# *Introduction to Russell's "History of Western Philosophy"**

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In his review of the first edition of Russell's *History of Western Philosophy*, Isaiah Berlin, a distinguished historian of ideas, made a prediction that has turned out to be strikingly false. Russell's book, Berlin wrote in 1947, will mainly be read "for the light it casts upon the views of its author." Now that it has had more than sixty years in print, and probably over two million readers, it is safe to say that almost nobody reads this very long book in order to find out about Bertrand Russell. People read it to find out about philosophy. Already in 1950, the Swedish Academy singled out the *History* when it awarded Russell the Nobel Prize for literature, noting in its award statement that he had been "so eminently successful in keeping alive the interest in general philosophy".

When the book first appeared, in 1945 in the United States and one year later in Britain, its liberal and hopeful values were a tonic for the times. Like Karl Popper in his *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (1945) and Friedrich von Hayek in his *The Road to Serfdom* (1944), Russell attacked authoritarian politics, both of the left and of the right, and was cautiously optimistic that civilisation could solve its problems, provided it adopted a calmly rational approach to doing so. Russell's full title for the book announced that its subject was not just Western philosophy but also its connection with political and social circumstances. In fact, although he takes some steps to place the great thinkers in their historical contexts—especially in its first two parts, on the ancient and medieval periods—and also provides thumbnail sketches of their lives and personalities, Russell does not try to explain away their ideas as the products of their times. On the whole he engages with all philosophers as if they were his contemporaries, paying relatively little attention to the intellectual landscapes in which they moved, even if they in fact lived 2,000 years ago. That is one main reason why the book continues to engage its readers today, though it is also why some scholars have reservations about it.

It was in the mid-1930s, when he was in his early sixties, that Russell conceived the project of producing a history of philosophy. At the time he was writing a great deal of journalism, in addition to books and essays, in order to support his family, and had enjoyed considerable success with *Freedom and Organisation: 1814-1914*, a book about Europe and America that combined political and intellectual history. He proposed a similar book on philosophy to his American publisher, Warder Norton, and a contract for it was signed in 1937. As it turned out, he wrote a different book (*Power: A New Social Analysis*) for Norton instead, and the project was

temporarily shelved. It revived in 1940, two years after Russell had moved to the United States to lecture in Chicago and Los Angeles, when he suddenly found himself unemployed because the City College of New York revoked its offer of an appointment. The loss of the job in New York—he was to have taught logic and the philosophy of science and mathematics—was the

result of a famously scandalous miscarriage of justice, in which city authorities bowed to churchmen and social conservatives who disapproved of Russell's writings about sex. Not only was Russell deprived of a job, he also found that American newspapers and magazines would not publish his articles. He therefore jumped at an offer from Albert Barnes, a pharmaceutical tycoon and art-collector, to join his Barnes Foundation in Philadelphia. Russell's duties were to offer a course of lectures for the general public on the history of philosophy.

Two years later, in the summer of 1942, Russell signed a contract with the American publisher Simon & Schuster to produce a book on the history of western philosophy. About two-thirds of the manuscript consisted of the lectures given at the Barnes Foundation between January 1941 and December 1942, and the rest was completed—at great speed—by September 1943. As Russell later noted in his autobiography, "The *History of Western Philosophy* began by accident and proved the main source of my income for many years."

Despite its continuing appeal to large numbers of readers, the *History* raises eyebrows among some scholars. The conventional wisdom in English-speaking countries is that although Russell's work is much livelier, a more sober and reliable guide is the nine-volume *History of Philosophy* by Frederick Copleston, an English Jesuit, the first volume of which was published in 1946. It has been said that Russell's book is distorted by its author's bias; that it contains mistakes; and that it is curiously selective in what it covers—why is there a chapter on Byron, for example? And why no Kierkegaard?

First let us consider the alleged mistakes. Given its large scope, there were remarkably few errors of straightforward historical fact in the first edition of the book, and there are fewer now, because Russell made several corrections to subsequent editions. One reviewer pointed out that although Russell writes that most philosophers of the Hellenistic period believed in astrology, his own treatment reveals that they did not. This minor slip remains in the text. A more substantial historical error is that Russell exaggerates the importance of Pythagoras in mathematics and philosophy, attributing to Pythagoras himself various views and achievements that in fact belong to later Pythagoreans. But Russell can in no way be blamed for this, since he was correctly summarising the best scholarship that was available to him at the time of writing. It was only in the 1960s that Pythagorean scholars became persuaded that they had got Pythagoras seriously wrong.

The rest of Russell's most questionable statements occupy a grey area between wit and distortion. Russell was (among other things) the Oscar Wilde of philosophy: Isaiah Berlin said that he was the greatest living master of "shrewd and ironical aphorisms". Like a lively conversationalist, Russell was wont to sacrifice strict accuracy in order to produce a memorable epithet. But I doubt if this does any great harm, since Russell's style is transparent. He is obviously having fun, and it is patronising to readers to believe that they will takes all his quips

literally and fail to realise that there is probably more to be said about the matter in hand than is revealed in one of Russell's *bons mots*.

Still, it must be admitted that a handful of Russell's statements seem pointlessly off-beam. For example, he writes that, according to Kant, "it is wrong to borrow money, because if we all tried to do so, there would be no money left to borrow". In fact, what Kant said is that you should not borrow money if you intend not to repay it, because if everybody did this, then people would stop lending. I do not think it is merely humourless to point out that these are two different things. On the other hand, compared with a more plodding and literal treatment, I suspect that the liveliness of Russell's account of Kant is rather more likely to hold the attention of readers and tempt them to find out more about this daunting philosopher.

In his autobiography, Russell wrote that "a man without bias cannot write interesting history", and doubted whether such a person could exist anyway. A book should be held together by its point of view, he wrote, and the best one can do is to "admit one's bias and for dissatisfied readers to look for other writers to express an opposite bias." A much longer work, such as Father Copleston's, has less need of extreme compression, and is certainly to be recommended for students who want more detail on some of the topics that Russell skims. But, like Russell, Father Copleston believed that it is impossible to write a history of philosophy without taking a point of view. Indeed, the aim of his history, he wrote in the preface to his first volume, was to provide a textbook for use in Catholic seminaries, and it clearly bears the marks of having been composed for such a purpose. It has three chapters on the revival of Catholic scholasticism in the Renaissance, which few other historians would bother with, and a more sympathetic treatment of medieval theology than most non-Catholics will be able to stomach. Again, as with Russell, Copleston's bias is unlikely to do much harm because it is so open. Copleston no more tries to hide his clerical collar than Russell tries to hide the fact that he is a liberal rationalist with a penchant for plain speaking.

There is wide disagreement over the fairness of Russell's accounts of some philosophers, but it is notable that those who vehemently condemn his treatment of a thinker are usually admirers of the philosopher concerned when Russell is not. For example, Nietzscheans tend to disparage Russell's chapter on him, but Isaiah Berlin judged it to be "a distinguished essay", and the Cambridge philosopher C. D. Broad (who found plenty to disagree with elsewhere in the book) pronounced it "admirable". Similarly, followers of Hegel are, unsurprisingly, apt to dismiss Russell's trenchant criticism of him as a misrepresentation; Broad, on the other hand, thought that Russell gave a "clear and fair" account of Hegel's views. In general, reviewers who liked the tenor of the book found it to be accurate, while those who were annoyed by its colourful and combative style did not. A review in *Isis*¸ an Oxford journal, says "his treatment of ancient and medieval doctrines is nearly worthless"; Isaiah Berlin says that Russell's exposition and argument are "scrupulously honest throughout".

When I was writing my own history of philosophy, *The Dream of Reason*, I was puzzled that many friends were more eager to know which philosophers I intended to cover, and how much space would be allotted to each, than in what I proposed to say about them. This sort of keen concern with who is in and who is out seems to me to be more appropriate for a historian of, say,

the Middlesex County Cricket Club than a historian of philosophy. There are endless ways in which the story of philosophy may be told. Philosophers rarely even agree on the boundaries and definition of their subject, and philosophy's understanding of its own past has varied enormously over time. Perspectives change, new scholarship discovers new connections between old thinkers, the sages of one period are sometimes utterly forgotten in the next. It is hard to see how a historian's decisions about whom to include can fail to be influenced by his or her own interests and knowledge, or why they ought not to be.

No reviewer of Russell's *History* managed to resist the temptation to query his choice of people to write about, though there was little agreement among the critics on who belonged in the book and who did not. The *Times Literary Supplement* was baffled to see a chapter on the poet Byron; *The New Yorker* was particularly pleased to find chapters, including that one, about the influence of non-philosophers on philosophy. The *Journal of the History of Ideas* thought that there was too much about Leibniz (the one great philosopher on whom Russell was an authority) and not enough on Giordano Bruno, Lord Herbert of Cherbury, Josiah Royce and George Santayana, among others. Isaiah Berlin said there was too little on the 18th-century French enlightenment.

The present and the recent past are the easiest times for a historian of philosophy to get badly wrong in the eyes of his successors. The ninth edition of G. H. Lewes's popular *Biographical History of Philosophy*, which was published in 1857, ends with an encomium on the philosophy of Auguste Comte, a French thinker who died that year, which it described as "on the whole the truest" system yet produced. This, thought Lewes, was the philosophy of the future. It wasn't. Russell does not even mention Comte, and not many people would fault him for that (though one reviewer did).

Russell ends his own *History* with an account of "The Philosophy of Logical Analysis", the philosophical school of which he was more or less the founder. From the viewpoint of the early 21st century, it now seems odd of Russell not to have mentioned Wittgenstein or Heidegger. Their main works had been published long before Russell wrote, and they are now regarded (at least by their many respective admirers, who are not always the same people) as two of the greatest philosophers of the 20th century. I would guess that in 100 years' time these two omissions will still be noticed as somewhat eccentric—in other words, that people will still be reading this book.

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29th September 2008

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* Published as the introduction to the Collectors' Edition of Bertrand Russell's *History of Western Philosophy* (Routledge, 2009): http://www.amazon.co.uk/History-Western-Philosophy-Collectors-Routledge/dp/0415478812