

## Russell as a debater

We have long been aware of Russell, the author of scores of books in philosophy, logic, epistemology, science, religion, social, political and international problems, and of the surprise occasioned by his appearance as a short story writer. Then late in his life came the publication of his expansive autobiography. We know him as a teacher and lecturer in wide demand on four continents, but it is to Russell as debater that we would advert here with the hope that it will bring to light a phase of his genius not too frequently considered but which is fully illustrative of that ever alert mind.

I turn to my ever growing Bertrand Russell library for my material but, no doubt, the Archives can add much to the subject.

In the course of my meeting with him in 1942 when I was working on the bibliography for the Schilpp volume, *The Philosophy of Bertrand Russell*, I mentioned that my wife was in Florida with our two children who were recuperating from mastoid operations. This reminded him of the fact that his two oldest children had also been operated on for the same infliction. He told me of a debate he had had one evening with a bishop in which the bishop argued that human suffering was caused by sin. Russell was on the way to the hospital after the debate to see his five year old son and, as he said, could scarcely understand how he could have sinned so much. I have never been able to track down the occasion of which he spoke. [It's in Clark, p. 413. -- Ed.]

Russell was engaged in many debates over the years, not all of which were later published. Likewise in that same memorable conversation with him, as recounted in my "Recollections of Three Hours with Bertrand Russell" (*Correct English*, 1943), on mention of the name of John Cowper Powys, he recalled that he had debated with him on the subject of marriage and agreed with him on only one point: that marriage had something to do with the difference between man and woman. This debate, published as *Debate! Is Modern Marriage a Failure?*, is extremely rare and I do not possess a copy myself.

I have a copy of a photo of Russell and Sherwood Anderson from the *New York Herald Tribune* of April 12, 1953 printed 22 years after the occasion of their debate on the question of whether the state should rear their children, but have never seen any transcript of their meeting.

If only in every instance of the publication of his lectures we had appended thereto the question and answer period, we would have a delightful record of his ability to parry and to meet all avenues of criticism with humor and logic. Speaking of humor, we have an example of the reverse situation when Russell appeared as the questioner. This story appears in Stephen Potter's *Sense of Humour* in which he quotes from C.E.M. Joad's *A Year More or Less*. Joad in 1947 delivered to the Aristotelian Society a paper on Russell's recently published *A History of Western Philosophy*. Russell was present and was called upon to comment. He stole the show with jibes, anecdotes and criticisms to such an extent that, as Joad adds, pretty soon the audience forgot about him. He just couldn't look Russell straight in the eye to stand up to his dialectical skill.

And now to eight examples of Russell in debate that I find in my library.

Russell has long been accepted as one of the keenest and soundest critics of Marxism in theory and practice. On his return from Russia, he told frankly of his impressions in *Bolshevism: Practice and Theory* and continued his critical analysis in *Freedom versus Organization*. The Chinese Mao-Marxists are wont to call anyone who dares to criticize communism a swindler. I suppose if they deigned to consider Russell, they would so characterize him or perhaps as he is described in *The Short Philosophical Dictionary* issued in Russia in 1951. He is there called a reactionary and militant ideologue of Anglo-American imperialism, as cited in Simirenko's *Social Thought in the Soviet Union*.

Be that as it may, it is refreshing to see how Russell handles himself in a debate with Scott Nearing in which he took the negative on the question of whether the Soviet form of government is applicable to Western Civilization. This debate was published under the title *Bolshevism and the West*. Russell decries any notion that the Soviet form of government can apply to the West. He tears to shreds the notion of the Bolsheviks that they are scientific. He believes that politicians are politicians in whatever latitude. He carries the argument forward in this vein in his refutation. He ends by saying that he leaves with no change of opinion from that he brought with him. Such is successful debating.

Next we have the famous debate on the existence of God with Father Copleston. Interestingly and amusingly enough, a transcript appears in the British edition of *Why I am Not a Christian* but not in the American edition. The debate was originally broadcast in 1948 on the Third Pro-

gramme of the B.B.C., which must be a fruitful source for more examples. Russell announced his position as agnostic. To him the universe is just there and that is all. That the world as a whole must have a cause, he sees no ground but he is willing to listen if the worthy Father has one. Russell does not contend that there is no God, but that we do not know that there is. This thought is akin to the reported answer Russell gave not long before his death as to what he would say if and when he faces God. He is reported to have said that he would tell the Lord that he had given us too little evidence. In the Copleston debate there follows an interesting discussion of Russell's ethical position centered in man's feeling and not in divine precept. He stresses not alone the feelings but the effects of the acts in question. Throughout the argument Russell avoided any of his wonted barbs and treated his opponent with due respect, even as Copleston did in return in his treatment of Russell in his justly hailed *History of Philosophy*.

The very popular old programme *Invitation to Learning* called upon Russell on five occasions to join in their discussions. I will not expend space on the fifth occasion, when the subject was *Alice in Wonderland*.

He reviewed Hegel's *Philosophy of History* with Huntington Cairns, Allen Tate and Mark Van Doren. In it there are some typical Russell asides. He thinks the work in question is important because of its effect on so many but not for any truth it may contain. He dislikes the dialectic thesis as arbitrary and unconvincing, as too simple a solution even as is the Marxian adaptation of the formula. He also dislikes Hegel's worship of the state. There are many organisms aside from the state. With tongue in cheek he states that Plato, Aristotle, Kant and Hegel are misfortunes in the history of philosophy. Give him Locke, Berkeley, Hume, Leibniz and Spinoza. His participants in the discussion did not take too kindly to this jibe.

With respect to Descartes' *Discourse on Method* we have an interesting discussion with Jacques Barzun and Mark Van Doren. Russell states that he has found much of value in the method proposed by Descartes. This is principally so in its application to mathematics. Barzun thought Descartes was singularly unamiable, vain, malicious and timid. Russell doesn't get ecstatic over this characterization. He believes Descartes had a number of disciples who merely repeated his ideas without thinking and thus had a harmful influence in France as Barzun contended. All of this was advanced on a simple, sound, philosophic basis without fanfare.

On Spinoza's *Ethics* he was joined by Scott Buchanan and Mark Van

Doren. Russell scouts the Spinozistic metaphysics but sees value in the ethical theories, which he believes do not follow from the metaphysics. The calm which Spinoza seeks he finds praiseworthy. Nature works not only for good as Spinoza thinks but for evil as well.

Mill's *On Liberty* brings forth an interesting discussion among Russell, Robert M. MacIver and Lyman Bryson. Russell thought that Mill was not the rigorous logician he is reputed to have been but that his heart always rebelled against the head. With respect to *On Liberty*, Russell stated that the conclusions are sound as are the principles, but the conclusions do not follow from the principles. His fellow debaters do not accept this paradox. As to freedom of opinion, Russell is highly critical of the view that pupils must not be allowed to hear certain opinions. Mill's ideas are still good, according to Russell, and are still needed in our day. There is a healthy give and take in this discussion.

The University of Chicago radio *Round Table* discussions also brought Russell to the fore.

First we have a talk with T.V. Smith and Paul Douglas on "Taming Economic Power". They refer to Russell's *Power*. Russell concurs that political power has been more successfully curbed than economic power. He favors the exercise of democratic control over the executive. He would diffuse power in all organizations. As to change, he would rely on persuasion and peaceful propaganda rather than civil war and armed rebellion. These ideas are bandied about with pertinent questions posed to Russell.

Next we have a discussion with Albert Hart and Walter Laves on the question "Is Security Increasing?" Russell believes there are greater security factors existent (1939). He does find insecurity in the fear of war. To meet this fear he favours a supernational power to control the ambitions of individual nations. He hails the stability of the United States and avers that the world would be in a sorry condition if that country did not exist. This is a note that critics of Russell should harken to, as there are many who feel Russell was totally prejudiced against the U.S.A. There must be a willingness, he adds, by the strong nations to forego some part of their complete sovereignty for the sake of international co-operation and peace.

In "What about India?" (1942) we find Russell meeting with Pearl Buck, T.A. Raman and Louis Fischer. Each made an opening statement. Then there followed the informal, round table discussion. The argument was heavy in the light of events in India and the rest of the world.

Much of the debate involved the status of India, its future, and the impact of Gandhi's proposals.

In all of these examples Russell stands head and shoulders above the other participants. We might say that he carried the ball in each instance. His logical analysis is ever in evidence. His humour and sarcasm stand him in good stead and are employed by him when he deemed it expedient. Never were they used in disrespect of his adversaries.

There is one last area in which Russell appeared in what is tantamount to debate and that is in litigation. It might be said that he was literally raised in litigation when the guardians chosen under his father's will were not approved. There were also his two World War I trials (in one of which he eloquently addressed the court - without effect), his three divorce suits, his action against Barnes and, of course, the famous City College of New York case in which he was not given leave to appear or intervene. The most typical example of the Russell alert response was in the trial of leaders of the Committee of 100, in which Russell appeared as a witness. The judge patiently explained to Russell that he need not respond to questions if by so doing it might tend to incriminate him. Russell promptly queried, "But, your lordship, do I not have the right to incriminate myself?" This is something for those in the United States who traffic in the fifth amendment to consider.

Russell fearlessly advanced the views he believed to be correct on every occasion. The alert mind and knowing eyes never failed to be in evidence.

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