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The Potential for Ethics Without God Through Bertrand Russell's Authentic Notion of Philosophical Inquiry

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Violence dominates the landscape of our present world. Prejudice and sectarianism threaten human rights, putting our hopes for the authentic possibility of humane ethical/moral interaction on a global scale in serious question. Ours is a world where epistemological and ethical relativism appear to rule the day. In these extremely hard times, it would benefit us, as philosophers, informed thinkers, and concerned human beings, to revisit with a discerning eye and charitable heart the philosophy of Bertrand Russell, which reminds us in a powerfully persuasive manner just how important philosophy can be in offering hope for a better world during dark, turbulent times. In what follows, I examine the unique way in which Russell responds to the following question: What is philosophy good for, what is the value of philosophy for the world and its inhabitants? His response to these queries resonates with a distinctive ethical tone and timbre.

It was Russell (1985) who began seriously thinking about the legitimate possibility of humanist ethics without God when writing *Why I am Not a Christian*, wherein he claimed that religion was a pariah on the human condition, the cause of unthinkable and immeasurable suffering. "I regard [religion] as a disease," he wrote, "born out of fear and as a source of untold misery to the human race" (p. 125). Russell also believed that religion was inconsequential to our understanding and practice of morality. Despite living in a world devoid of intrinsic value, a world in which no divinely sanctioned, objective and absolute moral principles existed, it was our duty to search out "human" values and meanings, and it was possible, according to Russell, because of our capability to think rationally and our capacity to be deeply moved on an emotional level, to understand the world in distinctly moral terms:

Nature, omnipotent but blind, in the revolution of her secular hurrying through the abysses of space, has brought forth at last a child, still subject to her power, but gifted with sight, with knowledge of good and evil, with the capacity of judging all the works of his unthinking Mother (p. 152).

In *The Problems of Philosophy*, Russell wrote in a highly speculative and refreshingly poetic manner about that which is crucial to the understanding of what good philosophy is all about, namely, the indispensable concern for the ethical when approaching the ultimate questions of existence. According to Russell, if practiced as an ethical discipline, philosophy can guide our enquiry along the path to knowledge of the world, and more importantly, philosophy can also inspire us to actively improve the world that we inhabit with others. Russell identifies philosophy's value in its potential to authentically inspire our practical ethical comportment, fostering and enhancing our legitimate interpersonal relationships, as a secondary benefit of a

unique method of enquiry. Russell believes that philosophical enquiry is best practiced as an ethical endeavor when it retains and accentuates the crucial distinction between what Russell terms the “Self” (the philosopher) and the “not-Self” (the objects of the philosopher’s contemplation), stressing a charitable and respectful attitude toward questioning the world at large and its inhabitants.

Russell (1969) opposes the traditional and dogmatic subject-centered model of philosophical enquiry that, “fetters contemplation to the self” and finds its ground in the absolutist tendency to reduce the objects of its enquiry to a comprehensive and categorical body of systematic knowledge in which the notion of difference, or otherness, is either pared down or abolished (p 159). According to Russell, what traditional philosophy calls knowledge, “is not a union with the not-Self, but a set of prejudices, habits, and designs making an impenetrable veil between us and the world beyond” (p 159). Russell’s distrust of rigid, systematic philosophical explanation emerges from his critique of all forms of philosophy that display the heedless drive to understand the world in unabashedly categorical terms. He is also critical of philosophies which attempt to force the vast and expansive universe to conform with our preconceived epistemological notions of how things should be, presumptuously embracing the idea of Man as the “measure of all things” while callously neglecting the all-important ethical distinction between the Self and the not-Self (p 159).

In *The Problems of Philosophy*, Russell effectively attacks the epistemological relativism of Protagoras, Nietzsche’s idea of truth as a human construct, the idealism of Bishop Berkeley, and Kant’s monumental attempt in *The Critique of Pure Reason* to reconcile rationalism with the tenets of empiricism. Russell’s brilliant critique of the Western philosophical tradition renders the aforementioned positions unsound and illogical. For in essence, as related to Russell’s understanding of ethical philosophical enquiry, they fail to adopt a charitable and respectful attitude toward the not-Self. “There is a widespread [negative] philosophical tendency,” writes Russell,

towards the view that Man is the measure of all things, that truth is manmade, that space and time and the world of universals are properties of the mind, and if there be anything not created by the mind, it is unknowable and of no account for us (p 159).

Philosophers fall into error, according to Russell, for two reasons. First, they make the assumption that humans are seamlessly woven into the complex fabric of the world, and secondly, they believe that it is possible to “assimilate the universe to Man,” and not *vice versa* (p 159). Importantly, when we incorrectly perceive and judge that the world is just like us, that is, that the world is identical to the “Self,” we mistakenly imagine that “knowledge of it is possible without admission of what seems alien” (p 158). Russell, quite correctly, is highly critical of the pervasive attitude within much of philosophy’s tradition that believes that all knowledge of the world presupposes a reduction and assimilation of the object to the thinking subject into a closed, all-encompassing, system of explanation, or grand-narrative.

Russell eloquently describes the philosopher’s (Self) authentic relationship with the objects of philosophical contemplation (not-Self) in terms of a union that must be liberated from

any and all self-centered aims on the part of the thinker. "Knowledge," as Russell states, "is a from of union of Self and not-Self; and like all union, it is impaired by dominion and therefore by any attempt to force the universe into conformity with what we find in ourselves" (p 159). According to Russell, the philosopher must, with steadfast resolve, abstain from the headstrong disposition that would violently force the objects of philosophical contemplation to conform with preconceived notions of how they should be, for philosophical knowledge can never be subjugated or controlled by the thinking subject. Knowledge of a philosophical nature is never a possession of the thinker because it always transcends the possibility of reducing the world to our ways of perceiving and thinking.

Russell states that philosophical contemplation, in the form of the union of Self and not-Self, should never "aim at proving that the rest of the universe is akin to man" (p 158). Rather, in Russell's opinion, it is philosophy that must adapt to "the characters which it finds in its objects," and if the philosopher grants to the objects of his contemplation the just due of their uniqueness and "otherness," he expresses an attitude that embraces and actively works to preserve the sublime sense of wonder inherent to our world and the infinite universe (p 16). Russell demands that all philosophical investigation should adopt an ethical approach to its questioning, which is highlighted and characterized by the desire to allow the not-Self, that which is radically Other and always beyond our absolute comprehension, to retain its question-worthy status, its unique, foreign, and mysterious nature with respect to our ways of being.

In response to the possibility of allowing the objects of our philosophical thoughts to retain their uniqueness, or transcendent natures, as we attempt to understand them, Russell proposes an ethical model for philosophical enquiry wherein "true" contemplation, "finds its satisfaction in every enlargement of the not-Self, in everything that magnifies the objects contemplated" (p 160). As opposed to interpreting the universe as a means to the philosopher's ends, in a relationship that privileges the Self above the universe (not-Self), Russell reverses the variables in the equation by proposing an authentic model for philosophical enquiry, as contemplation, wherein the universe, or not-Self, is given priority. Russell urges the philosopher to grant a sense of superiority to the objects of philosophy, and "through the infinity of the universe the mind which contemplates it achieves some share in infinity" (p 159). Russell understands knowledge as the product of the asymmetrical union between the Self and not-Self, wherein the philosopher embraces the recalcitrant universe, and through a loving, intractable, and ever-evolving discourse, works to reveal the hidden nature of the universe. The universe, in turn, remains forever beyond the philosopher's logical grasp, despite the philosopher's best attempts at explanation.

For unlike the sciences, the problems, issues, and questions to which we can provide no definitive solutions and responses, "remain to form the residue which is called philosophy" (p 155). If it should ever be the case that philosophy provides a categorical explanation for the things it interrogates, they leave the purview of philosophy and become something other than a subject for philosophy. The philosopher must recognize that definitive knowledge of the world, specifically in terms of philosophical knowledge, is a hopelessly impossible ideal.

True contemplation, according to Russell, finds satisfaction and its value in all that enlarges and ameliorates the not-Self, or the objects of philosophical reflection. Philosophical

contemplation conceived as an ethical endeavor is the liberating freedom from narrow subjective, egoistic aims and expresses an impartial attitude through “the unalloyed desire for truth,” which should always be free from prejudice and dogmatism in all matters of truth-seeking (p 160). It is Russell’s claim that the freedom and impartiality of the philosopher’s charitable and respectful attitude afforded to the objects of thought carries over into the philosopher’s interpersonal relationships, preserving a similar freedom and impartiality in the realm of practical activity, which includes the understanding of the human as a fragile, passionate, and emotional being. Russell is careful to elucidate and punctuate the notions of authentic social justice and universal love that emerge from philosophy’s unique method of ethical reflection. According to Russell, retaining the openness of both mind and soul in the unprejudiced quest for philosophical truth is, “the very same quality of mind which, in action is justice, and in emotion as the universal love which can be given to all, and not only those who are judged useful or admirable” (p 161). Just as the great philosopher resists the complete “objectification” of his subject-matter, so too the good, moral human avoids the “objectification” of other human beings. With such understanding, perhaps we can acquire a newfound respect for the differences within others, allowing those people with whom we share the world to retain their uniqueness. Thus, as opposed to privileging our own personal desires, treating others as disposable means-to-the-ends of our projects, the possibility exists for a renewed sense of dignity to rise up from the heart of the human condition.

This protracted relationship between Self and not-Self, one that graduates from theoretical enquiry to the realm of practical interpersonal social interaction, can be grasped at the level of inter-subjective discourse, for Russell is adamant that the objects of philosophical reflection can never be reduced to philosophical subjectivism (solipsism) or expressed in terms of objective, universal truth. Russell seeks to demonstrate that ethical discourse on the social level plays out in the manner of charitable philosophical interrogation, which attempts to address the various quandaries it encounters with a heightened sense of respect, and such a context for ethical interaction would perhaps manifest through a loving, intractable, and ever-evolving social discourse in which radical differences are not only recognized, but further, are privileged and preserved above similarity and identity. Importantly, Russell intimates the responsibility that I have for each and every living being who is quite literally not like me, radically *Other* in their existence. In this realm of authentic social discourse, the philosopher (Self) also assumes the role of the Other (not-Self) within a context where others retain their privileged status as unique, different, and indefinable human beings, and it is in this radical notion of the not-Self (Otherness) that Russell locates the center of human dignity. In the immediacy of our ethical encounters with the other, we are struck and overwhelmed by our innate responsibility to be as ethical, engulfed by the transcendent sense of wonder that allows for the manifestation of “familiar things in an unfamiliar aspect.”

According to Russell, philosophy should not to be studied because it procures definitive answers to its questions. Rather, he suggests that philosophy should be pursued and practiced for the way it enriches our intellect, soul, and contributes to the understanding of human potential, which always includes the pressing and immediate concern with authentic ethical relationships. However, it must be stressed that Russell is not propounding a rigid and complete ethical schema

or system for moral behavior, with prescribed and proscribed rights and duties. Rather, he is working to break open the space, or context, within which the potential exists for revealing and nurturing authentic ethical encounters in the first instance, the rich soil from which ethics can take root, growing and flourishing in time with the proper attention. This represents Russell's original and primordial thinking on ethics, perhaps in terms of offering the grounds for a possible ethics to emerge from the context established by the ethical model of philosophical enquiry, which is highlighted by the relationship, or union, between the Self and not-Self, between the philosopher and the objects of philosophical contemplation.

Nielsen (1990) has argued persuasively for an ethics without God, addressing the problems of skepticism, relativism, and nihilism as they emerge from Sartre's existentialism, by looking to the aspects of our lives that are not merely instrumental to the achievement of further goods, but those things which are good intrinsically, "relatively permanent sources of happiness," such as friendship, love, meaningful employment, security, the pursuit of ethical and aesthetic endeavors (p. 118). Admitting that morality can never be an exact science, Nielsen states that it is possible to establish the grounds for a humanist ethics within universal and agreed upon sources of value, beginning with the basic "assumption that happiness and self-awareness are fundamentally good and that pain and suffering are never desirable in themselves" (p. 119). Without divine explanations and assurances that our world is indeed meaningful and value-laden, Nielsen identifies many ways in which our lives take on meaning by examining the many overlapping and interrelated explanations and purposes that are distinctly human in origin, universally human. We do not require religion in order to understand the world as a meaningful place of dwelling: "The goals we set for ourselves," as Nielsen points out, "are enough to give meaning to our lives" (p. 119).

Russell would not disagree with the ethical philosophy of Nielsen as outlined. However, there is an important aspect of Russell's philosophy to which I have alluded that requires an explication, for it is often overlooked within the realm of moral speculation on the whole, namely, the legitimate concern for "difference," the various aspects of our unique situations that make us radically unique, and even strange and frightening, that lies at the heart of our moral endeavors. Nielsen's secular ethics depend on inter-subjective agreement, on the universalization of human commonalities stemming from rational, emotional, psychological, and physiological sources, based on the assumption that common, if not identical, wants, needs, and desires are shared by all humans, whether secular or God-fearing Christians. And while this is an obvious, and to a great extent, logical starting point for humanist ethics, both Russell and Levinas, each in his own novel way, show there is concern for a problem inherent in such thinking that attempts to ground ethics exclusively the notion of universal similarity. It is argued, that within such a view to ethics there is the imminent danger that the important distinction between "the same" (The Self) and "the other" (the Not-Self) will be lost or obliterated; privilege and exclusion emerge as inevitable side-effects when the totalization of "the same" occurs at the exclusion of "the other."

This is precisely the problem with traditional morality that Levinas (*Totality and Infinity*) addresses when arguing for the necessity of an understanding of a more authentic and primordial notion of ethics as existing prior to metaphysical or ontological knowledge. According to

Levinas, traditional ethics as I have described, establishing moral principles based on our Common Human Nature, resembles idealist metaphysical speculation in that it adopts the methodology of traditional ontology, or the study of Being *qua* Being, striving for systematic knowledge of the human and its world, albeit in “ethical” terms, in which all differences are resolved within or excluded from the totality of the system. For Levinas, and this can also be said of Russell, it is the Other, as the locus of radical difference, who can never be assimilated by me in knowledge, that first demands my legitimate ethical response, establishing the origins and gesturing toward the potential parameters of ethics. As Levinas writes, “The strangeness of the Other, his irreducibility to the ‘I,’ to my thoughts and my possessions, is precisely accomplished as a calling into question of my spontaneity, as ethics” (p. 43).

It is possible to view Russell as resembling a kindred philosophical spirit to Levinas, because Russell also discusses an ethical relationship that is importantly characterized by the human’s (the Self) encounter with the radically Other nature of the not-Self. In a similar fashion, Russell appears to oppose the notions of identity or similarity forming the singular fundamental ground, or bedrock, for establishing morality based on what we all share universally, he suggests that the potential for ethics must also be considered from the notion of difference, or the radical and transcendent nature of the Other’s being. There is a unique particularity bound up with the problem of ethics that Russell refuses to ignore, and the contemporary global landscape is such that the obvious and apparent differences between cultures cannot be ignored. Technology, in one respect, has brought the world’s population into closer proximity than in any other historical age. Ironically, and herein lies the tragic double-bind at the root of humanity’s struggles, despite the nearness of the proximity, there exists a profound ethical distance between human beings, which appears to be insurmountable, and so I return to the question that began the essay: What is the value of philosophy for the world and its inhabitants?

Russell (1969) has provided a powerfully viable response to this query, and in these hard times, I believe that we would benefit by taking seriously what Russell has to say about the practice of philosophical enquiry. Ultimately, the only hope for authentic social justice is through united group activity - and if Russell is correct, philosophy holds the potential to inspire such practical ethical activity, with the potential to make us true cosmopolitans in this rapidly expanding epoch of globalization, “citizens of the universe, not only of one walled city at war with all the rest” (p. 161).

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