

Joachim's early advice to Russell on studying philosophy

by Nicholas Griffin

RUSSELL SEEMS TO have gone up to Cambridge with the intention of studying philosophy for the second part of his Tripos.¹ Certainly none of his experiences as a mathematics student in the first part of his Tripos would have encouraged him to change this intention. The Mathematical Tripos in Russell's day was a relentless grind of examination coaching which bore little relation to contemporary mathematical research, and in which computational speed was more important than mathematical insight.² The result was to make Russell "think mathematics disgusting".³ Elsewhere he wrote:

I was encouraged in my transition to philosophy by a certain disgust with mathematics, resulting from too much concentration and too much absorption in the sort of skill that is needed in examinations. The attempt to acquire examination technique had led me to think of mathematics as consisting of artful dodges and ingenious devices and as altogether too much like a crossword puzzle.⁴

It is not surprising, therefore, that even before his Mathematical Tripos was over Russell was already looking forward to changing to phi-

¹ See Russell's letter to Alys Pearsall Smith, 14 March 1894, reporting a conversation he'd had with her brother-in-law, Frank Costelloe, before going up.

² It is scathingly described by A.R. Forsyth, "Old Tripos Days at Cambridge", *The Mathematical Gazette*, 19 (1935): 162–79, and by W.H. and G.C. Young in documents excerpted in I. Grattan-Guinness, "A Mathematical Union: William Henry and Grace Chisholm Young", *Annals of Science*, 29 (1972): 105–82, and "University Mathematics at the Turn of the Century", *Annals of Science*, 28 (1972): 369–84.

³ *My Philosophical Development* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1959), p. 38.

⁴ *Portraits from Memory* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1956), pp. 15–16.

ilosophy for the second part of his Tripos. But the Mathematical Tripos imposed an onerous work load, so onerous, in fact, that it was widely regarded as a threat to the health of students who were not especially resilient.⁵ It is surprising, therefore, to find Russell embarked upon a serious course of philosophical reading right in the middle of his three years as a mathematics student. From *What Shall I Read?*⁶ we know that in 1891 he reread much of Mill's work, with the notable exception of the *Logic*. Toward the end of 1892 he read Plato's *Symposium* and *Theaetetus* in a newly purchased copy of Jowett's translations about which he wrote enthusiastically to his uncle, Rollo Russell.⁷ In roughly the same period he also read Hume's *Treatise*, Hölder's *Kantische Erkenntnisstheorie* and Schwegler's *History of Philosophy*.

Russell's teachers were concerned that his interest in philosophy would impair his performance in the mathematics exams:

James Ward, whom I had consulted as to what I should read, sent for me and told me that a Wrangler is a Wrangler. From this instance of the law of identity he drew the inference that I had better read no more philosophy till after my mathematical Tripos, with the result that I did not do so badly in it as had been feared when he gave his advice.⁸

It would seem that there had been some deterioration in Russell's mathematical work. But Russell attributed this, in retrospect, to an attack of influenza early in 1892 which impaired his capacity for working on either mathematics or philosophy (*ibid.*).

It is not known what Ward recommended Russell to read at this time, but we do have a list of philosophical books recommended by Harold Joachim, an Oxford idealist philosopher at Merton with whom Russell, more than a decade later, waged a protracted debate on the nature of truth. Joachim, who became the brother-in-law of Rollo Russell, was Russell's neighbour at Haslemere, and clearly at one time Russell asked

his advice on what to read in philosophy. Joachim's reply has survived,⁹ and it was this list of books which, Russell claimed years later, "started me on philosophy."¹⁰

HIGHLANDS,
HASLEMERE,
Friday.

Dear Bertie,

Come & play tennis on Tuesday (27th) at 3. p.m. I hope you can.

I should suggest—

Plato (especially Phaedo, Phaedrus, *Republic* Sophist (wh. I haven't read myself!), Meno, Philebus (not so good), Symposium (Divine), ?Politicus—& Parmenides—or, if you have time, all of him, in the Master's [Benjamin Jowett's] translation.

Also—Erdmann's Hist. of Philosophy (if you read German¹¹) for reference—It is very good, tho' rather condensed on Greek Philosophy. There is an excellent book on "Early Greek Philosophy" just come out by Burnet—a friend of mine. It is first rate, & I think you would like it. Ferrier's lectures on Early Greek Philosophy are elementary, but good as far as they go.

Then you might go on to Descartes, Leibnitz (which I regret to say I haven't read—except in Erdmann!)—& Spinoza—especially the latter's Ethics (= Metaphysics with him) & his Tractatus de Emendatione intellectus, & (as an ingenious curiosity) his tractatus Theologico-Politicus. These are all in somewhat hard Latin, but one soon gets into the style.

Then you should attack Hume (Green & Grose's edition with Green's Introductions—especially the 1st 2 volumes—i.e. the "treatise on human nature".) & I suppose, Locke (whom I also have hardly read at all). Berkeley is delightful reading. There is a capital little volume of Selections from him by Fraser (?Fraser).

Bacon's *Novum Organon* is a splendid piece of brilliant writing—but disappointing quâ Philosophy. It sparkles with quaint illustrations & epigrams.

If you have survived some of this literature, I think you should then tackle some Kant—i.e. *The Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, *Kritik d. Urtheilskraft*, *Gründlegung zur [sic] Metaphysik der Sitten*, & *Kritik der Praktischen Ver-*

⁵ Cf. Sheldon Rothblatt, *The Revolution of the Dons* (London: Faber, 1968), p. 182.

⁶ *The Collected Papers of Bertrand Russell*, Vol. 1: *Cambridge Essays, 1888–99*, ed. K. Blackwell et al. (London: Allen and Unwin, 1983), App. II.

⁷ See letter to Rollo Russell, 4 December 1892, RA.

⁸ *My Philosophical Development*, p. 37. H. Montagu Butler, the Master of Trinity, expressed his relief at the outcome in his letter of congratulations on Russell's Tripos result (13 June 1893, RA).

⁹ It came not with the older Russell Archives I, as would be expected, but with Archives II. Moreover, it was found upon arrival folded several times and tucked into a small wallet along with a photo of Alys. Perhaps Russell carried the document about for reference. It would seem that he did not have the letter to hand in writing *My Philosophical Development*.

¹⁰ BR to B. Blanshard, 16 May 1942 (RA REC. ACQ. 235).

¹¹ The English transl. is *bad* [Joachim's note. An annotated copy of the German edition is in Russell's library.]

nünft,—& by that time, you will know much more about it than I do, and may be left to 'gang you ain gait'

Yours very sincerely

Harold Joachim

As to Logic. *Mill* (full of fallacies), *Bradley* (First rate—but very hard) & *Bosanquet* (Good, but still harder)—& probably Lotze (of whom I know very little)—certainly Jevons' *Principles of Science*—tho' this isn't really Logic—

Then, as a Corrective, Aristotle's *Ethics* (bad translation by Peters), *Metaphysics* (good German translation by Bonitz) & *Politics* (Welldon)—But I am afraid you would need to know Greek to make much out of him.

"Probably to Joachim's surprise," Russell recalled, "I proceeded to read the books on his list."¹² However, in 1959 Russell remembered only two of the books on the list, both of which he described with fair accuracy: "one was Bradley's *Logic* which, he said, was good but hard; the other was Bosanquet's *Logic* which, he said, was better but harder" (*ibid.*).

Unfortunately it is difficult to date Joachim's letter precisely. The reference to Tuesday the 27th restricts it to May 1890, January 1891, October 1891, September 1892, December 1892 or June 1893—the only months between 1890 and 1893 in which the 27th fell on a Tuesday. Joachim's reference to the recent appearance of Burnet's *Early Greek Philosophy*, which was first published in May 1892, rules out all but the last three dates. Clearly December 1892 was too late to be playing tennis in England. This leaves September 1892 or June 1893. The latter date would be a natural time for Russell to turn his thoughts to a serious reading programme in philosophy. Early that June he had completed the Mathematical Tripos, and in July he was to start attending Sidgwick's course on ethics. The heavy bias in Joachim's recommendations towards history of philosophy, in which Russell specialized in the Moral Sciences Tripos, suggests that Russell sought Joachim's advice with the specific intention of preparing for his Tripos work. Nevertheless, this date (27 June 1893) cannot be squared with Russell's recollection that he started to read the books Joachim recommended "while I was still working at mathematics".¹³ Elsewhere Russell implies that he started reading the books on Joachim's list *before* his influenza attack "[a]t the beginning of 1892".¹⁴ But this would rule out both

possible dates for Joachim's letter.

A plausible, simple explanation is that Russell misremembered the date of his influenza attack, and that the attack occurred early in 1893. This fits well with the illness's having a serious effect on Russell's chances in the Mathematical Tripos. It also means that Joachim's letter was probably written on Friday, 23 September 1892, four days before the scheduled tennis match on the 27th. Although somewhat late to be playing tennis, this date fits closely with the publication of Burnet's book and is also supported by the evidence from *What Shall I Read?* This list shows that Russell read Plato's *Theaetetus* and *Symposium* and Hume's *Treatise* in November and December 1892. It may seem strange that Russell, about to embark on his final year of the Mathematical Tripos, would have sought advice on a major programme of philosophical reading. However, the burdens of the Mathematical Tripos must by 1892 have confirmed Russell's intention to change his course of study. (It is possible, moreover, that his decision to specialize in history of philosophy in the Moral Sciences Tripos was influenced by Joachim's reading recommendations, rather than vice versa.) No doubt Ward's advice to postpone philosophical reading until after the Mathematical Tripos exams was given at the beginning of 1893, since *What Shall I Read?* does not list any philosophy books between January and June 1893. No doubt wisely, Russell didn't tackle Bradley's *Logic* until September 1893, while Bosanquet's *Logic* had to wait until June 1895.

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¹² *My Philosophical Development*, p. 37.—though *What Shall I Read?* makes it clear that he did not proceed far.

¹³ *The Autobiography of Bertrand Russell*, Vol. 1 (London: Allen and Unwin, 1967), p. 68.

¹⁴ *My Philosophical Development*, p. 37.