

RUSSELL AND PIGDEN ON ETHICAL THEORY

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Charles R. Pigden, ed. *Russell on Ethics: Selections from the Writings of Bertrand Russell*. London and New York: Routledge, 1999. Pp. xiv, 257. Hardbound: £40.00; US\$65.00. Paperbound: £12.99; US\$20.99; C\$31.99. ISBN: 0 415 15660 2.

Russell on Ethics is the subject of several hopeful claims in the editor's introduction. One is that "this book will provide an entertaining introduction to the chief problems of ethical theory and, specifically, meta-ethics" (p. xii). Most people are used to authorial hyperbole, but in this case the editor's claim is well founded.

Russell on Ethics is an ambitious book. Philosophical anthologies have always tried to teach their authors' thought, but *Russell on Ethics* does more: it succeeds in teaching Russell's thought and the subject on which the selections are based, metaethics. The first achievement is multifaceted. The book opens up research on Russell on this topic and provides most (but not all) of the primary texts for such research. E.g., Pigden explores the reciprocal influence of Moore and Russell through his discovery (pp. 10, 72) that §§13 and 26 of *Principia Ethica* are (partly) in reaction to Russell's views, which Moore knew well from Apostolic meetings. Quantitatively, the text is as much Pigden's as Russell's. I congratulate the joint author on devising a book that both provides original guided research into Russell's metaethical writings and teaches ethical theory. I, for one, would like to have his commentary extended to the full range of those writings.

The author of a great deal of normative writing, Russell also published a good deal on metaethics.¹ Proportionately to what he wrote on other topics at the time, Russell wrote more on ethical theory in his twenties than later.

¹ Given the immensity of Russell's output, this statement is consistent with Nicholas Griffin's that "He wrote relatively little on ethics" (*Concise Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* [London and New York: 2000], p. 780).

However, his thought developed, and there are major papers or chapters marking almost every new position with which he experimented. In his 60s and 70s he undertook a major research project to try to make his non-cognitivism objectively valid. All this took place without his having what might be called a professional interest in the theory of ethics. There is no record of his teaching the subject, except incidentally in teaching the history of philosophy, and he did not publish on the subject in academic journals.² Instead, ethical theory was a personal interest as he tried to attain certain knowledge of fundamental values. This makes the history of Russell's meta-ethical thought part of his personal and, as should become clear, even his political biography.

Pigden's approach is to preface each selection or extract with informative, pointed and witty commentary. These headnotes can be as long as the extracts. Pigden's frequent references to current literature indicate where theory has developed since Russell propounded his, and also trace Russell's anticipations of landmark publications such as Mackie's "The Refutation of Morals". The selections are arranged, for the most part, in two chronological sections. The first serious piece is one that Russell wrote for and gave to Alys Pearsall Smith before they became engaged. It remained possibly unread in her papers until twenty years ago, and possibly forgotten by Russell after the turn of the century. This paper, and those that follow it, assume the reader is attuned to current ethical controversies, and the reader will definitely benefit from first reading the introduction. Russell's expository powers improve immensely as his ethical thought matures, and that is one sure, and delightful, reward for reading further in this volume.

Pigden includes some selections on Russell's normative ethic of impersonal self-enlargement. There is an extract from the chapter on Spinoza in the *History of Western Philosophy*. However, he could have illustrated both normative ethics and metaethics by an extract from that book's Nietzsche chapter. Russell imagines a dialogue between Buddha and Nietzsche on their ultimate values. It is dramatic, although it does not resolve the question at issue.

Russell was much affected by his theoretical inability, based on his non-cognitivism, to decide between opposing fundamental values, or ends.³ There are a number of unpublished manuscript outlines in the Russell Archives in which Russell focuses on the subjectivist's problem at the time of the growth

² E.g., he wrote Daniel J. Bronstein that he wished to avoid giving a course at CCNY on ethics or metaphysics. See Thom Weidlich, *Appointment Denied* (Buffalo: Prometheus P., 2000), p. 13.

³ Michael Ruse, in introducing *Religion and Science*, calls Russell's position "deeply immoral" (New York and Oxford: Oxford U.P., 1997), p. xix.

of totalitarianism. One of them is to be found in the file of notes he made prior to writing on Nietzsche, and is headed "Arguments against Power Philosophies".⁴ He classifies these arguments in three ways: intellectual, emotional and practical. He judges that "Power philosophies, through [their] social consequences, [are] self-refuting." In a file of manuscripts that is earlier by a few years, he wrote three outlines that are all titled "Need Morals have a Religious Basis?".⁵ In the projected *Revolt against Reason* book and its partial outcome as *Power*, from which Pigden selects a sizable chapter, Russell devoted much effort to undermining the intellectual foundations of the fascist and communist forms of totalitarianism. To his frustration, he could not offer a logical refutation of their ethical theory and basic values. As Pigden realizes, Russell did try to offer a "social refutation" based on the compossibility of groups of desires.

The social refuge was one he tried his best to develop but could not, I believe, stretch sufficiently to cover, as he put it in the first "Need Morals have a Religious Basis?" outline: "But what about murders by Hitler, Mussolini, and Stalin, which go unpunished?" He seems to have had the social refutation in mind when he wrote in "Reply to Criticisms" that "As a matter of argument, I can, I think, show that I am not guilty of any logical inconsistency in holding to the above interpretation of ethics [the optative brand of emotivism] and at the same time expressing strong ethical preferences" (p. 149; *Papers*, II: 51). It was shortly afterwards that he wrote the theoretical part of *Human Society in Ethics and Politics* for his work *Human Knowledge*. But the problem remained and, as Pigden quotes, even near the end of his life Russell wrote that he would "deeply rejoice" if he could attain certainty in matters of ethical theory (p. 116).

What else might an expanded anthology of Russell's metaethical writings include in order to make it a full research resource for its subject? It could even cover normative ethical writings in which Russell evaluates considerations pro and con. They would show the nature of the informal reasoning that, as a non-cognitivist, he sanctioned for this purpose.

Only three of Russell's earliest metaethical writings are omitted, so that period is well represented. His close examination of Leibniz's ethics in the chapter of that name in *The Philosophy of Leibniz* is not mentioned. The second review of Moore is mentioned but not used. "The Elements of

⁴ "Totalitarianism: Hobbes, Fichte, Nazis", at RA1 210.006721. This outline seems closely related to the chapter of the same title in *Power*.

⁵ RA1 220.016640. The outline, published in *Papers* 10, App. VI, "Can an objective moral standard be set up?", is in the same file, and so is one titled "St. Anthony in a modern Eden". There is at least one other attempt in another file.

Ethics", Russell's full Moorean exposition from 1905, is deliberately omitted. Pigden defends the omission by the claim that it contains Moore's opinions rather than Russell's own (p. 96). But at the time Russell shared Moore's opinions, and Russell positioned the paper in his own first anthology and allowed its reprinting in other volumes many years later. Moreover, it was against this paper that Santayana wrote so influentially on Russell in *Winds of Doctrine*.⁶ There are writings in 1915–16 on theory of morality that have yet to be studied.⁷ There is a fine short article on rule utilitarianism and conscience, "The Conscientious Objector: Reply to E. A. Wodehouse" (1917),⁸ and the review of Schweitzer's *Civilization and Ethics* (1924).⁹ The 1923 Preface to the Mosher edition of *A Free Man's Worship* has several paragraphs on Russell's new view of the subjectivity of good and evil. Pigden quotes from, rather than presents, the ethical theory chapter from *An Outline of Philosophy* (1927). There are several more lengthy sections on ethics in the *History* that could be mined. There is the chapter "Individual and Social Ethics" in *Authority and the Individual* (1949). The 1949 review of Blanco White's *Ethics for Unbelievers* has passages of interest.¹⁰ Much more is available in *Human Society* (1954), from which Pigden makes a few selections. Russell's old age might be represented by "The Duty of a Philosopher in This Age" (1964) and the single paragraph on compossibility in the second chapter of the third volume of the *Autobiography*; this paragraph was his last writing on ethical theory and was composed in 1967. It begins: "There is one approximately rational approach to ethical conclusions which has a certain validity" (*Auto.*, 3: 33).

It is pleasing to find Pigden acknowledging Russell's supreme normative ethical principle by a final section, "Spinoza and the Ethic of impersonal Self-Enlargement". His tie-in to Russell's opposition to pragmatism is instructive.

The book is well indexed, well produced, and almost free of typographical error.¹¹ There is a long, helpful bibliography, which however omits Ryan's introduction to the error-theoretical paper "Is There an Absolute Good?". The joint author's refreshing and informal style produces such gems as the description of an early paper containing "a grisly excess of Apostolic banter" (p. 87).¹² *Russell on Ethics* is the first of what one hopes will be a long series.

⁶ See Griffin's commentary in *Selected Letters*, 1: 412, for an anticipation.

⁷ See *Papers* 13, papers 38a, 46, the first being cited by Pigden (p. 191).

⁸ *Papers* 14 (but not 8, as one would expect). Russell wrote it as "a person who believes in relative ethics and has some acquaintance with philosophic distinctions" (p. 123).

⁹ *Papers* 9.

¹⁰ See *Papers* 11.

¹¹ E.g., "of false" (p. 97), instead of "or false"; "CPBR 12" (p. 191), whereas it should be 13.

¹² *Russell*, n.s. 6 (1986): 144–8, which in turns cites the overlooked paper by Harry Rujja,