

Why did Bertrand Russell write so many things that he attached a low value to?

Author: Terence Rajivan Edward

Abstract. I present an answer to the title question which relates Russell's writings to a remark by C.D. Broad. Russell shared the same concerns as Broad about the new postgraduate students at the University of Cambridge but instead of voicing them, his writings left a problem.

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I wish to address a question, but I shall begin with a quotation by C.D. Broad. Broad writes:

It is to be feared that Spinoza would not have been enlightened enough to appreciate the beneficent system of the Ph.D. degree, introduced into English universities as a measure of post-war propaganda, whereby the time and energy of those who are qualified to do research are expended in supervising the work of those who never will be. (1930: 4)

"That is not very nice." "I bet you Bertrand Russell never said anything like that." "No wonder Russell is much more widely read!" These are reactions I imagine.

That brings me to the question. Russell wrote a lot and some of what he wrote is not held in high regard by academic philosophers, leaving aside exceptions (Pigden 2003: 475). Even Russell himself did not hold some of what he wrote in high regard, such as his ethical writings. Why then did he write these things and why did he write so voluminously? Here is an answer that occurred to me, but it is also not very nice. He wrote because he knew that academic philosophers would not hold these writings in high regard, but then they would be forced to

confront the question: “Are the students we are training going to produce any better?” If not, the academic philosophers would feel uncomfortable about giving them certificates of achievement and the like. Russell shared the same concerns as Broad but instead of voicing them, he left these philosophers with a problem composed of these commitments:

(Russell no-good thesis) Russell’s daily writings are not good enough.

(Students good thesis) My postgraduate students are good enough.

(Students no better thesis) Each essay by my students is no better than any one of Russell’s daily writings.

“How can these academic philosophers accept all three? Surely they have to give up on the middle thesis!” That is a clever alternative to Broad’s direct approach¹ but it is not without drawbacks. Some students might react by producing one exceptional paper and nothing else. That exceptional paper counters the third thesis above.

References

Broad, C.D. 1930. *Five Types of Ethical Theory*. Available at:

<http://www.ditext.com/broad/ftet/ftet.html>

Pigden, C. 2003. Bertrand Russell: Moral Philosopher or Unphilosophical Moralist? In N. Griffin (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Bertrand Russell*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

¹ My answer as to why Russell wrote so much is a speculation but I think it likely that Russell felt puzzles along these lines, such as more crudely “What is so good about these people you value when compared with my work?”