

Education & the emotions: the relevance of the Russellian perspective

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INTRODUCTION

Russell's educational thought is rooted in a theory of man and society whose orientation is global rather than nationalistic. Russell hankered after a political system whose supreme end was to promote the free growth of individuals who were to refashion the world, and there was no doubt in Russell's mind as to the role education was to play in this process.¹ For Russell education was the means by which human beings everywhere were to be motivated by a concern for the attainment of the good life—a concern that should have its basis in the overwhelming necessity to preserve life, to show respect for persons, and to employ the will towards preserving and extending the cultural and moral achievements of mankind.

This “omnibus conception” of education has had the effect of putting Russell outside the mainstream of contemporary educational thinking which appears to be directed at particular cultural milieux and which, in the Peterian and Schefflerian mode,² is not only silent, as noted by Hare,³ on the

¹ In *Proposed Roads to Freedom*, cited by Ronald Jager, *The Development of Bertrand Russell's Philosophy* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1972), p. 450.

² For their attraction to conceptual analysis as the means to establishing truth criteria in education, see R.S. Peters, “Education as Initiation”, in R.D. Archambault, ed., *Philosophical Analysis and Education* (London: Routledge, 1965); I. Scheffler, *The Language of Education* (Springfield: Thomas, 1960); P.H. Hirst and R.S. Peters, *The Logic of Education* (London: Routledge, 1970).

³ William Hare, “Russell's Contribution to Philosophy of Education”, in *Russell*, n.s. 7 (1987): 26–7.

place of Russell in educational discourse, but, more importantly, rejects omnibus conceptions of the educational philosopher's task springing from high moral principles or high-level directives as incapable of yielding objective truth in education. Although Russell himself would seem unperturbed by this—seeing, in general, no relationship between philosophy and education and proclaiming specifically that there is no connection between his works on philosophy and his writings on education even if others have claimed to find one⁴—some writers, no doubt out of a genuine desire to rescue Russell from oblivion, have tried to show that there are parts of his writings on education that meet the criteria for what could count as educational philosophy. Thus, William Hare, while himself acknowledging Russell's uncertain position in the philosophy of education, presents compelling arguments to show that Russell does make an important contribution to our understanding in his consideration of the distinction between education and indoctrination and in his defence of a concept of teaching appropriate to the ideal of education.⁵ Hare concludes that "Russell's task is the traditional one of clarification and justification."⁶ Just as cogently, Howard Woodhouse argues for a conceptual link between Russell's philosophy and his educational thought in the method of science.⁷ Further, Hare thinks that we should not go along with the suggestion that wanting to improve the world and speaking in plain terms *excludes* philosophy,⁸ and one would have liked to see him dwell more on that which *motivates* the wish to improve the world and to speak in plain terms. However, he quickly passes to his central question whether or not any philosophy can be found in Russell's writings on education. And the philosophy he has found leads to his conclusion as mentioned above.

I do not seek a place for Russell among philosophers of education. I shall take Russell at his word. The view that I espouse in this paper is that Russell's place in educational thinking is considerably strengthened if we view his contribution in terms of his concern for the education of the emotions. This conviction is based on what I see as a conscious and deliberate attempt on Russell's part to further the philosophy of involvement in human affairs with-

out which, in Russell's view, education loses its *raison d'être*. For Russell the education of the emotions represents the missing link between moral understanding and moral obligation, between the intellectualization of virtues and the move to *action* by the truly virtuous. A fundamental question which many of us in educational circles today continue to seek answers for is that, if education is to fulfil its ethical function, by what means can we bring students to the condition of "moral autonomy", to use John Wilson's words,⁹ which obliges them to act on moral principles rationally conceived? The question first received serious attention from Aristotle who regarded it as naturalistically fallacious to assume that knowing that which is good, right, and proper necessarily commits a man to do that which is good, right, and proper. It seems to me that the whole intent of Russell's educational writings has been to facilitate the transformation of good thoughts into good actions, with his discussions on curriculum content and methods of teaching integral to this intent.

It is instructive to note that R.S. Peters¹⁰ himself in *Ethics and Education* (1966) does not unequivocally demonstrate that the acquisition of "cognitive perspective" on the part of the learner guarantees any urgency to action. Nor does the "progressive differentiation in human consciousness of distinguishable cognitive structures through mastery of various forms of knowing", as argued for by P.H. Hirst in "Liberal Education and the Nature of Knowledge."¹¹

The call to action fundamental to Russell's educational thinking proceeds from the logic of Russell's own career both as philosopher and commentator on social and political affairs, to understand which, I believe, one must look to Russell's globally oriented attitude as stated in my opening remarks. I wish to offer an explanation of this attitude, to show a connection between it and Russell's philosophy in the rubric of common sense, to demonstrate that via this attitude Russell was in the main concerned with advancing a theory of affective education, and finally to identify ways in which Russell's theory, so conceived, might be relevant to the present day.

It must be allowed at the outset that Russell's interest in education was very serious, although one might not think so judging from some evaluations of his educational contribution.

For a person who had just finished two outstanding philosophical treatises in *Principia Mathematica* (1910–13) and *Our Knowledge of the External World* (1914), the challenge of writing *Principles of Social Reconstruction* must have seemed something of an anti-climax. But Russell was convinced that the

4 "Reply to Criticisms", in P.A. Schilpp, ed., *The Philosophy of Bertrand Russell* (Evanston: Northwestern U. P., 1944), p. 727. Nor did he write *Principles of Social Reconstruction* (1916) in his capacity as a philosopher (John Slater, "The Political Philosophy of Bertrand Russell", in J.E. Thomas and K. Blackwell, eds., *Russell in Review* [Toronto: Hakkert Stevens, 1976], p. 138).

5 *Op. cit.*, p. 29.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 41.

7 Howard Woodhouse, "Science as Method: the Conceptual Link between Russell's Philosophy and His Educational Thought", *Russell*, n.s. 5 (1985): 150–61.

8 *Op. cit.*, p. 28.

9 John Wilson *et al.*, *Introduction to Moral Education* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967).

10 Richard S. Peters, *Ethics and Education* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1966).

11 In R.D. Archambault, ed., *Philosophical Analysis and Education* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965), pp. 113–38.

digression into social and political considerations was a pressing necessity and that such was the line his life must now follow.

Russell tells us, if somewhat melodramatically, that he could not bring himself to commit suicide (an escape route which he frequently contemplated during adolescence) because of his love of mathematics. But his penchant for melodrama—evident also in much of the polemical prose of his later years—should not be allowed to detract from the keenness with which he sought (a) to distinguish between the “ultimate questions” which only the peculiar mode of mathematics, as he saw it, was capable of addressing and the more “mundane and temporary” questions to which this mode seemed all too inappropriate, and (b) to address the latter questions as matters of highest urgency.

Russell’s priorities are made clear in a letter to Ottoline Morrell in June 1916: “I see room for endless work in political theory. And it will have the advantage that it will involve seeing all sorts of people and getting to know all sorts of human facts—it won’t leave half of me unsatisfied as abstract work does.”¹² And although an element of uncertainty lingers with respect to this digression: “The only doubt is whether I shan’t some day be suddenly overwhelmed by the passion for things that are eternal and perfect, like mathematics, for even the most abstract political theory is terribly mundane and temporary, ... that must be left to the future.” As it turned out, of the sixty-seven major works that Russell produced from 1916 to the end of his life, only eight could be described as philosophical in character, the rest solidly grounded in social and political considerations. The educational thinking that emerges from these considerations is *sui generis* and the attitude that informs it accordingly becomes a matter of serious investigation. Russell makes his point unreservedly: “The task of a liberal education was to give a sense of value of things other than domination, to help to create wise citizens of a free community, and through the combination of citizenship with liberty in individual creativeness to enable men to give to human life that splendour which some few have shown that it can achieve.”¹³

THE EDUCATIONAL ENDEAVOUR

Nowhere in Russell’s educational writings do we find an analysis of the term “education”—hardly surprising in view of Russell’s impatience with analytic philosophers of education. Russell is more concerned with what educators

may or may not accomplish rather than with the concept of education as such. Educators are regarded as agents who should help their pupils attain certain goals determined by a concern for truth, and the advancement of what he calls the “good life”, a life, that is to say, inspired by love and guided by knowledge. Concern for the truth should, in Russell’s view, be guided by a thoroughgoing empiricism of the Lockean type that requires us to follow where the argument leads ever willing to bow to new evidence. Leading the good life involves cooperation rather than competition, doing one’s best to help eliminate preventable evils (war among other things), feeling “abstract sympathy”, channelling of the aggressive impulses into creative activities, and the capacity to make judgments based on facts.

Education so conceived is mainly instrumental, as opposed to intrinsic, in orientation. This clearly puts Russell in opposition to many present-day educational thinkers who tend to ascribe to education a descriptive meaning emphasizing its intrinsic goodness and who believe that a good society would ask of education only that the best be provided, or again who emphasize the distinction between “training” and “education”, where the former is seen as education for some determinate end, and the latter as a worthwhile process. Russell does say that “almost all education has a political motive”,¹⁴ presumably intending that that aspect of education which is not motivated by political considerations has some purpose that is intrinsic to it. That this is so is illustrated by his sympathetic account of education as a *good* before it is a *use*, and by his reference to the educated man as one who possesses the “glorious attributes” of “knowledge and comprehensiveness”.¹⁵ However, except with reference to university education, we find that Russell does not give sustained attention to education conceived of as valuable in itself. Indeed, to Russell the intrinsic goodness of education as compared to its use in terms of the improvement of social and political institutions and society itself is of minor importance.

Now, the data of experience, as far as politics are concerned, Russell claims, yields that those who run social and political institutions, by and large, incline men toward ways of thinking and behaving that betray a liking for wars and a lust for power. This, he believes, can be shown to be grossly incongruous with the good of the individual and consequently with the good of society itself, since the good of society is not a good separate from the collection of individual goods. The educational endeavour is to address this incongruity. On this basis Russell sees the single overriding purpose of education as a moral one and goes on to suggest two possible ways in which this moral purpose might

¹² *The Autobiography of Bertrand Russell*, Vol. 2: 1914–44 (London: Allen and Unwin, 1968), p. 67.

¹³ *Power: a New Social Analysis* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1938), p. 319.

¹⁴ *Principles of Social Reconstruction* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1916), p. 103.

¹⁵ *Education and the Social Order* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1932), p. 10.

be served: (a) by (a negative approach) seeking to eliminate wars by clearing men's minds of irrational prejudices and hatreds upon which wars feed, and (b) by (a positive approach) accepting the aggressive impulses as indubitable data in the human condition and endeavouring to channel these tendencies into constructive pursuits. Russell's conviction of the need for the former is clearly expressed in *Principles of Social Reconstruction, Political Ideals* (1917) and *Roads to Freedom* (1918), all of which were written after the outbreak of World War I and all of which were clearly influenced by the War. In the pursuit of these ends Russell does not hesitate to draw, albeit selectively, on the evidence to hand in the fields of psychology and sociology.

COMMON SENSE AND EMOTIONALITY

The ethical system that informs these approaches is essentially to be derived from appeals (a) to common sense and (b) via common sense to man's emotionality. The appeal to common sense is consistent with Russell's purely philosophical position held since 1898 when he came to reject Hegelian and Kantian metaphysics as means to truth, experiencing a sense of exhilaration in the process. The appeal to the emotions as a means to what is possible in education has its basis in Russell's own personality which was shaped by childhood and adolescent emotional experiences¹⁶ of a profundity that assumed an importance verging on the transcendent, if one is to judge by their persistence and their permanent effects on Russell's judgments on social issues.

Here it is important to recognize the two senses in which Russell takes common sense. The one is where it means common knowledge, e.g. the earth is round, the other where it includes the advice of the experienced and the wisdom of the old, e.g. Russell's grandmother's advice to him as a boy not to follow a multitude to do evil, or the perceptive remarks and insights associated with individuals whose judgments are held in respect, e.g. those "excellent teachers" at Beacon Hill of whom Katharine Tait has so much to say.¹⁷

One might interject at this point that the search for basic principles for the progression of intelligent discussion in human affairs was fundamental to Russell's entire outlook on life, an outlook that was clearly human-centred. This search has some interesting antecedents in the development of Russell's philosophy traceable to the year 1898 when he came to reject Hegel. For Russell, the metaphysical underpinnings of the Hegelian Absolute were antithetical to the human-centred view of man, and he made no secret of his

delight not only when he broke away from Hegelianism but when he recognized the critical point of departure as the analytical method rooted in common sense as the means to truth. We have it from Alan Wood, Russell's biographer and close friend, that he was not in fact happy with Hegel ever since his undergraduate days when he wrote an essay criticizing Hegel's absolutist tendencies, and so entirely had Hegel been against the Russellian grain that it is doubtful whether Russell would have ever become attached to him had it not been for "the influence of Stout and, in particular, McTaggart, who taught me to consider British Empiricism crude, and I was willing to believe that Hegel (and to a lesser extent Kant) had a profundity not to be found in Locke, Berkeley, and Hume, or in my former pope, Mill."¹⁸ When the break actually came, Russell, speaking of Bradley, another Hegelian, expressed his feelings thus:

Bradley argued that everything common sense believes in is mere appearance; we [G.E. Moore and I] reverted to the opposite extreme, and thought that everything is real that common sense, uninfluenced by philosophy and theology, supposes real ... we allowed ourselves to think that grass is green, that the sun and stars would exist if no one was aware of them, and also that there is a pluralistic timeless world of Platonic ideas.¹⁹

LOGICAL STATUS OF COMMON SENSE IN RUSSELL

Henceforth, for Russell, mind and matter were not to be considered ultimate kinds of entities but "logical constructions" with no basis in metaphysics, and deducible only by the process of analysis. Any investigation into the nature of knowledge was to start from that which has the greatest likelihood of being true, and must require of the investigator the manner of the disinterested seeker after truth, with an emphasis on the sense of commitment to look out for new evidence in situations where absolute certainty cannot be attained.

It is in this vein that Russell deplored the tendency of many philosophers to be less anxious to understand the world of science and daily life than to convict it of unreality in the interest of a suprasensible real world. Equally worthy of censure, Russell felt, was the view of the philosophical enterprise as an exercise whose purpose was to arrive at "cheerful" conclusions.

There is, to be sure, in Russell's view, a certain disingenuousness in the motives of philosophers who had their great answers in hand and tried to make the disparate parts of their philosophies fit into the answers. A philos-

¹⁶ See the section headed "From Thought to Action Personal: Experiences and the Defining of a Way of Life", below.

¹⁷ *My Father Bertrand Russell* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975).

¹⁸ "My Mental Development," in *The Philosophy of Bertrand Russell*, p. 10.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

ophy guided by a metaphysic external to the individual thus becomes synthetic, not analytic, and does not start from the data of common sense. If the real purpose of philosophy is to eliminate false notions about the universe and man's place in it, then the truth thus revealed must be accepted even if such acceptance were to lead to unhappiness.

Russell registers a similar aversion to any metaphysic of morals when, in another, more direct assault on Hegel, he observes that Hegel's metaphysic gave rise to an organic view of society in which obedience to the state was the essential consideration. Since, according to Hegel, the state is the Divine idea as it exists on earth, the morality of the state is not that of an ethically reflective kind, but is based on the principle of abiding by one's duty to the state at large. For Russell this ran counter to his own perception of morality as possessed of its own internal dynamic that allows for changes in moral codes as human society changes or improves. Moreover, to Russell a metaphysic of morals that upholds duty to the state as its ultimate goal would be especially objectionable because it is likely to inform a theory of education that condones heinous restrictions on the individual's freedoms. It is in this spirit that Russell attacked the classical education provided to aristocratic boys in England—an education that was defined for them from without and designed for a specific purpose i.e. as preparation for service to King and Country and to Empire without much concern for their own emotionality.

For our present purposes it is worthy of note that just as, with respect to philosophy, Russell sought to remove a slum of metaphysical debris (some of it his own), by appealing to the possibilities of common sense and by starting from that which has the greatest likelihood of being true, so he sought to remove from education some of its more unwarranted and unacceptable claims by appealing to a morality grounded in psychological and sociological principles which he saw as having the greatest likelihood of being true. Such principles then assume a status in moral discourse parallel to that assumed by the data of common sense in Russell's philosophy. What this amounts to is an emotive theory of ethics, and Russell's defence of this theory cannot be understood without some reference to factors in his own personality and circumstances of his childhood and adolescence.

At this point one might note that although Russell sees the intrusion of the emotions in philosophical discourse as a trespass, he plainly regards them as critical to an understanding of social and political considerations especially in circumstances where one is trying to raise the standard against the odds. And the odds, for Russell, were doubtless phenomenal.

In philosophy the quest is for truth pursued in accordance with the canons of rationality. In social and political affairs, on the other hand, Russell sees injustices, inequalities, deceitful motives, ethnocentric beliefs, aggressive instincts, the will to power, possessive impulses, frustrations, etc., that are

intractable, as objects of the philosopher's scrutiny. Here the emotions must intrude, for here we are concerned with making the leap from thought to action, with the practical affairs of living, and most importantly, of living among others rather than with the disinterested pursuit of truth.

FROM THOUGHT TO ACTION: PERSONAL EXPERIENCES AND THE DEFINING OF A WAY OF LIFE

We move now to a consideration of how Russell expects to effect this leap from thought to action.

In his *Autobiography* Russell records his indebtedness to his Scottish Presbyterian grandmother, a woman of strong moral and religious scruples, whose fearlessness and public spirit, contempt for convention and indifference to the majority had always seemed good to him, and whose biblical injunction that he should not follow a multitude to do evil "led me in later life to be not afraid of belonging to small minorities."²⁰ Russell also confesses that the circumstances of his early life and upbringing as well as certain personality factors gave rise to his tendency towards introspection (a preoccupation which he once declared to be the only method of obtaining a great deal of important knowledge) which sharpened his sensitivities to the sufferings of mankind. Moreover, Russell recalls an occasion in 1901 when, finding Mrs. Whitehead suffering from paroxysms of pain as a result of a presumed heart attack, he had a sudden revelation of the loneliness of the human soul akin to "mystic illumination". Russell writes:

... nothing can penetrate it except the highest intensity of the sort of love that religious teachers have preached; whatever does not spring from this motive is harmful, or at best useless, it follows that war is wrong, that a public school education is abominable, that the use of force is to be deprecated, and that in human affairs one should penetrate to the core of loneliness and speak to that.²¹

This "mystic illumination" was to convert Russell from an imperialist and a Pro-Boer into a pacifist, and (in his own terms) from a concern for exactness and analysis to semi-mystical feelings of beauty, with an intense interest in children, and with a desire almost as profound as that of the Buddha to find some philosophy that could make life endurable.

I posit that it is this kind of capacity for conversion that Russell was looking to education to bring about. This is clearly the case in his discussion of

²⁰ *The Autobiography of Bertrand Russell*, p. 11.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 149.

abstract sympathy and of ways in which the individual is to mirror the world with emotion. In this respect Russell's search represents a serious attempt to understand the roots of emotion.

In *Principles of Social Reconstruction*, Russell's stated aim is to suggest a philosophy of politics based on the belief that impulse has more effect than conscious purpose in moulding men's lives.²² This statement should be set against the background of Russell's conviction that the views that most people hold in matters of political concern have their origins in personality factors and essentially in the Freudian "death wish".²³ It is a conviction that Russell came to hold after a personal analysis of the attitudes of some of his closest friends to the first World War, and indeed to war in general as an instrument of policy. In an attempt to understand the pre-1914 zest for war and, in deference to his own stated position to go where the evidence leads, Russell consulted *The Psychology of Insanity* (1912) of Bernard Hart.²⁴ W.A.C. Stewart²⁵ tells us that Hart was one of the few neurologists who had read and understood Freud—in 1911 he had written a masterly essay on the psychoanalytic concept of hysteria, and *The Psychology of Insanity* was a landmark in the popular recognition of unconscious impulses. Russell seemed to have been influenced by Hart sufficiently strongly to conclude that the outlet for an impulse need not be merely in harmful acts. To confirm this conclusion Russell read William James' *The Moral Equivalent of War* (1903). James' position was that the horror of war makes the thrill, for when the question was of getting "the extremest and supremest out of human nature, talk of expense of life and limb or otherwise sounds ignominious."²⁶ For James what was needed was the creation of the means whereby the impulse to fight could be directed into activities in which human aspirations no longer found satisfaction in the glorification of the military virtues, but in the conquest of nature and human misery. For Russell this was no less than a revelation. He writes of James: "His statement of the problem could not have been bettered; and so far as I know he is the only writer who has faced the problem adequately."²⁷

There can be no doubt of Russell's indebtedness to James in the formulation of his Principle of Growth. The Principle itself requires that we recognize the importance of impulses and desires to human conduct, but it is also responsible for the notion of "compossibility of desires" and the quest for the

maximization of compossibles in terms of which human beings everywhere are to grasp the logic of their interdependence.

Russell's investigative manner, entirely in line with the moral obligation suggested by the scientific spirit, also took him to the field of behaviouristic psychology as suggested by J.B. Watson, to the writings of I.P. Pavlov, and encouraged his observation of the practices of Maria Montessori and Margaret MacMillan as he moved beyond the confines of conventional philosophical bases of education, as is clear from both *On Education* and *Education and the Social Order*. Thus when Russell came to Beacon Hill, he was already well grounded in current educational theory and practice, but, as Park²⁸ notes, adopted the eclectic approach of taking from each author those elements that seemed to have substance and relevance, and rejecting those that seemed to him irrelevant and fallacious.

It is clear that the overriding principle emerging from this approach and from Russell's personal construction of reality was that the impulses may be conditioned to produce advantageous results for mankind. In practical terms this meant the direction of attention to the education of character, and this, ideally, was to begin "at birth".

Russell was, of course, conscious of the futuristic orientation of such an education which leaves unanswered the question of what do with men as they are now. Here the process of socialization came in for serious consideration. Russell's conclusion was that just as how via this process individuals come to adopt negative patterns of behaviour under the influence of misguided parents, political leaders, peers, teachers, and instruments of propaganda, so they can come to "unlearn" these patterns if the right education, i.e. one inspired by "love" and "guided by knowledge", is brought to bear.

Russell's appeal, then, is essentially to the emotions, and he was willing to go as far as the current state of knowledge would take him, even if this meant into the sphere of, of all things, religion. For when Russell appeals to the need for "Christian love" or compassion he does so not indeed as a Christian, but as an individual of religious temper convinced of the power of such love and compassion to provide the motive for existence and the guide to action, yet as one in deep despair about the way the Christian message has been distorted by the upholders of institutionalized religion and about the all too common tendency in education to separate intellect from feeling, moral understanding from moral responsibility and obligation.

Russell's method in philosophy, as in moral discourse and education, has been to move from the personal to the general, from the individual to society, from the individual pain of Mrs. Whitehead to the general misery synony-

22 *Principles of Social Reconstruction*, Preface.

23 See Russell's discussion of "The Principle of Growth" in *Principles of Social Reconstruction*, Chap. 1, *passim*.

24 Cited by W.A.C. Stewart, *The Educational Innovators* (London: Macmillan, 1968), p. 138.

25 *Ibid.*

26 William James, *The Moral Equivalent of War* (London: U. of London Press, 1903), p. 295.

27 *Principles of Social Reconstruction*, p. 67.

28 Joe Park, *Bertrand Russell on Education* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1964), p. 43.

mous with war, from himself to the world at large. Indeed, Russell represents in himself an existential ratification of concern and sacrifice. In an intellectually dishonest, deceitful and uncaring world he was bound to be disappointed. But Russell knew what he was looking for, and this made his consciousness of failure (defined in terms of the fact that the world had not changed significantly in his favour in spite of *Principles of Social Reconstruction, On Education, Education and the Social Order* and his numerous essays on educational subjects) all the more agonizing. He was to write at the age of eighty-four:

Love and knowledge, so far as they were possible, led upward towards heaven. But always pity brought me back to earth. Echoes of cries of pain reverberate in my heart. Children in famine, victims tortured by oppressors, helpless old people a hated burden to their sons, and the whole world of loneliness make a mockery of what life should be.²⁹

And, perhaps acknowledging the optimism of the psychology of *On Education*, he continues: “I long to alleviate this evil, but I cannot, and I too suffer.”

PRINCIPLES OF AFFECTIVE EDUCATION

The pervasive question in Russell’s educational writings has to do with what constitutes the best way in which people should bring up their children. Russell believed that this question could not be answered without reference to the kind of world in which we live, and the world, for Russell, was infested with cruelty, injustice, abuses of power, unwarranted restraints on freedom, double standards, corruption, hypocrisy, greed, lack of genuine feeling, love of war, male domination, prejudices, sexual frustrations, alienation and anomie among huge sections of the world’s population, hunger, starvation and malnutrition, and manipulation of the masses by the few. If we desire to change things, as for Russell we must do, then we must not only *understand* the critical connection between fact and value, between what *is* and what *ought* to be, but also what it takes to *respond* to the compelling call to action.

Some, Russell recognized, because of their penchant for disputations of “cold rationality”, do no more than stand aloof, above the fray, far from the maddening crowd. Others, because of misplaced respect for tradition, court the safety of the status quo. We may chuckle at Russell’s statement that “None of the higher mental faculties are required for conservatism”,³⁰ but we must

share his seriousness when he says that “Education is as a rule the strongest force on the side of what exists and against fundamental change.”³¹ Others still, conscious of the sorry state in which the world is in, either because they feel overwhelmed by the sheer weight of the problems, or because of deep mistrust of their own capacity to do anything about it, become cynical and indifferent. Needless to say that to Russell each case represents a “cop out” of monumental proportions, because in each case men refuse to be *moved*. Russell invites them all to open their eyes:

Institutions, and especially economic systems, have a profound influence in moulding the character of men and women. They may encourage adventure and hope, or timidity or the pursuit of safety. They may open men’s minds to great possibilities, or close them against anything but the risk of obscure misfortune. They may make a man’s happiness depend upon what he adds to the general possession of the world or upon what he can secure for himself of the private goods in which others cannot share.³²

Instead of forcing the wrong outcomes of these alternatives upon all those who are not heroic or exceptionally fortunate, as modern capitalism does, Russell would have us “alter institutions in a way that will, of itself, modify the life of impulse in the desired direction.”³³

Specifically, the educational prescriptions that derive from the philosophy of involvement amount to the following:

(1) The intent of education should be deduced exclusively from the right understanding of what constitutes the “good” life. But “good”, being a relative concept, needs to be defined in such a way as to have appeal to the mass of humankind. Instrumental to this pursuit is the exercise of reason and rationality and a genuine concern, akin to “abstract sympathy”, for others.

(2) The concept of “good” thus revealed will be rooted in principles of affect that recognize the peculiar predicament of man who, as the creator of his own destiny and endowed with the capacity for both good and evil, shows an extraordinary tendency towards evil in terms of his preference for wars and lust for power. These principles of affect are expected not only to have a debunking effect on the “twisted imaginations” of men but to prescribe courses of action that would lead to the channelling of aggressive impulses into constructive pursuits.

The mode of reasoning to be employed in the pursuit of understanding the

29 “What I Have Lived For,” in *Russell in Review*, Plate II. This is the Prologue to the *Autobiography*.

30 *Education and the Social Order*, p. 15.

31 *Principles of Social Reconstruction*, p. 144.

32 *Political Ideals* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1963; 1st ed., 1917), p. 15.

33 *Ibid.*, p. 65.

concept “good” is antithetical to that used in philosophy since for him “where ethics is concerned it is impossible to produce intellectual arguments.”³⁴ At any rate, the tendency for ethical argument to descend to clashes of rival dogmas makes it inappropriate to the quest for commonly agreed principles of action that can be described as moral. Instead, since, for Russell, the data of common sense assures us that pleasure is preferable to pain, that happiness is preferable to misery or unhappiness, the concept “good” should use as its referent that which tends to increase the sum of human happiness or decrease the sum of human misery. That happiness that depends on the unhappiness of another is a spurious one since it does not recognize, in motive or intent, its true referent in the maximization of satisfied desires. It follows that if people’s conception of the good life is such that it involves wars, injustice, cruelty, greed, etc., that conception is a mistaken one.

(3) It follows also that the educator’s task should be oriented not merely toward national cohesion, but toward international cohesion. The sense of the whole human race as one cooperative unit might be considered a Utopian ideal, but, in Russell’s mind, it is an ideal worth striving for. For a major criterion of worthwhileness in education is proof of its universal applicability. From this Russell’s argument logically extends to the recommendation of a single world government, and of cooperative effort at the international level to lower the birth rate and to diffuse prosperity across the world—a state of affairs he considers well within the realm of possibility if resources are diverted from instruments of destruction to those of construction.

(4) With respect to curricular content, students should be introduced to those things that glorify the human condition and, by implication, to understand and eschew those that denigrate it. Armed with the right conception of the good life, the educator should be conscious of the fact of progress of civilization through the ages, and should seek to pass on knowledge in terms of which such progress is defined. This behooves him to provide doses of “sheer instruction”, e.g. in science and mathematics, and not merely to provide students with opportunities for growth. Moreover, the educator should have a sense of the manner in which the historical process helps to shape the human condition and of his own role in influencing this process for good. This will enable him to resist an educational process directed towards the historical “type” since it is this “type” that has brought civilization into moral turpitude.

(5) The essential consideration in pedagogy is to treat the child with “reverence”, which is complemented by respect for the fundamental impulse in oneself. It is the absence of this “reverence” in traditional education that accounts for the starving of the intellect and the emotions in the interest of

the will. To counteract this Russell recommends that educators seek to develop in the growing child the capacity for critical reflection which should lead to a questioning of received wisdom, not in the spirit of destructive criticism, but in the scientific spirit which requires of the seeker after truth something of an anarchic state of mind, and which obliges him to go only so far as the evidence warrants ever prepared for the possibility of modification or outright rejection of even the most cherished beliefs.

The spirit of disinterested investigation is especially relevant to Russell’s discussion of education at the university level where he proffers arguments to support the view that the acquisition of knowledge gives an individual “mental possessions” that are good on their own account and not just because of their utilitarian value.

An intellectual heavyweight of many parts who has himself made significant contributions to knowledge, anxious to remake the world—a world in which love and the pursuit of knowledge were to be accorded a certain transcendence—Russell recognizes that those whose research, vision, and creativity help us understand the world are worthy of a special place in the scheme of things because of the curious and exacting nature of their task. For Russell, all great art and all great science spring from “the passionate desire to embody what was at first an unsubstantial phantom, a beckoning beauty luring men away from safety and ease to a glorious torment.”³⁵ So those who are possessed of this passion must not be fettered by the shackles of a utilitarian philosophy. Rather:

Utilitarian knowledge needs to be fructified by disinterested investigation, which has no motive beyond the desire to understand the world better. All the great advances are at first purely theoretical, and are only afterwards found to be capable of practical applications. And if some splendid theory never has any practical use, it remains of value on its own account; for the understanding of the world is one of the ultimate goods. If science and organization has succeeded in satisfying the needs of the body and in abolishing cruelty and war, the pursuit of knowledge and beauty would remain to exercise our love of strenuous creation.³⁶

SOME CONSEQUENCES FOR THE MODERN WORLD

The primacy of the emotions on this interpretation of Russell’s educational thought allows his “theory” (I use the word as a courtesy term) the universal applicability that he was looking for. He presents educators with the challenge

34 “Reply to Criticisms”, in *The Philosophy of Bertrand Russell*, pp. 719–20.

35 *On Education: Especially in Early Childhood* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1926), p. 202.
36 *Ibid.*

to get people to understand how social and political institutions work, how they help to shape the historical process and define the roles of men and women in the scheme of things. In the sphere of social life this reduces:

- (1) to concerns associated with explosive population growth and its unacceptable consequences in terms of hunger, disease, infant mortality, depletion of the earth's resources as energy needs intensify, deforestation and desertification.
- (2) to the larger considerations associated with the proliferation of nuclear power and its awful capacity for destruction and to possible alternatives open to mankind, as discussed in *Common Sense and Nuclear Warfare* (1959). Fairly recent nuclear accidents on Three Mile Island and at Chernobyl will serve as reminders of the precarious condition to which the human race has brought itself.
- (3) to the need to understand how the philosophy of rugged individualism contributes to alienation, anomie and the stifling of genuine human feeling. Witness the case of the American Indian.
- (4) to the compelling necessity to face squarely the challenges of an increasingly interdependent world. As the cold war loosens its grip on civilization and the superpowers move towards political and economic realignments, the value of intercultural communication becomes more pronounced.
It would no doubt have come as a pleasant surprise to Russell that in recent years there has been a gradual awakening in the United States to the possibilities that this kind of communication opens up in the sphere of trade and commerce as well as in the area of intercultural understanding. But I suspect Russell would have been suspicious about an emphasis on intercultural communication whose genesis is in the profit motive. Nevertheless, we do find that the linguistic ethnocentrism that finds expression in American resistance to the learning of languages other than English is slowing losing ground, and Russell would have seen this as a hopeful sign.
- (5) to a consciousness of the fact that the machinations of the great powers still pose serious financial problems for many Third World countries which must spend more than they can afford fighting enemies aided and abetted by external interests instead of directing their resources to the problems of poverty, illiteracy, and overpopulation. India, Pakistan, Somalia and Ethiopia, are just a few cases in point.

There is an urgent need at the present historical moment for ordinary men to understand what is happening to them. The rapidity of change in all aspects of human endeavour forces questions as to what the world will be like a mere decade from now, and whether we, as individuals, are prepared for the changes. We live in an environment in which, in spite of recent realignments, the geopolitical ambitions of the superpowers could still produce life-threatening conflicts on a global scale, in which energy crises rise and subside at the whims and fancies of but a few, in which social problems mercilessly multiply as vested interests pursue their own ends, in which social injustice and indignities dampen the very instinct for survival among large groups of people, in which nations that profess their right to self-determination are callously seen as incapable of exercising such a right despite all the evidence to the contrary, in which those in positions of leadership fail to live up to elementary moral principles of practising what they preach. Is it surprising, then, that individuals feel a sense of powerlessness, alienation and even betrayal?

The call to action implicit in Russell's educational thought can best be understood as an attempt to help us meet these social challenges courageously. It may be "romantic" (a term used by Howard Woodhouse to characterize *Principles of Social Reconstruction*³⁷) to want to improve the world, but what is important is not so much the characterization of Russell's educational ideas (which I believe defy neat characterizations), but whether they can have relevance to the present day.

Alan Wood, writing in 1957, noted that nobody had up till then succeeded in controverting Russell on most of the questions with which he deals in his social and political writings,³⁸ and Robert Marsh, in his contribution to *Russell in Review* (1976), expressed the view that Russell's "basic ideas [on education] do not need to be revised extensively."³⁹ In the world of 1990 these judgments still hold. We might, I think, serve Russell better if we recognize the link he makes between *education* and *social purpose*, and, I might add, if we "sell" him on that basis.

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37 Howard Woodhouse, "More Than Mere Musings: Russell's Reflections on Education as Philosophy", *Russell*, n.s. 7 (1987): 176–8.

38 Alan Wood, *Bertrand Russell: the Passionate Sceptic* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1957).

39 Robert C. Marsh, "Bertrand Russell's Educational Ideas in the World of 1972," in *Russell in Review*, p. 125.