

Logical correspondence with Russell

by W.V.O. Quine

SIXTY-ONE YEARS AGO, and a little more, I was approaching the end of my freshman year at Oberlin College. It was time to choose a field of concentration, and I was torn three ways. I was drawn to philosophy, to mathematics, and to linguistics, which I called philology and would have meant majoring in classics. My problem was solved when one of my friends, who was majoring in English, told me that Bertrand Russell had a "mathematical philosophy". This would evidently combine two of my three competing interests, making the score two to one against philology. So I majored in mathematics, and arranged for honours reading in mathematical philosophy, which was mathematical logic. No logic was taught at Oberlin, but the chairman in mathematics made inquiries and got up a reading list for me. Russell dominated it, with *The Principles of Mathematics*, *Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy*, and *Principia Mathematica*.

Having thus decided that Russell was going to be important to me, I turned to him also for leisure reading. *Marriage and Morals* disposed me kindly to my new master. I read *Sceptical Essays*, *Philosophy*, *Our Knowledge of the External World*, *Mysticism and Logic*, and *The A.B.C. of Relativity*. These books gratified my philosophical appetite and whetted it further. The reading in mathematical logic induced a lasting enthusiasm in me for that subject. My admiration for *Principia Mathematica* was unbounded. Its other author, Whitehead, was teaching philosophy at Harvard, so I went to Harvard for graduate study in philosophy.¹

Philosophically Whitehead and Russell were far apart. "Bertie thinks I'm muddle-headed," Whitehead said, "and I think Bertie's simple-minded." Actually Whitehead's appreciation of Russell spanned the gulf. He once told me that he believed Russell to be the greatest analytic thinker the world had ever known, not excluding Aristotle. Whitehead's hero, however, was Plato.

My most dazzling confrontation of greatness occurred in October 1931, when

¹ I have lifted twenty-odd lines, some here and some later, from my autobiography in *The Philosophy of W.V. Quine*, Library of Living Philosophers, 1986.

Whitehead and Russell stood side by side on the podium of a Harvard auditorium. Russell had come to give a lecture, and Whitehead was introducing him. After the lecture, Whitehead introduced me to Russell. By then I was writing a doctoral dissertation on *Principia Mathematica* and I told Russell some of the innovations I had in mind.

Three years later my first book came out: *A System of Logistic*. It was an outgrowth of my dissertation, and I sent a copy to Russell. He responded in June 1935 with a 600-word letter. I shall proudly quote two passages.

Telegraph House,
Harting, Petersfield
6.6.35

Dear Dr. Quine

Your book arrived at a moment when I was overworked and obliged to take a long holiday. The result is that I have only just finished reading it.

I think you have done a beautiful piece of work; it is a long time since I have had as much intellectual pleasure as in reading you....

In reading you I was struck by the fact that, in my work, I was always being influenced by extraneous philosophical considerations. Take e.g. descriptions. I was interested in "Scott is the author of *Waverley*", and not only in the descriptive functions of PM. If you look up Meinong's work, you will see the sort of fallacies I wanted to avoid; the same applies to the ontological argument....

He went on to remark that the notation of the logic of relations in *Principia* was mainly Whitehead's. He proceeded to some technical points, and then closed in this gratifying vein:

In any case, I have the highest admiration for what you have done, which has reformed many matters as to which I had always been comfortable.

Yours very truly,
Bertrand Russell²

This is one of several immodest quotations, but it would be ungrateful to him not to take pride in them. In the present case what pleases me most is the care with which Russell read my book. He dealt thoughtfully with one specific point after another. One novelty in my book had been an extensional version of propositions, construed as sequences. Russell raised two objections here, and his points were well taken. Actually my sequences were working well and achieving a certain economy, but I would have done better to dissociate them from propositions. Propositions were a legacy of *Principia Mathematica* that I should simply have dropped, and soon did.

Russell expressed misgivings also over my abandonment of propositional functions in favour of classes and my elimination of his axiom of reducibility. Also he echoed, tentatively, an allegation of Sheffer's that there is a circularity in the notion of ordered pair. These three misgivings are all traceable to a failure to maintain a

sharp distinction between the use and mention of expressions—a failure that had likewise caused the fogginess and complexity of early portions of *Principia Mathematica*. It is not to be wondered that my answer to Russell's 600-word letter was three times that long.

My admiration of *Principia*, despite its faults, was well known to my friends. My first daughter was born that same year, 1935, and Charles Leslie Stevenson suggested that I name her *Principia*.

It was four years later that Tarski came to America. Pre-war Poland was mildly antisemitic, and Tarski's academic status was consequently incommensurate with his stature. Charles Morris, Ernest Nagel, J.H. Woodger, and I managed to get him invited to an international philosophical congress at Harvard in September 1939 with expenses paid, and with some difficulty we persuaded him to accept it. Our hope was that it might lead to his being offered a good job in America. In fact it saved his life. He had just arrived when the Nazis invaded Poland, and Tarski's parents were among the first Polish Jews to be massacred.

Various of us proceeded to try to find him a job. I wrote to Russell, who was at UCLA, and he responded in October 1939 that he had tried them in vain.

I went so far [he continued] as to hint that if I could, by retiring, make room for him, I might consider doing so; but it seemed that even so the result could not be achieved.

He had begun the letter thus:

I quite agree with your estimate of Tarski; no other logician of his generation (unless it were yourself) seems to me his equal.

This parenthetical reference to myself was kind but uncalled for; I was never under the illusion of equalling Tarski in logic, but I could cite many living contenders: Gödel, Bernays, Church, Turing, Kleene, and Post. Anyway he concluded his letter thus:

You may quote me anywhere as concurring in your view of Tarski's abilities.

I shall recur to this a little later.³

Meanwhile Russell was invited to give the William James Lectures at Harvard the following year, 1940. Russell wrote to William Ernest Hocking on the matter on the last day of 1939; I shall read his note if only to parade another of my highly prized bouquets.

I could very well draft off the severer portions of my "Language and Fact" into discussions in a seminar. In a place containing Quine (for whom my respect is unbounded) I should not dare to say much about pure mathematical logic; but the subject has applications to "Language and Fact" that I should like to develop for advanced students.

So Russell and I were colleagues at Harvard through the fall term of 1940. I made

² Quoted in full in *The Autobiography of Bertrand Russell*, Vol. II: 1914–1944 (Boston: Atlantic—Little, Brown, 1968), pp. 323–5.

³ Quoted in full, *ibid.*, p. 344.

less of the opportunity for his society than I ought to have done, perhaps out of diffidence. At any rate, we were together at the department luncheon meetings every week or so, and I was of course a regular auditor at his lectures, which were published as *An Inquiry into Meaning and Truth*. Also I must surely have attended the associated seminar, if it took place. It was a banner semester, for Tarski was still there, on some makeshift research appointment, and Carnap was there as visiting professor; and I was vigorously engaged with them.

There was an effort, issuing from Brown University as well as Harvard, to promote periodic gatherings for discussion. Our three-star cast managed to bow out after two of these unwieldy sessions, and to meet in the seclusion rather of I.A. Richards' study or Carnap's flat along with a few of us younger devotees.

Tarski's introductory logic textbook was published in English translation the following year, 1941, and Russell was up in arms over the blurb on the publisher's circular. In March 1941 he wrote to Hocking:

I have been very much distressed to find myself quoted, in an advertisement of Dr. Tarski's Introduction to Logic, as saying that Dr. Tarski is the ablest man of our generation in logic and semantics. I have a very great respect for Dr. Tarski, but I hope that he will forgive my disowning this statement as exaggerated. The words "our generation", which are in any case unsuitable, since Dr. Tarski and I belong to widely different generations, would include all logicians and writers on semantics now living, for example Dr. Whitehead. The words that I used in fact were these: "Dr. Tarski is the ablest man of *his* generation in logic and semantics." This was not meant to refer to men a few years older or a few years younger than Dr. Tarski; and in fact the statement was not intended for publication at all, but as a confidential recommendation for a professorship.

On the same day he sent a protest to the publisher, and also wrote to Tarski, in part as follows:

I see that your publishers have got hold of a confidential statement that I made about you to the College of the City of New York, and ... have exaggerated it. Of course I realize that you are in no way responsible for this ... I am only sorry that it is necessary for me to embarrass you by disowning the statement.... To make public even my original statement would seem like showing favouritism among my children.

From these two letters and his protest to the publisher we see that Russell was deeply troubled by the thought of having hurt anyone's feelings by an invidious comparison. In saying that his original statement had been confidential, however, he was perhaps forgetful. You will recall that in his letter to me of October 1939 he said of Tarski that "no other logician of his generation seems to me his equal", and added that "you may quote me anywhere as concurring in your view of Tarski's abilities."

I had ten more letters from Russell over the next twenty-seven years. In 1941 he wrote me about a longish manuscript by R.L. Goodstein on the foundations of mathematics:

I want to unload this manuscript on someone. Are you willing to be the someone?

In 1949 he wrote to me in part as follows:

Thank you for ... your paper "On What There Is"—a somewhat important subject. When I first sent my theory of descriptions to *Mind* in 1905, Stout thought it such rubbish that he almost refused to print it....

I was lucky in the aeroplane accident, as nearly half those on the plane ceased to be among "what there is".⁴

Touching on that same harrowing experience on another occasion, Russell recalled that on entering the plane he had told the stewardess, "Let me sit at the back. I'll die if I can't smoke." It was lugubriously prophetic. The passengers in the forward seats drowned.

In 1956 he wrote me at length in praise of Robert Marsh, whom he was helping to find a job. The next year he wrote me as follows:

I have been moved to write a polemical article against a man who says his name is Warnock, which is in a volume called *Essays in Conceptual Analysis* edited by Antony Flew. His article is largely concerned with you, but I have not attempted to defend opinions which belong to you personally as I am quite satisfied that you can defend them yourself better than I can if you think it worth while. I should, however, be very grateful if you could give your blessing to what I have to say. If you can do so, I should on the whole prefer to publish the article in America rather than in England and I should be glad of your opinion as to where, in that case, it ought to appear.

The paper was "Logic and Ontology". I responded with applause and discussion, and suggested the *Journal of Philosophy*. He then wrote me as follows, in part:

Dear Quine,

I think we might drop the formality of "Professor" and "Lord" don't you? ... Would it be too much trouble for you to send on the typescript that I sent you to the *Journal of Philosophy*...?

At the end of October 1962, I heard from Russell as follows:

Many thanks for your letter of October 18. I am highly honoured and much pleased that you wish to dedicate your forthcoming book to me. If Kennedy and Khrushchev permit, I shall read it as soon as I get it, but, at present, it looks very doubtful whether any book not yet published ever will be.

I shall be interested to see how you manage with weakened existence axioms. I always particularly admire your symbolic virtuosity and I am sure you will manage the job better than anybody else would.

A year later he wrote as follows:

Thank you warmly for sending me your book on Set Theory, and still more warmly for

⁴ Quoted in full, *ibid.*, Vol. 3: 1944-1969 (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1969), p. 49.

the dedication and inscription, both of which gave me the greatest pleasure. I am not capable of forming a critical judgment of your book, as it is nearly forty years since I last worked at mathematical logic and I have read very little on the subject during that long period, but what I have read of your book I have found extremely interesting. I do not quite understand your classes which cannot be members of classes of classes. I suppose I should if I could give more time to the subject, but my time is all taken up in trying to secure that the class of human beings alive in 2000 A.D. will not be the null class.

I found your dedication particularly gratifying because so many logicians now-a-days seem to consider *Principia Mathematica* worthless. I do not at all mind any number of emendations, but I like to think that, considering its date, it was not without merit. It is comforting to find that you think so.

In 1966 I had a long letter from him urging me to will my possessions to his Peace Foundation, as he had done. No doubt much the same letter went to others. A month later, at the age of ninety-four, he wrote me again about logic:

I have read your recent paper with considerable interest. There is one minor point which I thought to clarify. On page six you say that Frege is *said* to have commented "Arithmetic totters". In fact, in a letter to me he says "Die Arithmetik ist ins Schwanken geraten". The comment of Frege is, therefore, quite authentic.

My last word from Russell came in January 1967. It was this:

I enclose a paper by G. Spencer-Brown, which I have given one careful reading, but no more. I am very lazy at the moment, but thought I should draw Spencer-Brown's work to your attention.

I looked into Spencer-Brown's work and was not moved by it. When his little book *Laws of Form* came out two years later, it bore this blurb from Russell:

Reveals a new calculus of great power and simplicity.

At first glance the blurb as printed looks longer and more extravagant; one must look sharp for the quotation mark.

The last time I saw Russell was decades earlier—November 1950—when he came to Harvard to give a public lecture. My wife and I picked him up at Mrs. Whitehead's, where he had gone to pay his respects, and we drove him to his lecture. It was scheduled for New Lecture Hall, but as we drove down Kirkland Street our way was blocked by a great flock of young people hurrying across the street from the New Lecture Hall to Sanders Theatre, where there was more room for the unexpectedly large turnout. What with the girls' bright dresses and sweaters flying in the wind, it was a gala welcome, and Russell was pleased.

Mrs. Whitehead had nursed some minor grudges against Russell down the years. She told Irving Singer after this last occasion that she had been reluctant to receive Russell, and had resolved to give him a piece of her mind, but that when he came his sprightly talk and engaging way had charmed all her resentment away.

I had a posthumous and wordless message from Russell as recently as 1980. It

was when I visited the Russell archive at McMaster, where Russell's personal philosophical library was set out. I was pleased to find six of my books in it, only three of which I had sent him. A pipe cleaner, by way of bookmark, still marked the place in my *Mathematical Logic* where I departed from his definition of singular description.

I should like to conclude by reading a short letter of my own which I wrote on the occasion of Russell's ninetieth birthday.

April 5, 1962

Dear Russell:

A young man decides to be a philosopher. "How do you mean, 'philosopher'?" they ask him. "Well," the young man pursues, "take Bertrand Russell." I was one of the many down the years who answered thus.

You have followers and followers' followers, apostates and apostates' apostates. For generations you have been head empiricist in a land celebrated for empiricism, and along the way you have sired the Vienna Circle and grandsired the Russell-baiting Oxford philosophy itself:

So I hail your ninetieth birthday as a momentous anniversary. I could have done so on the score of your mathematical logic alone; for *Principia Mathematica* was what, of all books, has influenced me the most.

Sincerely yours
W.V. Quine⁵

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⁵ First published in *Into the Tenth Decade: Tribute to Bertrand Russell* ([London:] Malvern Press, [1962]), p. [36].