A glimpse of the Russell–Couturat correspondence

by Albert C. Lewis

L'Oeuvre de Louis Couturat (1878–1914) ... de Leibniz à Russell ... . Paris: Presses de l'École Normale Supérieure, 1983. Pp. 130. 55 F.

AN INTERNATIONAL COLLOQUIUM devoted to the works of the philosopher Louis Couturat was held in June 1977 at the École Normale Supérieure. Most of the papers presented are published in this volume along with a bibliography of Couturat's works. Couturat is largely ignored today, but Maurice Loi, in the first paper in the volume, argues that this is undeserved and that Couturat's work is worthy of continuing study. He also mentions a few personal facts about Couturat: his entrance into the École Normale Supérieure in 1887 and study of mathematics under Jules Tannery, his major work on Leibniz, his inaugural lecture at the Collège de France in 1905 (reproduced here), and his death in an automobile accident in 1914.

Russell favourably reviewed Couturat's published dissertation, *De l'Infini mathématique* (1897) in *Mind*, and Couturat's letter to Russell of 3 October 1897 thanking him for the review was the start of a friendship and even collaboration (in producing the revised French edition in 1901 of Russell's *An Essay on the Foundations of Geometry* [1897]). An indication of the richness of their correspondence, consisting of 198 letters and postcards, is given in the paper "La Correspondence inédite Couturat–Russell" by Anne-Françoise Schmid, who expresses her hope of producing a scholarly edition of the correspondence in the not too distant future. She points to a fundamental difference between the two men that is quickly revealed in their correspondence. Couturat reproaches Russell for being "scholastic" and for allowing himself to be stymied by what Couturat regards as relatively secondary difficulties. Quotations from the letters in the period 1903 to 1905 are used to illustrate this difference with respect to the topics of extension, Russell's paradox on contradiction, and the axiom of choice. Further quotations are given concerning Russell's discovery of Peano and his work on *The Principles of Mathematics*. Russell's and Couturat's views are compared on Frege, Hilbert, Meinong, Kant and Poincaré. Their views are also compared on a variety of other subjects under such headings as the Boer War, an international language, and mathematical existence. (A revised and "somewhat augmented" version of Schmid's paper was also published in *Dialectica*, 37 [1983]: 75–109.)

The closeness of Couturat and Russell would presumably be regarded as quite detrimental for Couturat by Jean Dieudonné. This renowned senior mathematician expresses in his paper, "Louis Couturat et les mathématiques de son époque", great disdain for Russell and his "pretensions" to being relevant to mathematics.

The other speakers represented here are: Mario Laserna on Couturat and the Kantian conception of geometry; Hervé Barreau on Couturat and the criticism of concepts of time of his contemporaries G. Lechalas, H. Bergson, and F. Evellin; Pierre Dugac on Couturat and the mathematician Georg Cantor; Franz Schupp on the problem of subalternation in Couturat's *La Logique de Leibniz* (1901); Ubaldo Sanzo on philosophy and science in Couturat's thought; and Alexandre Giuculescu on Couturat as a promoter of interdisciplinary research.

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