RUSSELL ON PRAGMATISM

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A certain view of contemporary philosophical thought, prominent only during the last decade or so, turns everything around, as it were, and saves pragmatism while savaging Russell. The renewed interest in anything even vaguely "pragmatic" seems to require that Russellian attempts at providing foundations be scoffed at, since presumably Russell was one of the chief targets of the original group under citation. Rorty has been one of the leading exponents of this view, and he notes that "As long as we see James or Dewey as having 'theories of truth' ... [w]e shall not see how radical their thought was—how deep was their criticism of the attempt, common to Kant, Husserl, Russell ..." to create foundations;[1] he also notes, in a similar vein, that "Neither William nor Henry James would have had anything to say in a world without Russells...."[2]

Although I enjoy the notion that Henry James would have had little to say in a world without Russells, the creation of Russell as chief stalking horse of the new, more relativistic movements strikes me as not without its defects. The chief defect, of course, is that the ease with which we can ridicule failed projects such as logical atomism prevents us from seeing what their virtues were in the first place. One is inclined to think that the swing of the pendulum has gone too far here, and that Russell deserves some small measure of redemption. In this regard I plan to argue here that a great deal of what Russell says about the pragmatic program, as he saw it in "Pragmatism", was quite correctly motivated, is worth preserving, and should not be the object

[1] Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis : U. of Minnesota P., 1982), p. 160.
[2] *Ibid.*, p. 136.

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of our continuous philosophic scorn, however fashionable such scorn might be at the moment.

I

Russell's essay was motivated largely by the work of William James and Schiller, although Russell admits that much of Dewey's work is relevant in this regard. As the citation above shows, the renascence of Dewey's work, in terms of popularity, means that Dewey is now viewed as pragmatism's chief exponent, at least in certain circles, and, more importantly, means that we are probably not wrong in interpreting much of Russell's commentary as directed at Deweyan views.

The heart and core of the debate seems to revolve around notions of truth, correspondence, theories, and the like. Incommensurability was never so incommensurable. One could, of course, simply admit defeat and choose not to pursue the matter. But if there is such a thing as philosophical clarification in this context, surely an examination of Russell's essay and some of the relevant work by the pragmatists (Dewey in particular) is called for.

To employ Rortian terminology, Russell believes in mirrors, and Dewey does not. But belief in mirrors is not necessarily reprehensible; one would like to know to what use the mirrors will be put. Russell criticizes the pragmatists' position on truth not only because he thinks it does violence to the English language, but because the attempt to employ a notion of truth that does not rest on some sort of correspondence must be insincere—it must rest, at bottom, on some other, unarticulated notion of truth. Dewey, as we know, metaphilosophically criticizes the notion that a concept of truth can be arrived at by employing any of the standard *a priori* lines of categorization.[3] What one is immediately tempted to say here is that a certain sort of category mistake is being made—Russell and Dewey are not talking about the same phenomena, as it were. But this assertion shifts the

[3] This theme is so ubiquitous in Dewey that it is difficult to find concise passages to support it. Two brief passages, from disparate works, are those beginning "The separation ... influence of cultural conditions", in *Theory of Valuation* (Chicago: U. of Chicago P., 1939), p. 64, and "Practically all epistemological discussion ... tableau is staged", in *Experience and Nature* (La Salle, Il.: Open Court, 1929), pp. 117–18.

argument back: if Dewey is free to attack a Russellian view, the force of Russell's contention that some notion of truth must be prior cannot be discounted.

As Russell notes:

> He [the pragmatist, James in this case] begins by assenting to the dictionary definition that "truth" means "the agreement" of our ideas with "reality". But, as he justly observes, this definition does not take us very far, unless we know what we mean by "agreement" and what we mean by "reality". The pragmatist holds that different sorts of "agreement" and different sorts of "reality" are concerned in different cases.[4]

Plainly, Russell is saying, the latter sorts of distinctions could not be made were there not some more fully grounded notion—the very notion the pragmatists are against, presumably—operating in the first place. But Dewey, of course, wants to maintain that there is no such notion, as the following epistemologically oriented set of assertions is designed to show:

> Practically all epistemological discussion depends upon a sudden and unavowed shift to and from the universe of having to the universe of discourse. At the outset, ordinary empirical affairs, chairs, tables, stones, sticks, etc., are called physical objects—which is obviously a term of theoretical interpretation when it is so applied, carrying within itself a complete metaphysical commitment. Then physical objects are defined as the objects of physics, which is, I suppose, the only correct designation. But such objects are clearly very different things from plants, lamps, chairs, thunder and lightning, rocks, etc., that were first called physical objects. So another transformation phantasmagoria in the tableau is staged.[5]

Here Dewey gives us the universe of "having" as against other universes of discourse, but if there is to be one discourse that is more fundamental, it is not clear what it would be—at least not in the sense that Russell requires, since the notion of "ordinary empirical affair" is left to stand alone.

This failure to speak to the same point is at the heart of the debate

[4] Russell, "Pragmatism", in *Philosophical Essays* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1966; 1st ed., 1910), p. 90; *Papers* 6: 268.

[5] Dewey, *Experience*, pp. 117–18.

between Russell and the pragmatists, but it does no good philosophically to champion their incommensurability by asserting that most of the virtue adhering to the positions is on the Deweyan (or Jamesian) side. When we refer to Russell's work as "foundational", we overlook—if we insist on cherishing pragmatism at the expense of hierarchies—the point of the notion of something's being foundational. We do not create the notion of foundations unnecessarily, or for no reason. Russell's "Philosophy of Logical Atomism" has the force that it does because the primitive notions are allied to what were then the comparatively recent developments in logic. It would seem to be unneeded to say this to Russellians, but apparently it is necessary to say it to pragmatists. Dewey ignores the motivation for bringing physics into a discussion of physical objects, and does not value the semantic primacy of sense-data when it is the semantics of the first-order predicate logic which is at stake.

II

Russell attacks the pragmatists on a second major front for their conflation, according to his lights, of the notions such as "works" (in the theoretical sense) and "is emotionally satisfying", or, as he also says, the conflation of "good" and "desire". It is, in fact, this large area which seems to be most worthy of Russell's criticism, and it is difficult to see how one could make the claim that the criticism is not well aimed.

With regard to the first of these two related conflations, Russell writes:

> A more serious objection to the argument from the procedure of the sciences is derived from the ambiguity of the conception of "working". What science requires of a working hypothesis is that it shall work *theoretically*, i.e. that all its verifiable consequences shall be *true*, and none *false*.... This is what we mean when we say that the law "works". We do not mean that it gives us emotional satisfaction, that it satisfies our aspirations, that it is a help in navigation, or that it facilitates a virtuous life.[6]

[6] "Pragmatism", *Philosophical Essays*, p. 95; *Papers* 6: 272.

Russell makes a similar set of assertions with regard to the second conflation above, that of "good" and "desire", in a passage in his essay that begins "But a closer examination shows that the pragmatists mean by the word 'good' whatever satisfies desire...."[7] Here he seems to get at something crucial which permeates the pragmatist line. Both James and Dewey attempt to collapse the usual means/end distinction as it occurs in the traditional formulation of ethical problems. Dewey specifically reiterates his theme that a greater collection of empirically based data would reveal the extent to which every "means" is shot through with an "end". A corollary is that what is desirable in the standard normative sense cannot be separated from what is or can be actually desired.

Here is Dewey on this thesis:

> But since the same word, "enjoyment", is applied also to gratifications that arise quire independently of prior desire and attendant effort, the ground is shifted so that "valuing" is identified with any and every state of enjoyment no matter how it comes about—including gratification obtained in the most casual and accidental manner, "accidental" in the sense of coming about apart from desire and intent.[8]

But Russell's response to this line—and again, I think his response is valuable—is that it places "... psychology ... paramount, not only over logic and the theory of knowledge, but also over ethics."[9] The larger point that Russell is making here is that something must be taken as primary, and now that something has turned out to be empirically confirmable facts about what it is that persons want. And yet if we were to examine these sorts of facts from the straightforward standpoint of their forming a basis for other sorts of conceptualizations, we might very well come to the conclusion (a conclusion that, apparently, the pragmatists cannot reach) that these are not the sorts of facts which we want to take as primitive, whether or not they are empirically derived.

What makes Russell's work particularly revelatory, I argue, is not so

[7] *Ibid.* p. 92; *Papers* 6: 270.
[8] Dewey, *Valuation*, p. 53.
[9] Russell, p. 92; *Papers* 6: 270.

much that he attempted to provide any sort of foundation, as that in this essay and in his commentary on the pragmatists in general, he points out the need for foundations. We have a tendency to move foundationally even when we are unaware of it, and yet pragmatist thought would like us to believe either that this phenomenon is not taking place, or that its taking place can be dispensed with from the standpoint of theory. To make the one assertion seems to be to insist on something that is plainly false, as Russell reminds us, and to make the other assertion smacks both of circularity and of a failure to grasp the nature of one's project.

III

Russell ends the essay titled "Pragmatism" with a number of pithy comments on the motivation behind pragmatist doctrine. It is probably somewhat ironic that there is, in fact, some psychologizing, at least of a certain sort, going on here, as Russell is quick to point out a certain sort of self-deception involved in pragmatic thought. But again I think we may see the virtues of his larger line of argument. Russell's closing comments are broadly to the effect that, where there are not standards, where the notion of "standard" itself is questioned, and where various doctrines are put on all fours with each other, so to speak, standards will eventually make themselves known. Some doctrines will achieve primacy; things will not, over a period of time, persist in a state of relative equality. But his point is that the manner in which such a change will occur tells us something about pragmatism itself, and what it tells us is not complimentary to this outlook.

For where a refusal to entertain the notion of primacy exists, that which is stronger, in some dubious sense, will eventually win out. Thus the somewhat bleak future that pragmatism would offer us, Russell argues, is a consequence of its failure to make the requisite sorts of distinctions at an earlier point.

He notes that:

> This philosophy, therefore, although it begins with liberty and toleration, develops, by inherent necessity, into the appeal of force and the arbitrament of the big battalions. By this development it becomes equally adapted to democracy at home and to imperialism abroad.[10]

Russell may, perhaps, be somewhat too pessimistic in his outlook, but then again his point does seem to be well taken. An era which asks us to consider a number of world views and vantages simultaneously naturally finds pragmatism attractive; pragmatism has the virtue that it obviates the necessity, not only of trying to decide among these views, but, more importantly, of trying to decide which standards would be employed to make that very decision. Dewey and others claim that we are inclined to try to make false dichotomies, to split hairs where the hair shaft has already been mutilated, and to force things where they will not go. Russell claims that failure to recognize the necessity (which, he seems to be claiming, occurs to us "naturally" in any case) to make these dichotomies at some early point leads inexorably to their being made forcedly at some later point.

It is thoroughly in keeping with the rest of Russell's work in areas related to theory of value that he ends his essay with remarks about the arrogance of those who believe in "man's omnipotence", and the greater vision of those who, as he phrases it "... desire rather the Stoic freedom that comes of mastery over the passions."[11] Here he is perhaps overstating what he takes to be the personality type concomitant to the pragmatist outlook. But whether or not his analysis of what motivates the pragmatists is correct, his assault on what he takes to be the failure of pragmatism to recognize its own motivation remains.

Russell's view and the views of the pragmatists are, indeed, incommensurable. But this does not mean that Russell's side should not be heard, and, perhaps more importantly, it does not mean that Russell was wrong about the long-term effects of rampant relativism.

[10] *Ibid.*, p. 110; *Papers* 6: 283.
[11] *Ibid.*, pp. 110–11; *Papers* 6: 284.