

## **Bertrand Russell: moral philosopher or unphilosophical moralist?**

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### I. INTRODUCTION

'I do not myself think very well of what I have said on ethics' wrote Russell in extreme old age (*DBR*, p. 132). And most subsequent philosophers have agreed with him. Either they do not think very well of what he said or they do not think of it at all. Until very recently, Russell hardly rated a mention in most books and bibliographies on 20th Century ethics. His most anthologized paper on the subject is 'The Elements of Ethics' (1910) in which he expounds, not his own ideas, but the ideas of his colleague and sometime friend, G.E. Moore (*PE*, ch. 1). Even dedicated Russell fans such as John Slater (*Bertrand Russell* (1994)) and Anthony Grayling (*Russell* (1996)) are a bit lukewarm about his theoretical ethics, whilst R.M. Sainsbury in his 'Arguments of the Philosophers' book *Russell* (1979), is positively dismissive: 'I have left aside his work on moral philosophy, on the grounds that in both its main phases, it is too derivative to justify a discussion of it'. In the first phase, represented by 'The Elements of Ethics' (1910), Sainsbury suggests that Russell's ideas were derived from G.E. Moore, and in the second, represented by *Human Society in Ethics and Politics*, they were 'close to Hume's, with a dash of emotivism'. (Sainsbury (1979), p. x.)

In my view this is a consensus of error. In the latter part of this essay I contend:

1) that Russell's 'work in moral philosophy' had at least three, and (depending how you look at it) up to six 'main phases';

2) that in some of those phases, it was *not derivative*, but on the contrary, highly original;

3) that Russell was a pioneer of *two* of the chief forms of ethical anti-realism that have dominated debate in this century, emotivism and the error theory (so that if the theory of *HSEP* was derived from emotivism, it was derived from a family of theories which Russell helped to create);

4) that the revolt against Hegelianism, which led to the birth of Analytic Philosophy, had an ethical dimension to it;

and

5) that Russell played an important part in the debates that led up to Moore's *Principia Ethica*, the book which he summarizes in 'The Elements of Ethics'.

Russell, in other words, was not the ethical non-entity he is widely believed to be, but an ethical theorist to be reckoned with.

## II. WHEN IS MORAL PHILOSOPHY NOT MORAL PHILOSOPHY?

But before going on I need to forestall an objection. To some readers, what I have just said may seem absurd bordering on the insane. How can there be a consensus, albeit a consensus of error, that Russell was not much to write home about as a moral philosopher? What about all those books and articles on moral and political themes from *The Principles of Social Reconstruction* (1916) through *Marriage and Morals* (1929) to *Has Man a Future* (1962), books which have continued to sell, in some cases, for over eighty years? Some of this stuff is a little lightweight to be sure. 'Should Socialists Smoke Good Cigars?' is a good question to which Russell supplies a sensible answer ('Yes') but it does not really qualify as philosophy (MOI, p. 140). But Russell devoted a lot of serious thought to the kinds of topics that have concerned moral philosophers in the past and it seems odd to deny that this counts as moral philosophy. (After all, it is often classified as such, sometimes by Russell himself!) And *if* this stuff counts, and if one measure of the importance of a philosopher is his influence, then Russell must

have been an important moral philosopher. For his influence on his numerous readers, though hard to quantify, has been immense. If it is intellectual calibre which makes the difference, then Russell's moral and political writings are certainly no worse, and in my view rather better than the moral and political writings of - say - Sartre, Nietzsche or Voltaire. And if *their* writings on power, politics and morality count as philosophy - which they are generally agreed to do - why not Russell's?

To deal with this objection I need to make some distinctions. Moral philosophy can be divided into three sub-disciplines: meta-ethics, normative ethics and practical ethics. Practical or applied ethics, as its name suggests, is a practical affair. It deals with the rights and wrongs of real-world issues; of war and peace, of euthanasia and abortion, of sex, love and marriage; it deals with social justice, and our obligations (if any) to remote people and to future generations. Practical or applied ethics is itself divided into a number of sub-sub-disciplines, such as environmental ethics, business ethics, bioethics and political philosophy. Practical ethics is distinguished from ethical theory which itself has two branches: normative ethics and meta-ethics. Normative ethics supplies (and criticizes) the premises for practical ethics, by providing 'general principles which help to determine the rules of conduct' as Russell himself put it (*OP* p. 180). It deals with such questions as what things are good and bad in themselves and what is the good for human beings. It asks what makes right acts right - are they right because of their beneficial consequences or because they are instances of some virtue? Given that consequences are relevant to determining the value of an action, normative ethics asks whether anything *else* is relevant. A normative theory, therefore, is an attempt to answer such questions: it is often (at any rate) a theory of the right and the good. Meta-ethics is a more theoretical study still. It deals with the nature and justification for moral judgments. It asks what moral judgments mean and what, if anything, makes them true. A meta-ethical theory will specify the *truthmakers* for moral judgments, the facts, if any, required to make them true, or perhaps it will deny that moral judgments *have* any truthmakers at all, because (for example) they are neither true nor false. Now, this rough and

ready way of dividing up the discipline of moral philosophy is a fairly recent invention but it can be applied without undue strain to the philosophers of the past. That is, it is often possible to say whether some late great of the subject is doing, meta-ethics, practical ethics, normative ethics or some combination of the three.

Until about 1920 and since about 1970, practical ethics was regarded as a legitimate branch of philosophy. There are now and there have been in the past famous philosophers, such as Jeremy Bentham and Peter Singer, who have devoted themselves to practical ethics. They did not suppose that they thereby ceased to be philosophers or that they had given up philosophy for something else. And though Peter Singer has perhaps had to fight to make practical ethics philosophically respectable, most of his contemporaries (like most of Bentham's contemporaries) have considered him a philosopher. But in the intervening years Russell helped to create a more austere conception of the subject which tended to exclude not only practical ethics, but even normative ethics as beyond the pale of philosophy. 'I should like to exclude all value judgments from philosophy, except that this would be too violent a breach with usage. The only matter concerned with ethics that I can regard as properly belonging to philosophy is the argument that ethical propositions should be expressed in the optative mood not in the indicative.' (*Reply*, Schilpp, p. 719, *Papers* 11, p. 47) Russell's exclusive conception of moral philosophy caught on, leading to the sort of situation complained of by Dale Jamieson. During the sixties, John Searle's ethics classes at Berkeley were disrupted by students because Searle (in this respect a good Russellian) wanted to talk about meta-ethical issues such as deriving 'ought' from 'is' whereas the students (Russellians perhaps, but in a rather different sense) wanted to talk about the rights and wrongs of the Vietnam War (Jamieson ed. (1999) p. 3).

Russell had a reason for this austere policy of exclusion derived from his meta-ethical opinions. For Russell philosophy was an *inquiry*, that is an activity aimed at truth. But from 1913 onwards he ceased to believe that there *were* any ethical truths, or at least that there were

any truths about what is good and bad in itself. His dominant view (though as we shall see, he shifted about a bit) was that moral judgments such as 'X is good', or 'Y is bad' are in the optative mood and merely express the desires or the feelings of the speaker. The point of such pronouncements is generally to influence others and thus to change the world. Thus 'X is good' means something like 'Would that everybody desired X!' Obviously such an optative pronouncement is not a candidate for truth. Indeed, it is not the kind of thing that can be true *or* false. Hence judgements about what is good or bad in itself, which (for Russell) constitute the core or normative ethics, fall outside the domain of philosophy. And since normative ethics provides the premises for practical ethics, practical ethics falls outside the domain of philosophy too. But whether or not moral judgements are really in the optative mood is a question with a true answer and an answer to be determined by conceptual analysis. So although normative ethics and practical ethics would appear to be excluded, meta-ethics, which deals with such questions, is safely within the sphere of philosophy. We can sum up Russell by paraphrasing Marx. Philosophers hitherto have attempted to interpret the world in various ways. The point of practical ethics however is to change it. Hence practical ethics is not a branch of philosophy.

But this is a bit swift. For even on Russell's own premises, there are parts of practical ethics that are not extruded from philosophy. Though he wobbled occasionally, Russell was some sort of utilitarian for most of his life. That is, he believed that we ought to do that action which seems likely (given the evidence) to produce the maximum of good and the minimum of evil (where good and evil have something to do with human happiness and misery). But if judgements about good and evil are in the optative mood, doesn't this mean that judgements about what ought to be done are in the optative mood too? Not necessarily. If we index 'ought' to contextually specified standards it can be a plain matter of fact whether a given action ought to be done. For it can be a plain matter of fact whether a given action is likely to maximize what someone *calls* good and minimize what someone *calls* evil. Of course such 'ought-judgments' will be hypothetical in a certain sense - they state what ought to be done to

realize somebody-or-other's ends - but they can be objectively true for all that. Thus according to Russell 'the framing of moral rules, so long as the ultimate Good is supposed known is a matter for science. For example: should capital punishment be inflicted for theft or only for murder or not at all? Jeremy Bentham, who considered pleasure to be the Good, devoted himself to working out what criminal code would most promote pleasure, and concluded it ought to be much less severe than that prevailing in his day. All this, except the proposition that pleasure is the Good, comes within the sphere of science' (*RS*, ch. ix, pp 228-229, *RoE*, p.p. 137-138.). However, these rules and the associated ought-judgments won't offer any guidance to people who do not subscribe to the relevant ends. At best they can have a sort of *ersatz* authority if all or most people can be persuaded to agree on good and evil. And since there are no facts to fall back on here, persuasion will be a rhetorical rather than a rational process. 'Persuasion in ethical matters is necessarily different from persuasion in scientific matters. According to me, the person who judges that A is good is wishing others to feel certain desires. He will therefore ... try to rouse these desires in other people ... This is the purpose of preaching, and it was my purpose in the various books in which I have expressed ethical opinions.' (*Reply*, Schilpp p. 724, *Papers* 11, p. 51. *RoE*, p. 149). Preaching as Russell makes plain is a legitimate activity, but it is not philosophy. However that is not quite the end of the matter. For on Russell's own showing, a book on practical ethics can in principle be divided into two parts: the part which consists in preaching in which the writer advocates certain ends, and the factual or 'scientific' part, in which the moralist argues that his policies are calculated to achieve those ends.<sup>1</sup> Thus a book on education might preach the

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<sup>1</sup> This holds even if the ethic in question does *not* have a utilitarian or consequentialist structure. For Robert Nozick 'individuals have rights, and there are things no person or group may do to them (without violating those rights). (Nozick (1974) p. ix.) If this claim is construed non-cognitively ('Would that nobody did certain things to individuals!') it could still be a matter of fact whether a given course of action violated an individual's Nozickian rights and hence was wrong-according-to-Nozick.

gospel of a generation raised in fearless freedom (which would be a constituent of the Good) and suggest a set of strategies to achieve this goal, based on experience, common sense and educational research. (*OE, ESO*). Alternatively a book on Bolshevism might concede the goal of a classless society but criticize the Bolshevik strategy for achieving that goal as counterproductive or unduly costly in terms of human suffering (*PTB*, especially ch. vi<sup>2</sup>). Let us grant that the pronouncements of the preacher do not constitute philosophy since they are neither true nor false. Still, the claim that this or that policy either will or will not achieve the preacher's ends is an obvious candidate for truth and the same goes for the factual reasonings used to support such claims. And since the moralist's reasonings can be true, they are not automatically excluded from the sphere of philosophy by the proviso that philosophy is an inquiry aimed at truth. Hobbes, whose meta-ethic is a rude ancestor of Russell's ('whatsoever is the object of any man's appetite or desire that it is which he for his part calleth *good*'<sup>3</sup>), still thought he could construct a set of 'theorems' pointing the way to civil peace; a goal that rational people could be persuaded to share. Thus there is more to practical ethics than preaching and we need a fresh argument to show that this 'more' does not constitute philosophy.

Russell's writings suggest two incompatible responses: 1) that his social and political writings do not count as philosophy because they are not intended as contributions to learning; and 2) that they don't constitute philosophy because the factual part falls within the sphere of science. I shall take them in turn.

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<sup>2</sup> Russell's critiques of Communism and of Marxism generally are usually of this nature. The underlying theory is false, hence the policies proposed are unlikely to succeed. See *RoE*, ch. 26, *IPI*, ch. 6., *FO*, chs. xvii-xx.

<sup>3</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, vi.7.

1) *The Principles of Social Reconstruction*, says Russell, (and this applies ‘to some extent to [his] other popular books’) ‘was not intended as a contribution to learning but had an entirely practical purpose’. ‘I did not write it in my capacity as a “philosopher”; I wrote it as a human being who suffered from the state of the world, wished to find some way of improving it, and was anxious to speak in plain terms to others who had similar feelings.’ (*Reply*, Schilpp, pp. 730-731 *Papers* 11, pp 55-56.) Russell wrote these passages in response to V.G McGill who had taken him to task for his sloppy use of the term ‘instinct’. Russell’s point is that in writing for the general public it is unreasonable to demand the same standards of verbal precision or even, perhaps, of argument that are required in an academic treatise. Like Russell, I dabble in political journalism, and I well remember the remark of my editor at what he considered an excessively laboured attempt to prove a contentious point: ‘You have to have the belt *and* the braces, don’t you Charles?’ In popular writing precision can be pedantry and it is possible, and perhaps even a good idea, to dispense with either the belt or the braces (though some support is no doubt necessary to prevent the trousers of your argument from falling about your ankles). Fair enough. But as a response to McGill, this is a little self-serving. For unless there is a reasonably coherent and sensible psychology underlying Russell’s loose talk of ‘instincts’ and ‘impulses’ then the ‘ways of improving the world’ that he suggests won’t be likely to work. If he is wrong about human beings, then he is probably wrong about the best way to ameliorate the human condition. Moreover, although the arguments can be simplified and sometimes left unstated, the program should be susceptible of a rational defence. (The belt and the braces don’t have to be *on display* but both should be *available* in case the trousers come under attack.) If not, the program would be (ex hypothesi) an irrational one, and hence, unlikely to succeed. In which case, Russell would be duping those sufferers from the state of the world that he was anxious to speak to in plain terms. In other words, the fact that the *PSR* is not intended as a ‘contribution to learning’ and is addressed to the general public does not entail that it is not philosophy nor that it is not susceptible to philosophical criticism. All that it means is that the fair-minded critic must make due allowance for the audience to whom it is addressed, and must be willing to do a little rational reconstruction before getting

down to critical business. After all, Russell was not the only philosopher to write books that were not intended as contributions to learning but had a principally practical purpose. Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* was certainly intended as a contribution to learning but the *Second Treatise* was written to justify an aborted rebellion and published to glorify a successful one<sup>4</sup> both eminently practical purposes. Mill's *System of Logic* was likewise intended as a contribution to learning but *The Subjection of Women* and *On Liberty* were written with the practical purposes of liberating women and securing civil liberties respectively. Yet all three of these practical works count as philosophy in Russell's book. Russell seems to think that Locke's *Second Treatise* is a rather derivative and second-rate piece of philosophy (though beneficial in its consequences), but he regards it as a piece of philosophy nonetheless. (*HWP* III. xiv.) As for Mill's *On Liberty*, Russell actually prefers it to his *Logic*, which is not 'an important work' (*Papers* 11, pp. 467-520).

Perhaps what Russell is getting at is this. Philosophy as practiced by Russell is a demanding technical discipline: it requires a capacity for abstract thought, a knowledge not only of mathematics but of mathematical logic, and a broad grounding in the sciences, particularly physics and psychology. Thus it is only accessible (and only of interest) to a

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<sup>4</sup> Scholars agree that the *Two Treatises* were drafted to justify a projected rebellion on the part of Shaftsbury and his associates during the period of the Exclusion Crisis, though the exact date is still a matter of dispute. (Russell's ancestor William, Lord Russell was executed as a result of his complicity in these plots.) But the book was published, as the preface proclaims, 'to establish the Throne of Our Great Restorer, Our present King William [and] to make good his title in the Consent of the People'. Locke seems to have drawn an almost Russellian distinction between his contributions to learning and his more practical productions. He put his name to the former but was secretive to the point of paranoia about his authorship of the latter. But this was probably because 'contributions to learning' do not usually expose a man to any great risks, whereas books written for a practical purpose can cost a man his head.

small intellectual elite. But (fortunately for the possibility of democratic debate) you don't need so much in the way of brains and background reading to arrive at reasonable opinions about the problems of morality, politics and everyday life. In advocating such opinions therefore, Russell was not 'doing philosophy' as he conceived it. As an ethicist I am not entirely happy about this. I think there is a certain tendency on the part of tough-minded philosophers to think of ethics as something to do on a wet Sunday afternoon. Accordingly they hold themselves to much lower standards on their ethical Sundays than they do in their weekday work. But however that may be, the fact (if it is a fact) that practical ethics is less demanding and abstruse than the philosophy of mathematics, does not prove that it is not philosophy. It proves, at best, that it is a relatively easy branch of the subject. It is true that philosophy is often difficult, but it does not follow that what is not difficult is not philosophy.

Perhaps Russell wants to disclaim any special *authority* for his moral and political opinions; to deny that such metaphysical expertise as he may have possessed gave him any special license to pronounce on questions of morals and politics. He was not (as Hegel believed himself to be) an interpreter of the Absolute as it manifested itself in history nor (as Heidegger believed himself to be) a person whose profound philosophic insights enabled him to pick the best political party (Heidegger picked the Nazis). *PSR* could in principle have been written by someone who was *not* the co-author of *Principia Mathematica* and the author of 'On Denoting'. It is true, of course, that Russell thought his ideas worth a hearing, but an opinion can be worth hearing even if it is largely devoid of metaphysical support. Russell was 'a human being who suffered from the state of the world' but a well-read and intelligent human being who had devoted some thought to improving it. As such he could hope for attention but he could not lay claim to any special deference. His arguments were supposed to stand on their own feet not to lean on his expertise as a technical philosopher. Again this is fair enough, maybe even admirable, but again it does not prove Russell's point. For it does not distinguish *PSR* from Mill's *On Liberty* or Locke's *Second Treatise*, which both count as philosophy. *On Liberty* could in principle have been written by someone who was not the

author of a *System of Logic* and is largely independent of Mill's empiricist epistemology. As for the *Second Treatise*, it is not just independent of Locke's more technical *Essay*, but actually inconsistent with it (as many scholars have noted). So far from trying to bolster his arguments as a Whig pamphleteer with the prestige he was to acquire as the author of the *Essay*, Locke published the *Second Treatise* anonymously and did not own up to it until he was on the point of death. Both Locke and Mill wrote as 'human beings who suffered from the state of the world' (Locke so much so that he became a revolutionary and was forced into exile), they too 'wished to find some way of improving it', and they too were 'anxious to speak in plain terms to others who had similar feelings'. But this did not entail that what they wrote was not philosophy.

(2) In *RS* Russell seems to take the opposite tack. The factual component in practical ethics is excluded from philosophy because it is included in the sphere of science. Penal policy provides a case in point. Whether or not the Death Penalty deters can, in principle, be settled by statistics. In fact the evidence suggests that it is no more of a deterrent than long-term imprisonment, the usual alternative. But even if we assume (say) utilitarian values, science cannot tell us to drop the Death Penalty. In a poor country, where even the innocent find it hard to get by, it may be difficult to maintain convicted murderers in humane conditions. Wouldn't it be more cost-effective to execute the killers and to devote the money saved to - say - public health programs? Now it may be that there is a rational response to such a question, but it is bound to go beyond the scientifically established facts. In particular it will depend on delicate economic considerations, and economics is not a science in the strict sense of the word. It will also depend upon an estimate of the joys and sorrows involved which is (so far) well beyond the reach of science. So although scientific facts are often crucial to questions of morals and public policy, they are seldom decisive even if a clear set of ends is assumed. Furthermore, science sometimes speaks with a divided voice (*ESO*, ch. 3), 'scientifically established facts' can prove to be ideologically constructed fictions, and scientists can be surprisingly unscientific, investing their prejudices with the aura of scientific

authority (*MO I*, pp. 66-67). For all these reasons, the factual side of practical ethics cannot be abandoned to the scientists, since philosophical reasoning is often required to sort out how science is relevant (which is not to say that someone trained as a scientist might not be better at it than someone trained as a philosopher). Indeed, I am inclined to think that some knowledge of the philosophy of science (which tends to alert you to the issues raised above) is especially useful for anyone engaged with public policy. At all events, Russell's own writings on practical ethics do not look like science even if we exclude the element of 'preaching'. Though they are scientifically well-informed, the factual component often includes claims which are not (and are not likely to be) scientifically justified, though they may, of course, be true.

But perhaps the best reason to suppose that Russell's writings on morals and politics constitute philosophy is that they embody distinctively philosophic ideas and are susceptible to philosophic criticism. Take, for example, Russell's views on world government ....

### III. A CASE STUDY: RUSSELL, HOBBS AND WORLD GOVERNMENT

It was Russell's belief that international peace would be impossible in the long term without World Government, a thesis he reiterated over and over again from 1914 till 1964 (*Papers 13*, pp. 45-46, *PSR*, pp. 71-74, *Papers 11*, pp. 460-461). This led to some dire predictions. In 1950 he confidently prophesied that 'before the end of this century, unless something quite unforeseeable occurs, one of three possibilities will have been realized:

- I. The end of human life, perhaps of all life, on our planet
- II. A reversion to barbarism after a catastrophic diminution of the population
- III. A unification of the world under a single government possessing a monopoly.

There is an apocalyptic tendency to Russell's thought, a *penchant* for dramatic disjunctions. We are at a fork in the road and must either choose the rational route to an Earthly Paradise

or the highway to a Nuclear Hell. There was something to be said for this view in 1964 when he roundly declared that ‘we have now only the choice between mutual destruction and mutual happiness’ (*Papers* 11, p. 461). But the interesting thing is that he voiced much the same sentiments fifty years earlier, long before the advent of nuclear weapons. ‘The civilized races of the world are faced with the alternative of cooperation or mutual destruction’ (*Papers* 13, p. 270). The idea that things might just jog along without getting much better or much worse is one that never seemed to occur to him<sup>5</sup>. This bias in Russell’s thought (which is very marked) was partly a matter of temperament and partly due to his historical experience. After all, twice in his lifetime things had failed to jog along in a truly spectacular fashion and civilization had shuddered into the catastrophe of a World War. But in the realm of international affairs Russell had a *reason* for discounting the jog-along disjunct and insisting on the need for World Government - he subscribed to Hobbes’s thesis that the international state of nature is in fact a state of war (*HWP*, p. 541.)<sup>6</sup>. Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) is principally famous as the philosopher of absolutism. Though his preference was for monarchy he was willing to concede that oligarchies might work so long as the power of the government was absolute. But government (and an undivided government with a monopoly of armed force) was, in his view, essential both for civil peace and for civilization. According to Hobbes, men are selfish, acquisitive, forward-looking and fearful and some of them aggressive and vainglorious to boot. They are subject to a ‘perpetual and restless desire for power after power [by which Hobbes means ‘resource after resource’] that ceaseth only in death’ (*Leviathan*, xi. 2). Absent the restraints of government, this ‘restless desire’ leads to conflict as people compete for scarce resources; a conflict which is exacerbated by two other factors: a) fear or diffidence which leads the fearful to ‘anticipate’ attacks with preemptive strikes of their own and b) the desire on the part of a significant minority to domineer and

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<sup>5</sup> See Ryan (1988) p. 186.

<sup>6</sup> That Russell was a closet Hobbist has been remarked on by Alan Ryan (1988) p. 80, and argued at length by Mark Lippincott (1990).

exalt over others. 'So that in the nature of man we find three principle causes of quarrel; first, competition; secondly diffidence; thirdly, glory. The first maketh men invade for gain; the second, for safety; and the third for reputation.' Thus a state of nature in which 'men live without a common power to keep them all in awe' would be a state of war, indeed a war 'of every man against every man' in which the life of man would be 'solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short' (*Leviathan*, xiii. 6-9).

Hobbes seeks to confirm his account of how individuals *would* behave in an *interpersonal* state of nature by appealing to the way that sovereign states *do* behave in the *international* state of nature. For Hobbes, states are 'artificial men', big robots composed of people, which inherit the psychological quirks of their constituent parts. The sovereign state reduplicates the psychology of the individual or individuals who constitute 'the sovereignty', the 'artificial soul' that gives 'life and motion to the whole body' (*Leviathan*, 'Introduction'). Thus a ruler like Louis XIV would have had *two* bodies, a natural body of his own and an artificial body composed of the organized force of the French State. It was therefore a pardonable exaggeration, but an exaggeration nonetheless, for Louis to declare 'L'etat, c'est moi!'. What he should have said is 'L'ame de l'etat, c'est moi!'. Now, since these artificial men live 'without a common power to keep them all in awe', and since they share the psychology of the individuals who direct them, it would follow, if Hobbes were correct, that the international state of nature would be a state of war. And this, Hobbes claims, is born out by the facts: 'kings and persons of sovereign authority, because of their independency, are in continual jealousies and in the state and posture of gladiators, having their weapons pointing and their eyes fixed upon one another ... which is a posture of war' (*Leviathan* xiii. 12). For Hobbes 'war consisteth not in actual fighting, but in the known disposition thereto during all the time there is no assurance to the contrary' (*Leviathan* xiii. 8). So what Hobbes is saying is that the artificial men are in a continuous state of cold war with hot war a constant and simmering possibility.

Hobbes was oddly unfazed by this fact, presumably because he believed that international war was far less destructive than either civil war or the war of all against all. And it is indeed true that England sustained no serious damage in all the international conflicts of Hobbes' prolonged lifetime (though *Germany* lost between a third and a half of its population). But with the destructive power of modern weapons we cannot afford to be so sanguine. If war is endemic in the international state of nature, then perhaps what we need is an international sovereign to put a stop to it. And this is precisely what Russell believed. 'The present system [that of interpersonal government and international anarchy] is irrational since external and internal anarchy must be both right or both wrong.' (*PSR*, p. 43.) 'There is not a word in *Leviathan* to suggest any relation between [states] except war and conquest, with occasional interludes. This follows on his principles from the absence of an international government, for the relations of states are still in a state nature, which is that of a war of all against all. Every argument that [Hobbes] adduces in favour of government, in so far as it is valid at all, is valid in favour of international government' (*HWP*, p. 541).

This is, perhaps, a bit swift. After all, it might be the case, as Hobbes evidently believed, that international war is far less destructive than domestic conflict, in which case the absence of an international sovereign might be tolerable. Besides, Hobbes' argument that the international state of nature is necessarily a state of war (that is a state of cold war with frequent eruptions of hot violence) is dependent on two premises: 1) that *individuals* are such that an interpersonal state of nature would be a state of war and 2) that the psychology of states reduplicates the psychology of their ruling individuals. The evidence is a bit equivocal, but I don't think Russell subscribed to either of these premises. To begin with Russell was much less of a biological determinist than Hobbes. For Hobbes, human action is dependent on human nature which manifests itself in much the same way whatever the social circumstances. For Russell, human action is dependent on human desires which can be extensively modified by education and opportunity. Thus the question of what people would do in the absence of government does not have an unequivocal answer, since it

depends upon the people and the upbringing that they have received. Russell's careful refutation of anarchism in *Roads to Freedom*, ch. 5 suggests that though anarchy (that is a state of nature) would be bad - indeed bad enough to warrant a government - it would not be as bad as Hobbes supposes, and certainly not as bad as war of all against all. And though the psychology of artificial men is determined by the psychology of the people that control them, Russell never suggests that the one simply reduplicates the other. And this is fortunate since it is obviously false. For the ruler's relation to his artificial body is very different from his relation to his natural body. No doubt Louis XIV suffered when Marlborough lopped off one of his armies at the Battle of Blenheim. But he would have suffered a lot more and in a profoundly different way if Marlborough had lopped off one of his arms. Had the pain been the same, his decisions as a ruler might have been rather different.

But if Russell rejects Hobbes' argument that the international state of nature is necessarily a state of war, why does he accept his conclusion? Because, in Russell's view, there are independent reasons to suppose *not* that the psychology of the state reduplicates the psychology of *real* individuals, but that the psychology of the state reduplicates the psychology of *Hobbesian* individuals. Scattered throughout Russell's writings are a series of observations that add up to the Hobbesian claim 'that in the nature of [states] we find three principle causes of quarrel: first, competition; secondly diffidence; thirdly, glory'. To begin with, states, especially capitalist states, are acquisitive. This is because people and especially capitalists are acquisitive, with a voracious appetite for markets and investment opportunities, and because capitalists can often call upon the services of the state to foster their acquisitive schemes. 'Whatever may be the psychoanalysis of acquisitiveness, no one can deny that it is one of the great motives - especially among the more powerful, for, as I said before, it is one of the infinite motives' (*HSEP*, p. 161). (The qualification 'especially among the more powerful' is important because the more powerful are precisely the people with the most influence in determining the psychology of states.) Where the states are capitalistic 'the desire for exclusive markets is one of the most potent causes of war'. (*Papers*

14, p. 271. See also *RF*, pp. 111-113.) Next comes fear. ‘War the Offspring of Fear’ was the title of one of Russell’s first anti-war pamphlets, and he continued to think that the fear of aggression was one of the principle causes of war, tempting diffident states to ‘anticipate’ their opponents. (*Papers*, 13, pp. 37-47, *HSEP*, pp. 170 & 230.) Finally, glory: Russell, unlike Hobbes, distinguishes between two motives which tend to go together, namely vanity and the love of power. The merely vain demand the trappings of outward admiration whilst pure power-freaks (such as the reclusive Baron Holstein) revel in the reality of secret dominion (*HSEP*, pp. 162-165). But both motives can be dangerous if they predominate within the ruling classes, since people tend to identify their personal greatness with the greatness of the state. And unfortunately, the love of power and the disposition to domineer are particularly virulent amongst the ruling classes. ‘Pride of dominion, unwillingness to decide disputes otherwise than by force or the threat of force is a habit of mind greatly encouraged by the possession of power.’ (*PSR*, p. 45. See also *RF* pp. 114-115.) Thus the psychology of states resembles the psychology of Hobbesian individuals, since the rulers, in their capacity *as* rulers, are often actuated by the Hobbesian motives of competition, diffidence and glory. The first maketh [states] invade for gain; the second, for safety; and the third for reputation [or, as Russell would have added, dominion].’

Thus one of Russell’s key theses, that world government is essential for the sake of long term peace, depends upon an interesting philosophical argument that ultimately derives from Hobbes. (If not, it is quite gratuitous!) It is also susceptible to philosophic criticism. For the argument only works under two conditions: 1) that Hobbesian individuals in the interpersonal state of nature would indeed be in a state of war; and 2) that the international state of nature is not only analogous, but necessarily analogous, to the interpersonal state of nature envisaged by Hobbes. The first condition is questionable and the second false. One of the most interesting results of recent Hobbes scholarship is that unless the state of nature is very carefully specified there is a frightful risk of peace breaking out. (See Hampton (1986), pp. 58-89, and Kavka (1986), pp 83-174. I mostly follow Kavka.) If Hobbesian individuals

were merely selfish, resource-hungry and diffident (that is death/pain averse) a policy of conditional cooperation might well be more rational (that is, more likely to pay) than a ruthless policy of aggressive anticipation. At least three extra circumstances are required to trip the majority of moderates (who do not desire to dominate) into a program of aggressive action: a) the policy of anticipation must be a much better bet than simply lying low; b) there must be a sizeable minority of dominators; and c) it must be difficult to tell whether a neighbour is a dominator or not. If a) were false there would be no war of all against all. Rational moderates would not attack each other, since it would pay better to stand on the defensive, and the irrational dominators would edit themselves out by a process of Darwinian selection. If defence, rather than attack, were the best form of defence, attackers would destroy themselves by pursuing such a risky strategy. If b) were false, then again there would be no war since conditional cooperation would pay better than conflict and there would be no irrational dominators to upset the apple-cart of enlightened self-interest. Finally, if c) were false, the war might be won by the moderates combining against the dominators. What triggers the war of all against all is the fear on the part of the diffident moderates that unless they act like dominators by mounting preemptive strikes, they will be destroyed either by dominators or by moderates who are likewise forced to act like dominators. But if it is possible to tell dominators from moderates, a more nuanced response is available - combine to attack the dominators whilst leaving the other moderates intact. So unless the settings are exactly right, the Hobbesian state of nature need not generate a state of war.

Happily for us and unhappily for Russell's argument, the international state of nature is *not* analogous to Hobbes' interpersonal state of nature. For a crucial premise of Hobbes's argument is that the Hobbesian individuals are functionally equal. For though one man may be 'manifestly stronger in body or quicker in mind' than another, 'the weakest has strength enough to kill the strongest, either by secret machination or by confederacy'. We are the physical equals of the bully because either singly or in a group we can sneak up on him in the

middle of the night and slit his throat. 'From this equality ariseth hope' (by which Hobbes means the hope of victory) which leads to the policy of anticipation (*Leviathan*, xiii. 1-4). But small nation states are not in a position to assassinate large nation states nor are minor nuclear powers in a position to assassinate major nuclear powers. France could no doubt do considerable damage if it chose to attack the USA, but it could not hope to finish off its opponent, which means that the two are not functionally equal in Hobbes's sense. Secondly it is far from obvious that in the international arena anticipation is the best policy. In the wars of the twentieth century anticipation has often led to defeat. Another disanalogy is that nowadays it is almost always irrational to invade for gain since modern wars are ruinous to victors and vanquished alike<sup>7</sup>. This removes the motive of competition, which, in Hobbes' eyes, is one of the principal causes of conflict. Finally, in the modern world, it is relatively easy for modern states to identify the dominators and to combine against them, as in the First Gulf War. There is nothing to trigger aggressive behaviour on the part of moderates without which there would be no war of all against all. Thus the argument for a world government - at least the Hobbesian argument for a world government, which is the only one that is even hinted at by Russell - collapses completely. (See Kavka (1987) ch. 7.)

There is another objection which can be urged against Hobbes which applies with even greater force to Russell. If the inhabitants of Hobbes's state of nature are sufficiently peaceable to get together and sign a social contract setting up an absolute sovereign, then they don't really need one since they have achieved a measure of cooperation without him. On the other hand, if they need an absolute sovereign to keep them in line, it is hard to see

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<sup>7</sup> The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait was motivated by the desire for gain and the thirst for glory and if no other powers had intervened it might have been a profitable venture. But the circumstances were unusual since Kuwait is both fabulously rich and militarily defenceless. And by declaring himself publicly to be a dominator, Saddam caused the world's other powers, both moderate and otherwise, to combine against him.

how they could get together to create one by signing the contract. Once Russell abandoned the option of creating a world government by force (which he did when the USSR acquired nuclear weapons), he faced a similar problem. If the Great Powers were sufficiently peaceable and their relations sufficiently friendly to agree to a world government, it is not clear they would need one, whilst if they *really* needed a world government to prevent a hot war breaking out, it is hard to see how they would ever agree to set one up. If a world government is possible it is not necessary and if it is necessary it is not possible. This is a much more urgent problem for Russell than Hobbes, because Russell's argument is *prospective* whereas Hobbes' is *retrospective*. Hobbes is not trying to persuade people in a state of nature to set up a sovereign. He is trying to persuade people who have already got a sovereign not to pull him down. Thus the difficulties of setting up a sovereign in the state of nature are not necessarily fatal to his argument. It is otherwise with Russell, since the world government does not yet exist and we are actually living in an international state of nature. (Kavka (1987) p. 130.) Now I don't pretend that this is a knockdown drag-out argument. The Great Powers might be just rational enough to see the need for a world government and to act on that perception, but not rational enough to coexist or cooperate in the long term. They might be a bit like the wealthy social democrat who votes for higher taxes every three years but cannot bring herself to keep giving away the money that she believes the state should subtract... But we can, I think, say this: the more likely world government is, the less there is a need for it, and the more there is a need for it, the less likely it is.

This is not to say that Russell is wrong. Maybe long-term peace *is* impossible without world government. But the argument, as I understand it, is a failure. I do not deny that a better argument might be constructed nor that such an argument might draw on Hobbes. But Hobbes must be modified if he is to prove the need for an international sovereign and if Russell is to convince us, he must provide us with something better.

Now what I have been doing for the last few pages certainly looks like philosophy. Which means that Russell's case for a world government is susceptible to a philosophic critique. To be sure, it is a critique which draws its data from a wide range of disciplines - game theory, psychology, history and political science - a fact which would have been more apparent if I had spelt out the argument in greater detail. But a discussion does not cease to be philosophical because it takes other disciplines into account. Russell himself would have been the first to pour scorn on such an idea. But a thesis that must be defended or attacked by philosophical argument bids fair to being a philosophical thesis. Such is Russell's claim that we cannot get by without world government. This illustrates the contention that I have been arguing all along - that Russell did not abandon his vocation as a philosopher when he took to practical ethics (which includes political philosophy). When he wrote on these topics he often wrote as a moral philosopher and not - as he sometimes pretended - an unphilosophical moralist. This would have been rather more obvious if I had discussed Russell's repeated critiques of Marxism in general and Communism in particular. Russell argues, for example, that materialism is dubious since matter (as traditionally conceived) tends to evaporate under the critical gaze of modern physicists and that dialectical materialism is absurd since a dialectical development only makes sense on the assumption that mind is the ultimate reality. He argues that the course of human history is determined by many factors besides the development of the means of production. And he argues that the theory of surplus value is flawed and that Marx's politico-economic predictions have been falsified by the facts. Now when Popper in the *Open Society* argues along similar lines everybody agrees that it is philosophy whether they like it or not. And when the analytic Marxists try to reconstruct Marxism so as to deal with such criticisms, so far from being regarded as non-philosophers, they are rewarded with chairs at Oxford and Chicago. Why then are Russell's writings excluded from the canon? But I don't think we should stop with his overtly political philosophy. After all, Hume did not cease to be a philosopher when he wrote on chastity and modesty, and feminist philosophy would be virtually non-existent if feminist philosophers were not allowed to talk about marriage and (sexual) morals. Even the

topic of happiness, whose conquest preoccupied Russell, is now well within the fold of respectable philosophy, since well-being has become a big philosophical business especially at Oxford. It is time, I think, to stop taking Russell at his word, to rescind his self-denying ordinance, and to admit that his social philosophy really is philosophy. That way we can give it the critical scrutiny that it deserves. For Russell is not just a philosopher but an *interesting* philosopher - even when he is wrong, there is often much to be gained by arguing with him.

#### IV. THE SIX PHASES OF RUSSELL

I now turn to Russell's ethical theory. This too needs to be vindicated. For Russell has suffered a double injustice. Having created a conception of philosophy which tended to exclude some of his own efforts, he was taken at his word by subsequent philosophers who went on to develop a much less exclusive conception of the subject. This accounts for the neglect of his practical ethics. But his ethical theory has been neglected too, and this for a different reason. Much of it went unpublished in Russell's lifetime (and this includes some of his most original contributions) and much of it was dribbled out in a series of asides when he was ostensibly talking about something else. Thus it was not known until 1988 that Russell had anticipated Mackie's famous error theory (the idea that moral judgements are factual but false) and not fully realized until recently that he was one of the pioneers of emotivism, anticipating both Ayer and Stevenson (its alleged inventors) by something like twenty years. It is only now that Russell is coming into his own as an emotivist with the inclusion of chapter ix of *Religion and Science* (note that this is a book chapter and note the title the book!) in James Rachels' Oxford Readings in Philosophy anthology *Ethical Theory* (1998). This helps to explain Sainsbury's mistaken belief that Russell's 'work on moral philosophy' had only two main phases both of them derivative. In fact it had about six, at least two of them highly original.

Phase 1: 1889-1903. 'We called him "old Sidg" and regarded him as merely out of date'. So said Russell of the great Victorian moral philosopher Henry Sidgwick who taught him ethics

at Cambridge. 'At the time, I, in common with other young people, did not give him nearly as much respect as he deserved' (*MPD*, p. 30) Maybe not, but Sidgwick did influence Russell almost without his noticing it. Although Russell's principle preoccupation during the 1890s was the philosophy of mathematics, he devoted some effort to ethics, wrestling with two problems, both set by Sidgwick's philosophy.

The first problem was the nature and justification of the axioms of ethics. Since 'ought' could not be derived from 'is' it appeared to follow that ethics depended on certain self-evident axioms which had nothing to do with what is, has been or will be (*RoE*, ch. 3). Russell was clearly unhappy with this and tried to justify the axioms of ethics by defining 'good' in terms of desire. After several unsuccessful efforts he arrived at the conclusion that 'good' means what we desire to desire, a view he abandoned under the influence of G. E. Moore. (See *RoE*, chs. 7, 9 & 10<sup>8</sup>.) But Russell, in turn, appears to have influenced Moore. Not only does Moore single out Russell's definition for critical attention in his famous *Principia Ethica*, but the need to deal with such definitions may have led him to invent the Open Question Argument, one of his two principal arguments against naturalism (the view that moral properties can be identified with natural properties of some kind). The first argument (which I shall call the Argument from Advocacy) occurs in the early draft of *Principia Ethica* known as *The Elements of Ethics* and contends that 'good' cannot be synonymous with any naturalistic 'X', if 'X things are good' is supposed to be a reason for action rather than a 'barren tautology'. (See *Principia Ethica*, §11, *RoE*, pp. 96 & 100.). The second argument (widely known as the Open Question Argument) only appears in the final version and contends that 'good' cannot be synonymous with any naturalistic predicate 'X', since 'Are X things good?' is a significant or open question for every 'X'. (*Principia Ethica*, §13) Now the Argument from Advocacy does not refute Russell's 'desire to desire' theory since 'What we

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<sup>8</sup> The theory has been resurrected and revamped in a famous paper by David Lewis (1989) who did not realize that he was reviving Russell.

desire to desire is good', is not *intended* to be anything but a barren but illuminating tautology: barren, because it does not provide any extra reason for the pursuit or promotion of what we desire to desire, but illuminating, since it is supposed to explain why the goodness of something (i.e. its being what we desire to desire) provides us with a reason to pursue or promote it. But the Open Question Argument, if sound, refutes *all* forms of naturalism, including theories such as Russell's since it is supposed to be an Open Question whether what we desire to desire is good. It is significant in this connection that Moore refers to Russell's 'desire to desire' theory precisely at the point where he is expounding the Open Question Argument. (i.e. *Principia Ethica*, §13). However, he does not credit it to Russell, presumably because Russell propounded it at a meeting of the Apostles whose transactions were supposed to be secret. (Moore was so scrupulous about keeping the doings of the Apostles secret that he worried about discussing them by postcard. See *SLRB*, p. 191.) If this is correct, Russell played a part in the formation of the Moorean theory that he went on to expound in his second, derivative phase.

The other problem that bothered Russell during the 1890s was also due to Sidgwick - the Dualism of Practical Reason. In Sidgwick's opinion, to say that one ought to do something is to say that it is reasonable to do it. It is reasonable to promote one's private interest and reasonable to promote the public interest. The problem is that the one does not seem any more reasonable than the other. So in the event of a clash, the 'Cosmos of Duty is reduced to a Chaos' since what one ought to do is indeterminate. (See Mackie (1976) and Sidgwick (1907), pp. xviii--xxiii, 162-175, 496-509.) The problem goes back to Thomas Reid who considered conscience and a regard for one's good on the whole to be distinct but complementary rational principles. However, in Reid's view, the two could not clash. 'While the world is under a wise and benevolent administration, it is impossible that in the issue any man should be a loser by doing his duty'. But Sidgwick did not believe that the world *was* under a wise and benevolent administration, since he had ceased to believe in God. Thus a clash could not be ruled out. Accordingly, Sidgwick might, in Reid's words, be 'reduced to

this miserable dilemma, whether it is best to be a fool or a knave'. (Schneewind (1977), p. 69.) Now Russell was much exercised by this problem and tried to solve it with the aid of Hegelian metaphysics. He wanted to show that in the long run - or failing the long run, in Reality - there could be no clash between duty and prudence or between altruism and rational self-interest. His first effort drew on the metaphysics of McTaggart as expressed in *The Further Determination of the Absolute* (1893)<sup>9</sup>. McTaggart believed - and for a while induced Russell to believe - that 'reality is exclusively spirit' and that the 'universe and ourselves are implicitly in harmony - a harmony that must one day become explicit' (McTaggart (1996) pp. 210-211.) Since we are also immortal we will one day experience this harmony which is (or will be) a communion of spirits in a loving state of mutual awareness. Since this future harmony will be a state of mutual awareness, I will not be able to promote my private happiness without promoting that of everybody else nor will I be able to harm others without hurting myself. Furthermore, selfish action in the present may retard that happy day when the harmony will become explicit. Thus in the long-term altruism and enlightened self-interest coincide. (*RoE*, 2, *Papers* 1: 31.) This solution evaporated once Russell ceased to believe in immortality. Instead he flirted with a Bradleian solution according to which altruism and self-interest *already* coincide (though 'already' isn't quite the right word here) since in Reality we are all one - or rather, we are all united in the Absolute, a sort of timeless cosmic experience of which our separate selves are delusory aspects. (See *RoE*, pp. 59 & 66-67, *Papers* 1, Bradley (1930) chs. x, xiii, xiv and xxv.) Hence if I hurt you in pursuit of my private ends, I am Really hurting myself - or rather the Absolute in which our separate selves are dissolved. Russell's famous paper 'Seems Madam? Nay It Is' (*WINC*, ch. 5, *RoE*, ch. 11, *Papers* 1, ch. 16) puts the kybosh on this solution. Not that Russell mentions the problem directly - rather it is a corollary of his chief argument that any supposed unity of selves cannot solve Sidgwick's problem unless that unity is *experienced*. Russell argues that

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<sup>9</sup> Reprinted in McTaggart, J. McT. Ellis, (1996) *Philosophical Studies*, Keeling, S.V. ed., Bristol, Thoemmes.

(Hegelian) philosophy can provide no 'comfort in adversity'. It may be that the timeless world of Reality is perfect, but since what we experience is the world of Appearance, the perfection of the Real world affords no consolation. By parity of reasoning, it may be that in Reality we are part of a unity of selves, but since we do not *experience* that unity - since we do not experience other people's joys or sorrows - this gives us no self-interested reason to promote other people's interests. As Russell put it in a letter to Moore, 'for all purposes that are not *purely* intellectual [which presumably includes the purpose of solving Sidgwick's problem], the world of Appearance is the real world' (*Papers* 1, p. 105). Once Russell realized that the Hegelian Absolute served no practical purpose - neither affording consolation nor providing us with a reason to be good - he speedily concluded that it served no intellectual purpose either and thereupon dismissed it as a myth. *One* reason, I suspect, for the revolt against Hegelianism was that the Absolute could not deliver the goods - neither the emotional good of comfort nor the moral good of a solution to Sidgwick's problem.

Phase 2: 1903-1913. Phase 2 was genuinely derivative since Russell became a convert to the doctrines of Moore's *Principia Ethica*. It was in this phase that Russell wrote 'The Elements of Ethics' as well as two highly laudatory reviews of *Principia Ethica* (*PE* ch. 1, *Papers* 4, chs. 27 & 28, *RoE*, ch. 13). Russell was not an uncritical disciple however. In Moore's view, 'what we ought to do is that action which will produce the best results on the whole; and this [he] regarded as constituting a definition of 'good'. Russell held that 'this is not a definition but significant proposition and in fact a false one' a) because it is an Open Question whether we ought to do what will produce the best results on the whole and b) because the answer to this Open Question is 'No', since what we ought to do is 'what we have *reason to think* will have the best results.' (*RoE*, p. 101, my italics.) But Russell agreed with Moore that 'good' is the name of a non-natural property, a property which cannot be reduced to or identified with any other property accessible to either science or metaphysics. This doctrine continued to influence Russell even after he had abandoned it. He was at least half-inclined to think that *if*

there was such a property as goodness, it had to be the kind of property specified by Moore. He just ceased to believe that there was any such property.

Phase 3: 1913-1922. In February 1913 Russell read Santayana's *The Winds of Doctrine* and gave up the Moorean good. If there is no such thing as goodness then it cannot be true that anything is good. But this still leaves two alternatives. Good-judgements could be just plain false or they could lack a truth-value altogether. In 1913 Russell seems to have opted for the second alternative and to have embraced some kind of emotivism. But the 'seems' is quite important here since Russell is never very explicit about what exactly he believes. Santayana, whose delicate mockeries (they can hardly be called arguments) destroyed Russell's faith in the Moorean good, appears to have been a proto-emotivist. 'But to speak of the truth of a ultimate good would be a false collocation of terms; an ultimate good is chosen, found or aimed at; it is not opined'. Ethical intuitions 'are not opinions that we hazard but preferences we feel' (quoted in *RoE*, p 105). If Russell took over this opinion, this would make sense of his arguments in 'The Place of Science in a Liberal Education' (1913) and 'On Scientific Method in Philosophy' (1914) (*ML*, pp. 57 & 103-7). In both these pieces he argues that 'ethical notions' should be 'extruded from scientific philosophy'. Why? Partly (I think) because philosophy is an inquiry aimed at truth and judgements about good and evil lack a truth-value, and partly because 'human ethical notions ... when used in metaphysics, [involve] an attempt, however veiled, to legislate for the universe on the basis of the present desires of men' - a remark which suggests that moral judgements typically *express* such desires. But Russell's arguments for his view (whatever exactly it was) are not so much arguments *for* proto-emotivism as *against* the Moorean good. They therefore favour the error theory as much as any form of emotivism (*RoE*, pp. 16-22 and 105-118). There are two undercurrents in Russell's thinking at this time that are worthy of note: 1) a growing disenchantment with the institution of morality brought on by the War ('the universal outburst of righteousness in all nations since the war began ... has given me a disgust for all ethical notions which evidently are chiefly useful as an excuse for murder.' *RoE*, p. 107), and a

belief that a 'recognition of the subjectivity of ethics' [whatever that means] would lead to 'less cruelty, persecution, punishment and moral reprobation than exists at present' (*RoE*, p. 117).

Phase 4: 1922. In March 1922, Russell read a two-page paper to the Apostles, entitled 'Is There an Absolute Good?'. Russell refrained from publishing this piece during his lifetime, perhaps because he soon ceased to believe it or perhaps because he considered it too dangerous to do so. (It first appeared in *Russell* n.s. 1987, pp, 144-149, with a long introduction by Alan Ryan.) By 1922 Russell was already something of a pariah, widely reviled by both Right and Left and if he had gone public with his meta-ethic, it might have alienated many of his remaining admirers. But whatever the reasons for Russell's reticence, he thereby lost an opportunity for fame as the founding father of the error theory, a doctrine subsequently developed by J.L. Mackie ((1946) and (1977))<sup>10</sup>. Russell rejects the proto-emotivism that he seemed to favour during the war years and insists that there is 'no doubt that our ethical judgements claim objectivity'. However 'this claim, to my mind, makes them all false'. Because 'good' is meaningful, it seems natural to infer that there must be a property which it means. This, however, is 'a fallacy'. 'Good' is rather like 'the present King of France' - it is an 'incomplete symbol' which contributes to the meanings of the sentences in which it occurs without having a meaning (in the sense of a reference) of its own. Thus 'when we define ['good'] as nearly as possible in the usage of absolutists, *all propositions* in which the word "good" has primary occurrence are false.' (*RoE*, pp. 122-123.) The qualification 'when we define ["good"] as nearly as possible in the usage of absolutists' is important. For Russell,

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<sup>10</sup> Mackie, with a good war record behind him, was, perhaps, in a better position to publish a 'Refutation of Morals' in 1946. Nevertheless, his meta-ethical frankness may well have cost him at least one job. He lost out on the Chair of Philosophy at the University of Tasmania to the meta-ethically acceptable but normatively suspect Sydney Sparkes Orr. See Pybus (1993), p. 206.

unlike Mackie, does not deny the existence of a non-natural property of goodness. In Russell's semantics things which don't exist have to be defined in terms of things which do, if the propositions concerned are to be meaningful. Indeed, in order to make sense of a proposition, we must be acquainted with *all* of its ultimate constituents. This entails that 'good' if it is to contribute to the meaning of a sentence (even a false one), must be given a naturalistic analysis, since it must be definable in terms of things which we can sense. Russell's analysis runs thus: To say that 'M is good' is to say that M possesses the property common to A, B, C, ... (which happen to be the things the speaker approves of) but absent in X, Y, Z ... (which happen to be the things the speaker disapproves of). It is because there is, in general, no such property that good-judgements are false. There is much to criticize in this analysis. (It entails, for example that people who approve and disapprove of different things are condemned to talk at cross-purposes and cannot genuinely disagree about what is good.) But under the influence of the error theory, Russell went on to develop what I call *humanistic amoralism*. In November 1922, he wrote a review in which a devil's advocate argues that morality is not only false but pernicious, an excuse for cruelty and a prop to predatory elites, and that the human race would be better off if we tried to get by with the aid of friendly feelings and enlightened self-interest (*RoE*, ch. 25, *Papers* 9, ch. 59). Russell soon abandoned both the error theory and humanistic amoralism, reverting to emotivism on the one hand and the view that 'undoubtedly the world needs a new morality [as opposed to *no* morality] and not merely a revolt against the old one' (*RoE*, p. 189). Why he did so is not entirely clear. In *Reply* (*Schilpp*, p. 720, *Papers* 11, p. 48, *RoE*, p. 146) Russell declares that 'no amount of logic even if it were my own' would persuade him to give up feeling and expressing ethical passions, yet if the error theory were correct, expressing ethical passions would amount to mouthing falsehoods. Perhaps Russell could not bring himself to accept a theory which made moralizing such a disreputable business, especially as moralizing was, by this time one of his chief sources of income. As for humanistic amoralism, my conjecture (for what it is worth) is that his experience as a schoolteacher convinced him that friendly feelings cannot always be relied on and that self-interest is not always sufficiently enlightened to secure civilized

behaviour; whilst his knowledge of the Bolsheviki convinced him that a belief in the 'subjectivity of ethics' and a contempt for the institution of morality are quite compatible with 'cruelty, persecution, punishment and moral reprobation' (*RoE*, Interlude 1). However, though Russell pulled back from the full-on humanistic amorality of writers like Richard Garner (1994) and Ian Hinckfuss (1987) he continued to think that there was a dark side to morality. Witness *HSEP* pp. 173-4 and one of his 'Newly Discovered Maxims of La Rochefoucauld': 'The purpose of morals is to allow people to inflict suffering without compunction' (*FF*, p. 184.) Russell does say that he is not 'at all points, ... in agreement with the epigrammatic Duke [i.e. La Rochefoucauld]' but I take it that this is a device on the part of the epigrammatic Earl to distance himself from sentiments that he only half-believed.

Phase 5: 1923-1945. After some confused subjectivist stumblings which I shall pass over in silence (*RoE*, pp. 125-130), Russell developed a sophisticated variant of emotivism during the thirties which he first published in 1935, anticipating Ayer's *Language, Truth and Logic* (1936) by one year, and Stevenson's 'The Emotive Meaning of Ethical Terms' (1937) by two. (Russell may have been aware of W.H.F. Barnes' 'A Suggestion About Value' *Analysis* 1, (1933) but then again, he may not, since he did not regard himself as a professional philosopher during this period and may not have been keeping up with the literature.) Russell's version of emotivism did not excite much comment at the time<sup>11</sup>, perhaps because it is buried towards the back of *Religion and Science*, a book which is largely devoted to knocking religion in the name of science (*RS* ch. ix, *RoE*, pp. 131-144.). (Russell did not enhance his status as an emotivist by burying his second exposition towards the back of *Power: A New Social Analysis* (1938), which, as its title suggests, is largely devoted to the analysis of power) The theory would appear to be a direct descendant of Russell's 'desire to desire' theory of 1897.

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<sup>11</sup> Nor has it excited much comment since. Urmson in his *The Emotive Theory of Ethics* (1968) and Warnock in her *Ethics Since 1900* (1st edn. 1960, 3rd edn. 1978) both seem to be completely unaware of it.

According to the 1897 theory, to say that X is good is to *state* that the speaker (or perhaps the community) desires to desire X. According to the 1935 theory, to say that X is good is to *express* (in the optative mood) the desire that everyone should desire X. Thus 'X is good' is equivalent to 'Would that everyone desired X!'. Not only did Russell anticipate Ayer and Stevenson - his version of emotivism is distinctly superior to the versions they went on to invent. The early emotivists had trouble making room for moral contradictions - special curlicues had to be added to allow 'X is good' and 'X is bad' to contradict one another. This is not a problem for Russell. Two optatives contradict one another if the desires expressed cannot be jointly realized. For Russell, 'X is good', means 'Would that everyone desired X!' and 'X is bad', means 'Would that nobody desired X!' - a pair of optatives which cannot both be fulfilled. Thus we have moral contradictions without the need of curlicues. More generally, Russell's theory allows for logical relations between moral judgements which the theories of Stevenson and Ayer notoriously do not. We can define a consequence relation for optatives such that optative B is a consequence of the set of optatives A and a (possibly empty) set of propositions C, iff A cannot be realized under circumstances C unless B is realized too. Finally Russell's theory, unlike the theories of Ayer and Stevenson, is not menaced by a vicious circularity. For Ayer and Stevenson, to say that X is good is to express approval of X. But to approve of X is to think or feel that X is good, which begets a vicious circle. For Russell, there is no such circle, since 'good' and 'bad' are defined in terms of desire rather than the thought-saturated emotions of approval and disapproval. The theory had another advantage from Russell's point of view - it allowed him to moralize with a clean intellectual conscience, In *Reply* (*RoE*, ch. 20) Russell considers the charge that his penchant for 'vehement ethical judgements' is incompatible with his official meta-ethic. He replies that according to his own theory the function of moral discourse is to express desires as to the desires of mankind. Since he feels such desires, why not express them? The moralizing error theorist is, at worst, a hypocrite, and at best, a dealer in useful fictions. The moralizing emotivist, by contrast, is an honest man who uses moral language for its express purpose. However, Russell remained unhappy with emotivism. When moralizing he continued to feel

not only that he was expressing his desires but that his desires were somehow *right* (*RoE*, p. 149). His last effort in meta-ethics was an attempt to do justice to this feeling.

Phase 6: 1946-1970. The meta-ethical part of *HSEP* was written in 1946 but not published till 1954. What Russell hoped to do (and what he half-believed he had achieved) was to inject a little objectivity into ethics, by conjuring inter-subjective truth out of subjective sentiments. His definitions and propositions would, 'if accepted', provide a 'coherent body of propositions ... true (or false) in the same sense as [the] propositions of science' (*HSEP*, p. 116, *RoE*, p.162). Sainsbury is at least right about *HSEP*. The theory is indeed, derivative, 'close to Hume's, with a dash of emotivism', though what Sainsbury manages to miss is that there is also a substantial dollop of Sidgwick. I shall not discuss the theory in detail since in my view, and I think Russell's, it is something of a failure. (See *RoE*, pp. 151-154 and 164-166.) Russell was ambivalent about it at the time and soon abandoned it, reverting to a dissatisfied and perplexed emotivism (*RoE*, pp. 164-165). 'I cannot see how to refute the arguments for the subjectivity of ethical values' he declared in 1960, 'but I am incapable of believing that all that is wrong with wanton cruelty is that I don't like it. ... when it comes to the philosophy of moral judgements, I am impelled in two opposite directions and remain perplexed. I have already expressed this perplexity in print, and I should deeply rejoice, if I could find or be shown a way to resolve it, but as yet I remain dissatisfied.' (*RoE* pp. 165-166.) And on that sad note, Russell ended his career as an ethical theorist.

There is more, much more, to be said about Russell's ethical theory and I try to say some of it in the introduction and notes to *RoE*. The encounters with Moore, the variants of emotivism, the error theory and the humanistic amorality - all could do with an extended treatment. But space is limited and time is short. Though Russell did not solve the problems of meta-ethics to his own satisfaction, I think I have done enough to demonstrate that he was an ethical thinker of interest and distinction. I do not, of course, claim for Russell the same gigantic stature as an ethical theorist that he enjoys as a logician and a philosopher of

mathematics. But I do claim that he was a highly inventive ethical thinker whose achievement ranks rather higher than writers such as Stevenson who have nothing but their meta-ethics to boast of<sup>12</sup>.

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