

PURSUIT OF AN ILLUSION

A COMMENTARY ON BERTRAND RUSSELL

By George P. Grant

WHEN Bertrand Russell has attempted to formulate the principles upon which the study of mathematics rests or when he has analysed the nature of scientific propositions, he has made certain principles clearer than they were previously. Such activities are part of the philosopher's job and therefore it is possible to call Russell a philosopher. On the other hand, when Russell turns from discussing man as scientist to man as moral agent or as artist, he foregoes the philosopher's function. That is, in writing about conduct or art he makes no attempt to discover the principles underlying these activities. He freely admits this, of course, and says that it is simply a necessity of the human condition. Over and over again he repeats that reason has nothing positive to say about the fundamental questions of conduct.*

Yet having said that reason cannot tell us anything fundamental about conduct, Russell has spent most of his life writing at great length on this very subject. Since 1914 more and more of his work has dealt with such aspects of man's conduct as politics, education, religion and sex. Why has he done this?

This would seem less contradictory if Russell simply admitted that what he has to say about human conduct is just his prejudices; admitting, in other words, that he is making no attempt to show others what are the principles of right conduct. But in his popular writings he never makes clear this distinction necessary to his own scepticism. He never states clearly when he is speaking as a philosopher and when he is gossiping about his own prejudices. From looking at Russell's writings, I am led to the conclusion that at one and the same time he has desired to assert moral scepticism (that is the impotence of reason in the fundamentals of conduct) and has also desired to teach men about conduct, using his position of authority as a philosopher.

Of course Russell cannot have it both ways. He cannot be sceptical about the positive role of the philosopher in discovering ethical principles and also expect us to take with any

* (If anyone doubts that I have stated Russell's position correctly I would refer him to *The Philosophy of Bertrand Russell*—in the Library of Living Philosophers—vol. V. pp. 531-535 and pp. 720-727. There he will find a plethora of quotations from Russell on this subject.)

seriousness his statements about how we ought to live. His principle must apply to himself. If reason is basically impotent in practical matters, then he either ought to be silent about these questions or else openly admit that what he writes about them has no rational content. And of course if he admits the latter, then there is no reason why any man should take what he writes about conduct seriously. We do not listen attentively when the brilliant mathematician is talking baby talk to his children.

It is this contradiction that makes difficult any systematic analysis of Russell's recent broadcast talks, *Living in an Atomic Age*. Does he claim for them any of the persuasive power of reason, or are they just intended as so much rhetoric that will stir us emotionally? As to Russell's intention, it is hard to answer this question one way or the other. Indeed the strange division in Russell's soul is particularly evident throughout these talks. If I did not know their author and was trying to describe him, I would say he must be a man with the wordly wit and cultivated style of the aristocrat, combined with a preacher's hatred of man's sin and desire to improve men; but that these excellent qualities were marred by continual contradictions and a failure to reduce any question to principles. Indeed, I would say that the author was a good man and a clever man, but not a philosopher. This is the dilemma in which Russell is inevitably entangled by the contradiction between the moral scepticism which he holds in principle and the moral fervour which he adopts in practice. Because of his moral fervour he wants to speak out and convince men to be good; because of his moral scepticism he cannot speak in principles and therefore cannot speak clearly.

Let me illustrate what I mean from Russell's writings on the problem of conduct. First an example from these broadcasts. Russell is describing the present state of the world and discusses what should happen in the future. One of his chief points is that modern industry is "a kind of rape," and that men are using up the natural resources of our planet frivolously. He condemns this state of affairs and demands that men "should" think of posterity. Now of course I am not here arguing with Russell as to the facts. I quite agree with him as to what men are doing and that we should carefully husband our resources for the sake of future generations. I am not arguing with him as an economist, but as a philosopher. Within his own philosophical position, what does Russell mean by the word "should"? The word "should" presumably means men ought to do this or

that. It is one of the fundamental words that western men have used about their conduct. But if Russell is right and reason cannot speak about the fundamentals of conduct, then he is using the word "should" with no rational significance. What then does he mean when he says that men "should" think about posterity?

From what Russell has written on this matter elsewhere, I would infer either that he means that he likes men to take posterity into account, or else that he commands them to do so. That is, he would say that fundamental ethical terminology such as "should" is not meant rationally, but either emotively (that is implying like or dislike) or imperatively (that is as implying command). Accordingly there is nothing rational in saying that men should take thought of posterity. But again I ask, if these words of Russell are, on his own showing, no more than expressions of like and dislike or of command, why should anyone listen to them? When Russell writes of mathematical principles we do not accept their validity because he likes these principles rather than others, or because he commands us to them, but because he has convinced our reasons. If in writing of conduct he can show us no reason for acting one way rather than another, why should we agree? And what is more important, how can he convince anybody who disagrees with him? There are obviously men in the world who do not care to take thought for posterity. Russell can present them with no reason for caring. He simply holds up his passion for posterity against other men's passion for immediate satisfaction.

I wish I could be sure that Russell always makes clear that he does not use such words as "should" or "ought" with rational content. Certainly in his writings for philosophers he has made his scepticism clear. He has done his utmost to be consistent. But the same cannot be said for these broadcasts. He uses for instance such sentences as the following: "I have been concerned in these lectures to set forth certain facts, and certain hopes which these facts render rational." The phrase "rational hopes" is plainly inconsistent with an assertion about the impotence of reason in ethics. For admitting the facts as he sees them (e.g. the rape of our natural resources), there is still no reason on his view of conduct why anything follows rationally as a hope about man's behaviour either as it should be or as it may be predicted. Why then does he use such phrases as "rational hopes"?

Russell then implies one set of principles for philosophers and a quite contradictory set for the public. And he cannot here use the doctrine of economy as an excuse. For the man who applies this doctrine may rightly avoid the subtlety of principle in popular lectures, but he certainly cannot enunciate principles in his profound and popular writings.

There seem to me two possible explanations as to why Russell falls into this contradiction. Perhaps he doesn't recognize he is falling into it. If this is so then we may have less respect for him as a philosopher, for it is the job of philosophers to ferret out contradictions. The other possible explanation is that he wishes to convince his popular audience that what he is saying about conduct has rational content, so that they will accept his opinions. That is, he wishes to convince his audience of the truth of a principle which he himself rejects as false. The idea that reason does play a central role is so deeply embedded in the tradition of the west that Russell perhaps thinks it is useful to foster the illusion for his own purposes. But surely, if there is anything that all philosophers may agree on, it is that fostering illusions for whatever purpose is not their function. Russell should have made clear in his writings that his repeated use of the word "should" has no rational content. I, on the other hand, am quite ready to use the word "should" about Russell, for as I will attempt to show later it is a word that has in truth the deepest rational content.

Another illustration from Russell's popular writings: in a recent article on "Gladstone and Lenin" he discusses the eminent men he has known. He ends the article with the statement that "what I have found most unforgettable is a certain kind of moral quality, a quality of self-forgetfulness, whether in private life, in public affairs, or in the pursuit of truth." He takes as an example of this quality E. D. Morel, the man who was chiefly responsible for exposing the abuses of the Belgian government in the Congo, and who later was a pacifist in the war of 1914. Of course I agree with Russell about the glory of the qualities he mentions. The self-forgetting man is surely the highest vision of God vouchsafed to us in this world. "Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels." E. D. Morel is equally one of my heroes. But I take issue with Russell again at this point because his moral scepticism prevents him from saying clearly why Morel was such a high type of human being and therefore presumably the kind of man we

should all attempt to become. Russell can say nothing to those who would reply that Morel was a bad type of man. And the last years leave us with no doubt that there are men all over the world who would consider Morel misguided or wicked. Any consistent totalitarian would say that Morel was vicious because he considered there were principles demanding his loyalty more than the principle of loyalty to the state. The hedonist would say that Morel was misguided because he exalted self-forgetfulness above his personal pleasure. Certain modern psychologists might say that Morel's hungering and thirsting after righteousness was a sign of "moral diabetes." And because of Russell's scepticism, he can present no principles which will be valid against the totalitarian and which will show him why loyalty to the state cannot be a first principle of conduct. And of course the inference must be that if reason has nothing to say against the totalitarian, the non-totalitarian is as much confined by prejudice and force and tradition. For, either reason can speak about conduct, or else prejudice, force and tradition are the deciding factors.

In fact Russell, having been brought up in a certain section of nineteenth century English society, happens to like the tradition of charity inherited from the broad line of Christian principles, the tradition of private judgment inherited from Puritanism, and the tradition of humane conduct that comes to the west from the Greeks. As he likes these, he admires Morel who partook of all of them so beautifully. But Russell's defence of these qualities can only lie in a completely irrational acceptance of one tradition as against another.

Russell, who has spent so much of his life making fun of tradition, finally must rest his case as to the central issue of human life—standards for action on a traditionalism which reason is completely impotent to criticize or improve. The churches he has so castigated for irrationalism and traditionalism were never so irrationalist or traditionalist as that. No Protestant or Catholic would go so far as Russell.

II

The question then which Russell's philosophy raises is whether reason can be practical. I believe this is the most important issue of all philosophy, for if we say with Russell that our action cannot finally be regulated by principles, we are saying that in the most important aspect of our nature reason is impotent.

In discussing this issue, it is first necessary to state Russell's position more fully. As I understand Russell, the place of reason in our life is to help us to find the means to achieve what our passions lead us to desire. Means belong to reason; ends to passion. If we desire riches more than anything else, the place of reason is to show us how to get rich. If our chief end is the conquest of women, reason will help us to become expert seducers. Reason can also show us the probable consequences of pursuing one course of action as against another. What reason cannot do is to tell us whether those consequences are good or bad. It cannot tell us what is the proper end of all conduct. We must rely on our emotions for that central direction. According to Russell, the role of reason is confined to logical and empirical concepts, and does not extend to the regulation of our wills by principles.

In criticising this view, up to this point, I have simply tried to make clear some of its consequences. The consequences for society are clearly that, when disagreement arises over ultimate principles of conduct, the issue must be decided by force or passion. If one American likes to lynch negroes and another American says it is wrong, the issue can only finally be decided by force. The American who hates lynching can indeed say with reason that such and such are certain consequences of lynch law. If, however, the other American is ready to accept these consequences and still likes lynching, there is nothing further that reason can say. In personal life there is no point in using our intelligence to judge what persons we should accept as examples. There is no meaning in saying that Copernicus or Socrates or Milton chose worthier ends than Himmler or Napoleon or Mickey Spillane.

Any argument from consequences is, of course, only of limited value. It must be supplemented by some positive grounds for thinking otherwise. Clarity about consequences is however necessary, for down the ages it has led men desperately to inquire whether there is not some intellectually respectable position other than moral emotionalism. In the Platonic dialogues, Socrates returns again and again to the consequences of scepticism, so that he can persuade the young men to see how in fact reason does operate in their lives.

It is necessary now to turn to the positive reasons why philosophers have believed that our practical life can be regulated by reason. In stating these grounds I would point out

to those readers who are not philosophers by profession (it will be obvious to those who are) that nothing I say has any originality. It has all been said, once and for all, in that most brilliant of philosophic works, Plato's "Republic". In modern philosophy much the same argument has been put by Kant. Also it will be clear that what I say on this matter is not meant as a complete statement of the case for ethical rationalism. That could only be done in greater compass than this article allows. It is simply an outline of the rationalist position, given to make clearer the difference between it and Russell's irrationalism. Anyone who wants a systematic account of ethical rationalism can of course find it in Plato's "Republic," Kant's "Critique of Practical Reason" or the nineteenth book of Augustine's "City of God."

Men act in the world to achieve purposes. We are moved to action by desire. We act because we think it will be good to achieve this or that object of our desire. The question then at issue is the relationship of desire to reason in our consciousness. To repeat, Russell's position is that reason helps us to find means to achieve what our passions lead us to desire. The position I maintain is that reason and desire are far more intimately bound in consciousness. The vast range of our particular desires does not appear simply as a chaos, because reason presents us with the idea of universality as an end, in which that very unity which we call the self, and not mere separate desires, will be satisfied. It is this idea of the highest good which allows the struggle between unity and diversity in our selves to seek reconciliation. Because of it all particular desires do not appear to us completely uncoordinated, but can be brought into some intelligible hierarchy, under the regulation of this principle of spirit. The union of reason and desire is even more intimate than this, because not only does reason give us this idea of a highest good, it also desires to realise itself therein. This is what is meant when we say our wills are rational. We are moved by the desire for rationality itself. I would say that we see this not only in personal conduct, but also in the striving of the scientist for universality, in the desire of the lawyer for a just law.

To put the same point in slightly different language, I would say that this is what we mean when we use words such as "should" or "ought" or "duty." When we say that it is the duty of man to do this or that we mean that he should follow

a course of conduct not motivated by the particularities of his pleasure at any given moment, but by some principle that is universal and therefore is law for him, irrespective of the passing whims of his consciousness. What seems to us the conflict between duty and desire is just the conflict between the desire for the highest good and the desire for some less whole good which arises from the particularity of our natures. To use Russell's example of E. D. Morel, how did Morel transcend the particularities of his passing desires to hold to with sufficiently abiding desire the interests of the Africans in the Congo, unless his reason gave him this idea of a universal good, which by his formulation of it called him to the service of their proper interests? When Russell says that we "should" take thought of posterity rather than our immediate greeds, surely such ethical foresight is only possible if reason does give us an idea of a highest good in the knowledge of which we can transcend the pressing particularity of our desires?

I realize that in describing the claims of ethical rationalism, I have assumed greatly. Above all I have assumed that despite the diversity of our consciousness, there is a real unity which we call the self. The philosophic deduction of this fact, usually assumed by common sense, would take too long. Neither have I space to relate the place of reason in the practical life to its place in the theoretical judgment—that is, to lay the groundwork of theology. Nor have I made any effort to show how the bare idea of the highest good can be given with sufficient concreteness to regulate all the diversity of particular circumstances. Nor will I discuss the question of sin, why men act on the motives of particular desires rather than from the idea of the highest good.

There are however two points I wish to make, because they always seem to arise in a discussion of the practical reason. The first concerns the appeal to the so-called facts of life. Is it not a fact, so this appeal runs, that men's conduct is dominated by force and passion? Is it not simply romantic to say that men act from principles? Just go into a big city during a heat wave and you will see that men are not ruled by reason. Just look at the African natives, the waitresses, the stockbrokers. Of course the primary answer to this so-called appeal to experience is to make clear that the idea of a practical reason does not affirm what men accomplish in this world, but rather what they should accomplish. It is a matter of definition and there-

fore cannot be settled by the appeal to any particular experience. I am however quite willing to go farther and meet this appeal to experience by a contrary one. I have never met a human being who does not hold some conception of the highest good, however imperfectly formulated and imperfectly followed. That is, I have never met a human being who was not capable of giving some faint semblance of order to his desires.

To go even further, to deny that reason operates in the conduct of all men is to deny that most men have any chance of leading the rational life. For most men in this world have not the opportunity to develop their reasons in the practice of some art or science. The means for rationality is given to most persons only through their conduct. The slum mother has no chance for the life of science or art, but only achieves rationality by exalting her family's general good above her own. To deny that reason operates in action is then to deny that most people ever enter into the glory of existence which is rationality. To appeal again to consequences, can we dare to be so presumptuous about other men?

To the contrary I would say that it is the chief wonder of human life that at the profoundest level all men are equal. All men are given in conduct this idea of spirit, which however imperfectly framed, because of historical circumstances, is at least sufficiently clear for them to choose whether their wills be ruled by it or not. At the same time no man is given this idea with such perfect clarity as would eliminate for him the possibility of choice. Only on such a conception of reason as I have outlined can equality, and therefore democracy, rest. To transpose into a different language, the conception of reason presenting to all men the idea of a highest good, is just the Christian belief of the image of God in all men. The denial of this by Russell and others is the denial of the only possible theoretical grounds for democracy.

The second point I wish to make is that the formulation of the principles of morality is in some ways similar and in some ways different from the formulation of the principles of logic. It is necessary to make this point, because sceptics such as Russell always emphasize the greater public agreement about logical principles, and infer therefore the invalidity of moral principle. Looking both at the differences among logicians and at the broad acceptance of the idea of the highest good in western philosophy, I am not impressed by any idea of total divur-

gence. Nevertheless it is true that the formulation of moral principles is more difficult than is those of logic. It is therefore necessary to discuss in what ways I consider them similar and in what ways different.

They are similar in the following sense. We can think scientifically before we have formulated the principles of scientific thought; we can act morally before we have formulated moral principles. Yet in both cases, the highest principle of the theoretical reason and the highest principle of practical reason, when they are formulated, are seen to be necessary to the proper functioning of thought and of conduct. So the idea of the highest good is a necessary idea. Yet having stated that firmly, I would also state that their formulation varies in difficulty. In the formulation of the principles of conduct our wills and our desires are more deeply involved than in the formulation of theoretic principles. When we formulate mathematical principles we can use those principles in physiology or physics, (in one part of our lives), while we do not use them in our relations with our wives or neighbors or the world in general. Having formulated on the other hand, the principles of the practical reason we are committed to a total way of life. We are committed to the effort to apply those principles universally. So, in the practical reason, what we have to surrender for the sake of clarity is the whole body of our habits. The commitment is not partial but complete. It is therefore only by the profoundest effort of our wills, the greatest discipline of our habits, that we can sufficiently face the problem to come to the recognition of the highest good. It is just the understanding of this difficulty that led such philosophers as Plato and Augustine humbly to insist that their ability to isolate the principles of conduct was not finally due to their own efforts, but was a gift, or in other words, grace.

If seeking the psychological and historical causes of other men's lives were not generally just mud-slinging masquerading as science, I might be tempted to speculate why the principles of the practical reason have been unclear to Russell.

III.

The following are two passages from Russell's writing. The first is from an essay he wrote in 1902 called *A Free Man's*

Worship. The basic argument is summed up in the final passage. I quote:

"Brief and powerless is Man's life; on him and all his race the slow, sure doom falls pitiless and dark. Blind to good and evil, reckless of destruction, omnipotent matter rolls on its relentless way; for Man, condemned to-day to lose his dearest, to-morrow himself to pass through the gate of darkness, it remains only to cherish, ere yet the blow falls, the lofty thoughts that ennoble his little day; disdaining the coward terrors of the slave of Fate, to worship at the shrine that his own hands have built; undismayed by the empire of chance, to preserve a mind free from the wanton tyranny that rules his outward life; proudly defiant of the irresistible forces that tolerate, for a moment, his knowledge and his condemnation, to sustain alone, a weary but unyielding Atlas, the world that his own ideals have fashioned despite the trampling march of unconscious power."

The second passage is the final words of *Living in an Atomic Age*, spoken in 1951:

"Man now needs for his salvation only one thing: to open his heart to joy, and leave fear to gibber through the glimmering darkness of a forgotten past. He must lift up his eyes and say: 'No, I am not a miserable sinner; I am a being who, by a long and arduous road has discovered how to make intelligence master natural objects, how to live in freedom and joy, at peace with myself, and, therefore, with all mankind.' This will happen if men will choose joy rather than sorrow. If not, eternal death will bury Man in deserved oblivion."

I have not quoted these two passages because there may seem on the surface a contradiction between Russell's appeal to doom and to joy. In my opinion, when one threads one's way through the rhetoric one finds much that is true and much that is false in both passages. Even if upon analysis these passages could in no way be reconciled, a man has a right to change his mind at least every fifty years. I quote them rather because they are both about the fundamentals of human existence—what is man's final destiny, what are the motives which any knowledge about it should inspire in our conduct? I quote them because in neither case does Russell make any attempt to appeal to reason, but simply lays down propositions as dogmatically given. And in no place in his vast writings have I been able to find any attempt to argue this basic problem.

Even if the existentialists are right when they assert that the issue between doom and joy can only be settled irrationally

(and here my rationalism would of course disagree with them) still it is the philosopher's job to show clearly how that decision between joy and doom should consistently affect our conduct. Russell never attempts this consistency. Indeed in *A Free Man's Worship* he asserts the strange position that we must pursue the rational life, even though final reality is blind chance or matter. Fifty years later he is less paradoxical, but more dogmatic. He asserts the need for men to be joyful without giving any reasons why they should be. This appeal to contradiction, dogma and rhetoric to settle the fundamental issue of life is a final illustration of how large is the irrationalism.

Naturally, I have not written the foregoing to convince Russell. He has presumably read Plato and Kant (though his *History of Western Philosophy* might leave one in some doubt as to this). I have written it rather because I so often hear Russell talked about as a great advocate of human reason as against the obscurantism and mysticism of the older philosophy and theology. The fact remains however that at the centre of the old philosophy and theology there lies the proposition that man is a rational animal. This proposition meant that man can only achieve his proper end by the perfection of his reason. At the heart of Russell's thought lies the denial of this. My argument is not with those people who admire Russell and recognize this central irrationalism. It is with those who admire Russell and think in so doing they are affirming the rationality of man.

This is indeed the contradiction that lies at the heart of much of the modern thought that took its impetus from our scientific achievements. Men such as Freud and Marx, starting from the claim that human reason can establish truth, end up with the conclusion that man's nature is ultimately irrational. This is of course patently obvious in crude and hesitant thinkers such as Marx and Freud. It is less obvious but equally true of subtler men such as John Dewey and Bertrand Russell.

What final value is there in any clarity about logical principles or any appreciation of wit (both debts we owe to Russell), if men are persuaded by his philosophy that they are not rational animals, but clever beasts with a facility for mathematics? For though men are not simply clever beasts, the fact is that when they are persuaded over a length of time that they are such, they more and more act as if they were. Surely the last

years are an illustration that the ground of civilized life is the assertion of our essential rationality.

Of course to a philosopher the denial that man's rationality is his essence is particularly distressing, for it denies the use or indeed the possibility of his study. Philosophy means simply the love of wisdom, and wisdom means knowledge of the true end of life. If men are not rational they cannot reach such knowledge and therefore the attempt is the pursuit of an illusion. This is why Russell is such a confused thinker. Calling himself a philosopher, he has tried to convince men that philosophy is a waste of time.