

RUSSELL IN A NUTSHELL

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A. C. Grayling. *Russell*. (Past Masters.) Oxford and New York: Oxford U. P., 1996. Pp. ix, 115. Paper; £5.99, US\$7.95.

In 1972 A. J. Ayer's *Russell* came out in Fontana's Modern Masters series. Now, quarter of a century later, Russell appears again, this time in Anthony Grayling's hands in Oxford's Past Masters series. It is inevitable that one should compare the two volumes, although doing so offers little useful insight into the differences between modern and past masters. Ayer, it is true, is more inclined to enter into an extended philosophical debate with Russell—as is appropriate when one is dealing with an elder contemporary. Grayling, by contrast, is more straightforwardly expository, although inevitably he has criticisms of his own to make and those of others to report. There is a sense in which, in epistemology, Ayer took up where Russell left off. Today, it is very unlikely that any philosopher, working in any of the areas in which Russell left his mark, would want to start exactly where Russell stopped. Not that this would have worried Russell: it was his hope that philosophy would become a progressive discipline, and the fact that current research does not start from his own work might be, in his eyes, an indication of success. A more important indication, as Grayling notes, is to be found in the number of ideas he put forward which have now become so established a part of philosophical discussion (though rarely in exactly the form in which he presented them) as to be taken for granted. "So pervasive is his influence both on the matter and style of twentieth-century English-speaking philosophy", Grayling writes, "that he is practically its wallpaper" (p. 1).

Anyone writing a short introductory book on Russell faces insuperable difficulties. The most obvious are those caused by the length of Russell's life, the vast extent of his output, and the wide range of subjects with which he dealt. Worse problems, however, are caused by the fact that his philosophy never assumed a final, settled form, with respect to which all his various contributions might be assessed, as leading either towards or away from the final goal. Moreover, detailed scholarship, despite important advances since Ayer wrote, has not yet reached the stage at which it would be of much help to the writer of a capsule summary of Russell's philosophy. If anything, it has made his task more difficult, by challenging the simplifications on which

earlier summaries were based.

Faced with these impossible odds, Grayling labours bravely and, almost always, well. The three central chapters of his book are devoted to "Logic and Philosophy", "Philosophy, Mind, and Science" and "Politics and Society". They are preceded by a brief survey of Russell's life and work, both fuller and better than Ayer's. They are followed by an even briefer survey of his influence. This last is especially valuable, since it serves not only to locate Russell in his philosophical tradition but to point out (what is very often overlooked) his huge and (for a long time) defining importance for that tradition. Perhaps the most obvious difference that the reader notes between Ayer's book and Grayling's is the greater prominence Grayling gives to Russell's social and political thought. Grayling handles this sympathetically and well.

Russell's contributions to logic pose the greatest difficulty to popularizers. Two at least—the theory of descriptions and his discovery of the set-theoretic paradoxes and their resolution by means of the theory of types—have to be included in any book on Russell. Of the two, the second is probably easier to handle. Although the paradoxes themselves are apt to induce a kind of mental vertigo in those coming upon them for the first time, there is at least no difficulty in convincing people that there is a serious problem to be dealt with. Moreover, the theory of types, in outline (though not in its labyrinthine details, nor the tortuous route by which Russell came to it), is both intuitive and reasonably straightforward. It is not difficult even for beginners to see how it solves the paradoxes. Grayling handles the matter concisely (pp. 30–3) and even manages to provide more incidental details than one might have expected.

An introductory exposition of the theory of descriptions, however, is not helped by the actual history of the theory. Grayling takes the traditional line that Russell originally subscribed to a Meinongian theory of reference and thus embraced the theory of descriptions to be rid of non-existent entities. In fact, there is good evidence for thinking that Russell never held a Meinongian theory, which raises the difficult problem, for an introductory account, of explaining why Russell thought the new theory was called for.¹ Grayling not only states the theory informally, but provides the standard translation of statements involving definite descriptions into first-order predicate logic (p. 36). I fear, however, that the account he gives is too brief to be of much help to the beginner.

My main complaints about Grayling's treatment of Russell's philosophy

¹ Even if Russell had held a Meinongian theory, there would still be the problem, which Grayling does not address, of explaining why non-existent objects were so very obnoxious.

concern his criticisms of Russell's logical atomism. It is not that one wishes to defend it: as Grayling says, "It is difficult to find logical atomism satisfactory" (p. 52). But the criticisms which Grayling makes of it, seem to me to depend upon importing into Russell's logical atomism doctrines which belong to Wittgenstein's version of the theory. For example, he raises the familiar objection of colour-incompatibilities to the claim that all atomic facts (e.g. the fact that this sense-datum is yellow) are independent of each other (p. 53). But the independence of atomic facts is Wittgenstein's doctrine; there is no trace of it in Russell. For Russell, it is particulars which are independent, in the sense that each could exist independently of the others.²

Grayling's second objection is that, while Russell says that simples are not experienced "but known only inferentially as the limit of analysis",³ he also takes sense-data to be simples. Since sense-data can be experienced, the theory is incoherent (p. 53). But what Russell actually holds is that sense-data are *particulars*, and particulars, at least many of them, have spatial and temporal parts and so cannot be simple.⁴ Once more, it is Wittgenstein who holds that objects are simple (*Tractatus*, 2.02).

Grayling's third objection builds on the misidentification of particulars with simples in his second. He complains that a logically perfect language in which Russell's logical atomism could be expressed would have to contain an infinity of names, since there are infinitely many simples, each of which is nameable (p. 53). But it is particulars which, as potential objects of acquaintance, can be named, not simples, which are known only by description. Nor will Grayling's objection work for particulars. To begin with, so far as I can tell, Russell does not assume that there will be infinitely many particulars. (By contrast, it seems clear that there will be infinitely many simples.) But even if there were, there would be no need for infinitely many names. Russell can handle infinitely large classes by means of descriptions and identity—indeed, his theory of denotation was introduced for that very purpose. Once again, it is interference from Wittgenstein's logical atomism which distorts our view of Russell's, for it was Wittgenstein who, rashly dispensing with identity, required a distinct name for each distinct object.

These complaints notwithstanding, Grayling's book is welcome for its sympathetic tone and for the clear and concise way it deals with so many issues in Russell's thought. It is to be recommended.

² *PLA, Papers* 8: 179, 181.

³ "Logical Atomism", *Papers* 9: 173.

⁴ *PLA, Papers* 8: 178; "The Relation of Sense-Data to Physics", *Papers* 8: 6.