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1. The Logical Atomism of Bertrand Russell

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1. The Logical Atomism of Bertrand Russell

Abstract

As can easily be seen, the impact of these three schools of contemporary philosophy — the linguistic, the logical analytical, and the logical empiricist — has been largely negative, critical, and destructive, especially with regard to theological beliefs, metaphysical systems, and value judgment. Thus the particular growing edges of contemporary philosophy have contributed their full share to the shaking of the foundations of Western Civilization. But, during the last few decades they have presented less of a united front than before. The differences which have appeared have come largely from a rethinking of the status and role of value, and these differences have found expression in a large number of philosophers both in England and the United States. One of the most articulate and influential of the men who have been identified with the whole critical movement is Bertrand Russell. While he has characteristically never accepted the label of any school of thought, it is with this movement of criticism and analysis that he is most closely associated. His thought and his life, as he himself has said, is "reminiscent of that of the aristocratic rebels of the early nineteenth century." [excerpt]

Keywords

Contemporary Civilization, Philosophy, Bertrand Russell

Disciplines

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Comments

This is a part of [Section XXII: Philosophical Meaning](#). The [Contemporary Civilization](#) page lists all additional sections of *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, as well as the [Table of Contents](#) for both volumes.

More About Contemporary Civilization:

From 1947 through 1969, all first-year Gettysburg College students took a two-semester course called Contemporary Civilization. The course was developed at President Henry W.A. Hanson's request with the goal of "introducing the student to the backgrounds of contemporary social problems through the major concepts, ideals, hopes and motivations of western culture since the Middle Ages."

Gettysburg College professors from the history, philosophy, and religion departments developed a textbook for the course. The first edition, published in 1955, was called *An Introduction to Contemporary Civilization and Its Problems*. A second edition, retitled *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, was published in 1958 and 1960. It is this second edition that we include here. The copy we digitized is from the Gary T. Hawbaker '66 Collection and the marginalia are his.

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as he himself has said, is "reminiscent of that of the aristocratic rebels of the early nineteenth century."

Because his parents died early, Russell was brought up in the home of his grandfather, Lord John Russell, the British statesman who had introduced the Reform Bill of 1832 into Parliament. At Cambridge he distinguished himself in mathematics, turning to philosophy only in his last year. At this time it was the philosophy of Hegel which was still dominant, and strong in its critique of British empiricism. He came under the influence of Moore's linguistic analysis and later of logical empiricism. As a result of these influences he rejected the rationalism and idealism of both Kant and Hegel, and turned to the narrower problems of science and its relationship to philosophy. In this he was attracted by the clarity, precision, and simplicity which were to be found in mathematics and logic. He worked in the direction of a combination of these two aspects of philosophy along the lines which were being developed on the Continent. His interests focused on what we know, what we can be sure of, rather than on how we know. While he accepted the general approach of the critical schools, he never embraced their dogmatic antimetaphysical stand. He preferred to hold the results of linguistic, logical, and mathematical analysis tentatively, and insisted on his right to speculate, even metaphysically, with them. The only name he has been willing to accept for his philosophy is "logical atomism."

Financially independent, Russell never had to hold an academic position. This fact helps to account for the independence of many of his thoughts on such social problems as war, education, politics, and marriage. The free expression of these thoughts made some of his academic appointments both stormy and short-lived. Even the briefest listing of Russell's writings cannot help but amaze any reader with the volume, range, and significance of his work. After his first book, German Social Democracy (1896), he went on to write under such titles as War, the Offspring of Fear (1915), Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy (written in prison in 1919), and Marriage and Morals (1929). His writings have been of such an order that in 1950 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature for A History of Western Philosophy, and Its Connection with Political and Social Circumstances from the Earliest Times to the Present Day (1945). In this book he tried to show how philosophy has influenced, as well as how it has been influenced by, the civilizations of which it has been a part. At the same time his insistence on freedom of thought runs throughout the entire book.

One of the earliest and best expressions of this attitude is the essay chosen to represent his general approach to philosophy, entitled "A Free Man's Worship" (1903). This essay has been translated and reprinted many times. While Russell later criticized some parts of it, it still remains the most succinct and artistic expression of many of the strands of his thought, strands which he has held together in his person rather than in any systematic expression of his philosophy.

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