

BROADCAST REVIEW OF *HISTORY OF WESTERN PHILOSOPHY*^[1]

K. R. POPPER

Translated by
I. GRATTAN-GUINNESS

Bertrand Russell has written a new book.^[2] It is a great work, great in its ideas, great in its inspiration and great in its significance. The title is: *A History of Western Philosophy*, in German, *Geschichte der Abendlaendischen Philosophie*. The book can well be called unique. In any case, it is the first of its kind. There are many histories of philosophy, multi-volumed and single-volumed, good and bad. But up to now there has not been one written by a really great and original thinker. Most were written by well-trained scholars, but there is a great difference between a scholarly professor of philosophy who *writes* the history of philosophy, and a man like Russell who is himself a *maker* of the history of philosophy. Perhaps this explains in part the uniqueness of this book. It is a book that is written with clarity and at the same time with a cheerful ease; a book that ventures, and that can venture, to handle the history of philosophy with humour and with grace.

What is special and great in Russell's book? The table of contents is not essentially different from other histories of philosophy. Russell himself describes the special purpose upon which he has settled as follows: he wants to understand each philosopher from his *social context*, and to explain the philosopher's special philosophy (as far as

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[² *History of Western Philosophy, and Its Connection with Political and Social Circumstances from the Earliest Times to the Present Day* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1946). Pp. 916. £1.0.0.]

possible) through its *social circumstances and the political institutions and problems of his time*. But in my view the aim is hardly the special thing in Russell's book. For nowadays this method can hardly be claimed to be original any more. It is true that Russell is the first to extend this socio-historical method to the entire history of philosophy; and that this allows him to throw new light on many problems—in particular, on problems and forms of philosophy of the early middle ages, for example Augustine and Boethius. But despite the attraction of these problems, I do not believe that the greatness of Russell's book lies in its socio-historical method.

What makes the book great is the man who has written it. The book *is* the man. By that I do not want to say that the book is less objective than *other* histories of philosophy. On the contrary, other books seek earnestly to be objective, but they never achieve it. What they achieve is only that they seem to be objective, and with that to give a false impression to the reader. Russell does not attempt to be objective. He permits himself to *state his opinion* simply and openly, and he makes it quite clear that this is *his personal* opinion—his well-considered opinion—but not more; *certainly not the judgment of history*.

In my eyes, Bertrand Russell is without doubt the only man in our time of whom one can say that he is a great philosopher—a philosopher who can be named in the one breath with men like Descartes, John Locke, David Hume, or Immanuel Kant. He is the man whom we thank that philosophy has not entirely lapsed into one of the intolerable fashions of our time, and into charlatanry and wind-baggery. The expressions “charlatanry” and “windbaggery” were deployed by Schopenhauer, who saw these things and fought against them, as did Kant.

Until Fichte and Hegel ruined it, philosophy was argumentation. Arguments counted—otherwise nothing. Since Fichte and Hegel philosophy has moved towards spell-weaving. It has given up *instructing* us, and instead seeks to *beguile* us, as Schopenhauer said. The trendy philosophers, who beguile us instead of instructing us, found an uncommonly simple means. They stopped putting forward arguments for their opinions. They *pose as prophets*, as men who have come to deep wisdom through deep thought, and in the richness of their wisdom give us a few lumps out of their surplus.

This philosophy of the great philosophical leaders and tempters, of the great prophets, pedants and swindlers, this philosophical Fascism, is still strong. This philosophy is a strong and a pernicious influence. But it is not *all* powerful. That it was actually not all powerful in our time, that the tradition of reason in the attack upon unreason has survived up till now, for that we thank nobody more than Bertrand Russell.

Russell has made several important contributions to an intellectual philosophy, especially to logic. His *The Principles of Mathematics* was the most important contribution to logic that had been made at the time of its publication [1903] since the death of the founder of logic, Aristotle. The influence of this work on the later development of logic and the philosophy of mathematics was enormous. But all that is not really the greatness in Russell. What makes him great? I hardly dare say: he was the first philosopher since Kant who ventured to alter his opinion, openly and without beating further about the bush. The only philosopher who *did not pose as infallible*, but who openly admitted that he could *err*; who through this act proved that to him only one thing was important: *to learn, and to seek, the truth*. I do not know *how often* Russell has altered his opinion, but I know: every time *when* he does it, it signifies *progress* in philosophy. He never altered his opinion without bringing forward good, very good reasons for the modification. And he would always give his reasons with great openness and simplicity. This sincerity and intellectual incorruptibility, this selfless devotion to truth and to reason, the simple humanity, that is the man. And that is his book—a history of philosophy full of enlightening ideas; written by the clearest, simplest and the most human thinker of our time.