifties—writings that include *An Inquiry into Meaning and Truth*, *History of Western Philosophy*, *Human Knowledge* and a series of attacks on the linguistic style of philosophy that became prevalent at Oxford in the 1950s—that does for that body of work what Nick Griffin's magnificent book, *Russell's Idealist Apprenticeship*, did for Russell's very earliest philosophical writings; that is to say, a detailed study that attempted to extract from these works something of abiding interest. I would also like to see a serious study of Russell's last political campaigns—the Pugwash Movement, the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, the Committee of 100 and the Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation—my own attitude to which becomes increasingly less sympathetic at every turn. I regard the Pugwash Movement as a serious and important attempt by scientists to overcome the barriers erected by the Cold War and to come together to warn the public at large about the dangers of thermonuclear weapons and the reliance on nuclear energy, and the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament as a well-intentioned attempt to persuade the British Government to withdraw its commitment to NATO's nuclear strategy. However, I cannot see the Committee of 100 as anything other than a bizarre and doomed attempt to force the government's hand through civil disobedience, nor can I see anything in the Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation except an attempt by a group of Trotskyists to use Russell's reputation as a peace campaigner for their own political agenda, an agenda that had more to do with armed revolution than with peace. However, these are contentious views, and one of the advantages of having a Russell Archive and a Russell Research Centre is that they provide a more sympathetic observer than I the opportunity to examine the record and to present a more sympathetic view. I sincerely hope that this opportunity will be taken.

It is, in many ways, an unenviable, even if absorbing, task. To read through the entire corpus of Russell's work is more or less an impossible undertaking. But to those of us who have made the attempt to read at least most of it, one indelible impression remains of what distinguishes him from most professional philosophers, and indeed from most journalists, and that is the quality of his prose. Whether he was writing for academic journals, popular magazines or just replying to letters from members of the general public, his facility to produce stylistically immaculate writing can inspire only awe and envy in those who write for a living. It is, we feel like protesting, just simply *unfair* that someone who writes so much can keep up such a high standard. Even when what he says is superficial, glib, unfair, contradictory or just plain wrong, he, as often as not, says it beautifully. This is, above all, what makes the Russell Archives acquired by McMaster such an enviable treasure trove. The 40,000 or so letters which are collected there—most of which remain to this day unpublished—are written by one of the great stylists of the English language.

Given this, it is perhaps disappointing that Russell published so few works that can be judged, from a literary point of view, great works. On a number of occasions, he tried his hand at fiction, but the results—the 1912 autobiographical novella, *The Perplexities of John Forstice*, and the short stories collected in *Satan in the Suburbs* and *Nightmares of Eminent Persons*—are curiously inept, almost embarrassing. When he wrote fiction a strange archness overcame his normal style, lending his writing a certain stiffness and artificiality. Much better is the first volume of his *Autobiography*, which is, in my opinion at least, his literary masterpiece. The second and third volumes fail to live up to the promise of the first, the second hampered by worries about litigation and the third hastily put together with the help of his fourth wife, Edith, in order to raise money for the Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation. But the first volume is a gem and ought to be read by anyone with an interest in the intellectual history of the twentieth century or, indeed, in the genre of autobiography of which it is an exemplar.

Apart from the mellifluous prose and the sometimes disconcertingly honest self-examination that it contains, what makes the first volume such an indispensable work is the quality of the correspondence it contains. Even if Russell had not been one of the greatest philosophers of the twentieth century, one of its most controversial polemicists and one of its most tenacious political activists, he would surely have gone down in history as one of its greatest letter-writers. Like many researchers into Russell's life, I have often wished that he and Ottoline Morrell had bought telephones to communicate with each other, but, if they had, consider what we would have lost. The 2,000 or so letters he wrote to

her—sometimes dashing off two or three in a single afternoon—constitute one of the greatest collections of love-letters ever written. Admittedly they are repetitive and sometimes embarrassingly gushing, but the record they contain of Russell's day to day life, the swings of his moods, the extremes of his passions, are surely without parallel. And this correspondence, huge though it is, is not an isolated example of Russell's powers as a letter-writer. His correspondences with Wittgenstein, with Joseph Conrad, with D. H. Lawrence, with Constance Malleson, even his replies to letters from members of the general public (of which there are thousands) are all, in their way, equally absorbing. He was, like Virginia Woolf, a compulsive correspondent, determined to commit every deed and every thought to writing.

When I began my biography of Russell, I intended to write a one-volume work. I soon discovered, however, that this would be impossible. Even if I had written a ten-volume work I could not have done justice to the extent and the richness of the available documentation. The subtlety and importance of his philosophical work, the bewildering complexity of his emotional life, the intensity and the variety of his public commitments—all this can only be hinted at, even in a two-volume book that contains nearly a million words. And then there is the problem of personal bias. If I were asked to list the things that make Russell of continued importance, I would mention *The Principles of Mathematics*, "On Denoting", *Principia Mathematica*, *The Practice and Theory of Bolshevism*, his *Autobiography* and his personal correspondence. Others would mention his work on education, *Marriage and Morals* and *The Conquest of Happiness*, and still others would point to the importance of his campaigns for peace. A true appreciation of Russell's life and work, in all its aspects, is perhaps beyond the scope of a single individual. To really appreciate the range of his achievements, we need an interdisciplinary effort; we need a carefully researched definitive edition of his work, edited by a team consisting of, among others, philosophers and historians, a journal devoted to studying the various aspects of his activities and a whole army of researchers with access to a well-catalogued archive of his papers. We need, in other words, the Bertrand Russell Research Centre.