BERTRAND RUSSELL, MY PHILOSOPHICAL DEVELOPMENT. Revised Edition, Routledge, London, 1995; pp. xvi + 207. ISBN: 0-415-13601-6

Though by no stretch of the imagination one of Russell's major philosophical works, *My Philosophical Development* is an excellent--perhaps the best--introduction to his philosophy and a very enjoyable read. In this book, which first appeared in 1959, Russell mainly describes his philosophical journey from his earliest reflections, some from as early as 1888, to the views he published in *Human Knowledge* in 1948. But there is also a fair amount of self-justification and stock-taking. Russell believed that *Human Knowledge* suffered because he omitted "the various perplexities and tentative hypotheses through which [he] had arrived at [his] final conclusions" (141), and *My Philosophical Development* seems to have been written partly to persuade us the journey was worthwhile and to publicize its results.

In an "Introduction", new to this edition, Thomas Baldwin contrasts Russell's scientific outlook with the philosophical approach often associated with the "later works of Wittgenstein which Russell so despised" (xvi). This is helpful as long as it is remembered that there are significant similarities, as well as enormous differences, between Russell and Wittgenstein. Not many philosophers can match Russell's scorn for those who "philosophise from their armchairs without bothering to acquaint themselves with contemporary work in the natural sciences" (xvi). And there can be no denying his commitment to what he calls the "grave and important task which philosophy throughout the ages has hitherto pursued", namely that of trying "to understand the world" (170). Only someone with Russell's philosophical temperament--and his "almost unbelievable optimism as to the finality of [his] own theories" (32)--could so peremptorily dismiss Wittgenstein's later philosophy as "involv[ing] an abnegation of his own best talents" (159).

Less clear, however, is whether Russell was much concerned with philosophical skepticism and "the issue of the extent of human knowledge" (xiv). His work on mathematics and science was directed towards elucidating their foundations (and determining how solid they are), not towards providing a philosophical foundation or grounding for them. Russell was bothered by doubts that crop up within natural science and everyday life, not by principled philosophical doubts, and he too may be read as "seek[ing] to respond to philosophical anxieties by elucidating the unnoticed background of many of our conceptual resources" (xvi). Russell's declaration that his "one constant preoccupation" has been "to discover how much we can be said to know and with what degree of certainty or doubtfulness" (9) is not at variance with his insistence that "the method of Cartesian doubt" is not of "fundamental validity" but at most "a tool in the work of logical dissection" (153). Russell did not "begin with how we know and proceed afterwards to what we know" (12) because "he was aware of the difficulties inherent in his thesis that the objects of perception are in all cases subjective" (xv). (Actually this was not his view; he only held--as he puts it on p. 78--that "we cannot suppose that the physical thing is what anyone sees".) The reason Russell reversed the usual approach was that he was impressed by the fact that "knowing how we know is one small department of knowing what we know" (12).

Throughout his long career Russell endeavoured to develop theories that give "answer[s] to ... problems which older theorists have found puzzling" (20). He saw himself as negotiating what he took to be "uncomfortable gulf[s]" (78) by developing theories that are "consistent with all the known facts and ..., so far, the only [ones] of which this can be said" (81). For him philosophical analysis was a matter of theoretical explanation, not the explication of meaning. His theory of matter as "series of events" (13), to say nothing of his theory of space as having "six dimensions and not only three" (79), was intended as an analysis of a phenomenon comparable to Newton's analysis of motion. As Russell himself stresses, his "initial prejudice"--that philosophy tries to replace "something vague but puzzling" with something less vague and less puzzling--was "perhaps the most important in all [his] thinking" (98).

For this reason, if for no other, Russell's brand of scientific philosophy is very different from the naturalism now in vogue. Unlike Baldwin, who takes contemporary naturalistic philosophy to be based on a "scientific outlook of the kind recommended by Russell" (xvi), I am inclined to think that his approach has largely dropped out of sight. Few philosophers--Quine is the most notable (partial) exception--are interested in analysis as Russell understood it, let alone convinced that philosophical problems can be resolved using the techniques of mathematical logic. Russell had as little sympathy for ordinary science philosophy as he had for ordinary language philosophy, and I very much doubt he would be less critical of our philosophical naturalists than he was of Herbert Spencer. Russell deployed what he took to be the all-important method of science in the interests of clarifying our knowledge; he did not attempt to erect a philosophy starting from the results of natural science.

Doubtless my differences with Baldwin arise because I view Russell's philosophical achievement rather differently. While agreeing that Russell contributed "enormous[ly]" to twentieth-century philosophy--whether he "made a greater contribution than any other person, living or dead" is another matter--I am reluctant to think of him as advancing "philosophical understanding" (xvi). Besides finding the idea of philosophical truth problematic, I believe there is much more to be gained from exploring the ins and outs of Russell's thinking--not least when his arguments seem "classic[ally] ... bad" (xiv)--than from niggling over the truth or falsity of his theories. To my way of thinking, Russell's greatness lies in the depth and breadth of his philosophical vision. His conception of analysis is tremendously important whether or not his "insights and arguments" have transformed "the whole shape of the subject" (xvi).

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