

Thoughts about Russell's thoughts

Ray Scott Percival

Review of: Bertrand Russell and the Origins of Analytical Philosophy

This collection of essays by acclaimed philosophers explores Bertrand Russell's influence on one of the dominant philosophical approaches of this century. Michael Dummett argues that analytical philosophy began with Gottlob Frege's analysis of numbers. Frege had begun by inquiring about the nature of number, but found it more fruitful to ask instead about the meanings of sentences containing number words. Russell was to exploit this method systematically. But Russell always insisted that philosophy was about the world, not language, and that the analysis of language even conceived as a tool of philosophical exploration could not be taken at face value. Indeed, everyday language was often positively misleading and embodied the errors and superstitions of cannibals. He developed a scorn for Wittgenstein and others' reduction of philosophy to clarification.

I should point out that few followed Frege's anti-psychologism seriously. A notable exception was Karl Popper, who developed an ontological theory that distinguished between World 1 (the world of physical states), World 2 (the world of psychological states) and World 3 (the world of abstract products of the human mind). He also elaborated a scientific method that had no use for belief. Russell, however, remained enmeshed in the philosophy of "rational belief".

One of the papers seeks to reveal the importance of Russell's writings on ethics. Charles R. Pigden argues that despite Russell's influential writings on the morals of sex, love and war, professional philosophers have ignored this part of his philosophy. This is strange in the light of the fact that Russell's impact on moral discussion was dominant. Pigden suggests that Russell was the first to advocate emotivism and the error theory, two dominant theories of modern debate. Russell attributes his abandonment of the objectivity of good and evil to George Santayana's criticisms of it in *The Winds of Doctrine*. Emotivism is generally thought to have originated with Alfred Ayer and Charles Stevenson, but Russell's advocacy dates from *The Place of Science in a Liberal Education*, written in early 1913.

Russell went on to argue that the good can be defined in terms of what we desire to desire, and Pigden urges that his papers "A note on ethical theory" and "Are all desires equally moral?" are now of more than historical interest. David Lewis is a contemporary exponent of a variant of Russell's position: the good is what we are ideally disposed to desire to desire. G. E. Moore had argued that naturalistic theories of the good fail because if "good" just means the same as "natural property X", then to ask whether X is good would be a silly question since we would already know the answer. However, this is not the case because it always makes sense to ask of any naturalistic property whether it is good. Pigden argues that both Russell's and Lewis's theories are immune from Moore's criticism of naturalistic theories.

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Louis Greenspan writes on the significance of Russell's History of Western Philosophy. One of its notable features, he says, is that it has no progressive schema. Greenspan also claims that Russell adopted some element of the Marxist theory that ideas are a reflection of the current modes of production and distribution. This, he says, is when Russell is a true historian of ideas, treating philosophies as ideologies and unconcerned with their truth or falsity. What Greenspan overlooks is the possibility that the truth and falsity of ideas may make a difference to their influence on social life and their chances of survival and reproduction down the centuries.

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