

Discussion

The duty of a modern philosopher

by *S. Nixon*

IN HIS ARTICLE, "The Philosopher's Duty in These Times" (*Russell* 35-6), John G. Slater endeavours to point out what he considers to be a curious consequence in what Russell has to say about the duty of a modern philosopher. According to Slater, Russell, in his encouragement to the modern philosopher to take an active role in the fight against nuclear warfare, contradicts his own aims, both in the emotional and intellectual spheres. Slater is suggesting that such involvement in the "here and now", be it through political speeches, the publication of articles of protest and warning or the like, is an active involvement and, hence, incompatible with Russell's former teachings, as seen in "The Value of Philosophy" (Chap. 15 of *The Problems of Philosophy*) and elsewhere, where intellectual impartiality and what Slater calls more "placid emotions" are encouraged. A philosopher's active participation in such present-day moral and political concerns, according to Slater, would be seen by Russell as departing from the true philosophic vision, as such participation prefers the terrestrial to the cosmic, the momentary to the eternal, the intensely emotional to the calmly contemplative.

Having once outlined this apparently curious consequence in Russell, Slater goes on to point out an incompatibility in the area of scepticism and, then, a comparison between Russell and Spinoza. I find Slater's interpretation of the article to be as equally curious as he found Russell's to be and shall attempt to explain why on these accounts.

Firstly, I do not see such action as incompatible with the emotional and intellectual natures of the philosopher who understands Russell's philosophic vision. Russell says that anything good is, as far as our experiences go, bound up with life and that human life is worth preserving. The philosopher should help to bring about, by any means available to him, the triumphs in art, science and morality that make human life worth preserving. He should endeavour to view the world, as far as he is able, without a bias of space and time. He should be capable of human sympathy and of

imagining the world without human strife. In order to avoid being an accomplice in the mass murder that will result from an atomic war, the philosopher, like any decent human being, has a duty to make known the facts about the probable disastrous effects of such a war. He should study these effects himself and, with the advantage of his knowledge and eloquence and the respect given to him by others, he is morally obligated to persuade others to agree with him and to join him in the fight to save the human race from extinction. This is all the more necessary since the scientists' warnings have been hitherto ignored by the public. This is what Russell says a modern philosopher should do.

I do not find this duty to act incompatible with what Russell finds valuable in philosophic contemplation. This desire to act is dependent upon an emotional as well as intellectual reaction to evil, but here, I think, Slater misinterprets the role of the emotions. For this is not, indeed, the blind, self-centered sort of emotion that Russell so often counsels against. These are not the feverish and confined emotions of finite personal concerns. Rather, since the provocations for such emotions threaten all humanity and therefore all good, they are quite acceptable within the framework of the philosophic vision. Emotions of this sort, be they intense or not, emotions which are motivated by an intellectual awareness of the evils of intolerance, dogmatism, and possible mass murder, are quite compatible with what Russell has to say.

How can the philosopher teach "citizenship of the universe" if, after a nuclear holocaust, there are no more citizens to learn? How can he teach freedom and impartiality in action and emotion if he himself sees intolerance, blind hatred and world-wide ignorance and does nothing about it? He must act to inform others of the dangers of nuclear war. When was it more imperative to actively inform men about the "superficiality of geographical and racial barriers" than now? Or to teach the communion of man with infinity, or that "we are all sufferers in the same darkness, actors in the same tragedy"? How can the philosopher preach about human liberation through the submission of our desires and victory of our thoughts if he sits back in such perilous times and allows the ignoble, thoughtless desires of a few to control us all? Shall he, dispassionate in his intellectual impartiality, be content to be a mere passive commentator on the tragedy of the passing show? It is not so, says Russell, that we can tear away the ever-present barriers and fears and insistent national egoisms or alter what is our apparent nuclear doom. We must act. And this action does not mean, as Slater suggests, to temporarily compromise the philosophical principles of our two natures, until the wrongs are righted. On the contrary, for the feeling here is universal, not merely personal; the thought is impartial, not partial. "Life is not action only, or contemplation only, but action based on contemplation,

action attempting to incarnate the infinite in the world", Russell wrote in "The Perplexities of John Forstice". He also wrote that this impartiality of thought should lead to "justice in action and universal love in feeling". And it is the philosopher, above all, because of his talents for impartial vision and for eloquent persuasion who has a moral duty to appeal to the public emotionally, and rationally, as best suits his purpose, in order to assist in avoiding planetary death.

According to Slater, what Russell recommends to modern philosophers must result in abandoning a sceptical attitude to truth. Slater says that the philosopher "will be wasting his time if he admits publicly that a reasonable man might doubt the truth" of what the philosopher says. This would be true if the philosopher were a total sceptic, not allowing for degrees of doubt. I don't know of Russell ever suggesting total scepticism. If the philosopher whose duties Russell describes is not a total sceptic, he will not have to abandon an attitude of probable doubt. He will have to convince his opponents that scepticism is more solvent when applied to their opinions than to his own.

It appears to me that Slater implies that, in order to act, one has to be passionate, and that, if one is passionate, one cannot be sceptical. It is not true that in order to act one has to be passionate. One can act by habit. And that if one is passionate one cannot be sceptical might be true of total sceptics. It is not true of non-total sceptics. In fact Russell would say that it is both possible and desirable to be sceptical but not totally. There are degrees of doubt. Not acknowledging them makes life difficult. If one wants to live without bumping into corners and trees one has to abandon total scepticism. But one does not have to abandon scepticism altogether, because, after all, this world (with total sceptics included) could be a communal dream. However, it does not need to be a dream, individual or communal. Moreover, having feelings attached to the world, including passionate feelings, is independent of the picture of the world we have. Even in a dream there may be passionate feelings. When these passionate feelings are of a certain kind they lead to action that is beneficial.

Slater contends that Spinoza, like Russell, lived in uncertain times, and yet did not counsel action to philosophers. Slater doubts that Spinoza would agree with Russell on the call to action. In the first place the threat of planetary extinction was not conceivable during Spinoza's lifetime; thus any conclusion based on this analogy is fallacious. Possibly Spinoza would not agree with Russell's recommendations, but, quite probably, given similar circumstances, he would. Someone living today who, like Spinoza, values understanding, is aware that understanding occurs less in inanimate matter than in life. This person would wish life to continue on this account. Inasmuch as Spinoza values understanding uppermost, he, in his active

46 Russell, nos. 37–40 (1980)

capacity, would encourage actions that would promote understanding and discourage those that would kill it. Therefore it is probable that Spinoza would agree with Russell in taking action to that effect.

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