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Bertrand Russell: Exploration Through Impartial and Ethical Worldly Contemplation

by Matt Brousil

(Philosophy 1100)

In Bertrand Russell's philosophy, science is sharply contrasted in method and value with philosophical inquiry. Although anyone can describe how technology and medical advancements have directly improved human life, the same cannot be said for the presence of philosophy, nor should it be. Russell undoubtedly sees science as important, but to him a world where every question can be answered empirically is one that overlooks the importance of moral and emotional dimensions of human relationships. In this essay I will discuss Russell's ideal relationship of the philosopher to her subject, or the object of contemplation, how this relationship holds the potential to enrich interpersonal relationships, and how this ideal method of ethical contemplation connects humanity with morality.

According to Russell, modern science is separated from philosophy by its ability to yield positive, verifiable results, for as he writes, "as soon as definite knowledge concerning any subject becomes possible, this subject ceases to be called philosophy and becomes a separate science" (Russell 26). While some philosophers assert dogmatic authority through philosophical inquiry, he holds that human knowledge is inherently limited; thus the belief that one can obtain a definite truth through any practice of inquiry is a prejudice formed from unwarranted extension of our scientific methods. Ideal philosophical questioning avoids the "imprison[ed]" mindset of an inquirer bound by biased, habit-driven strategies through which "unfamiliar possibilities are contemptuously rejected" (26). The relationship created through this approach is one of impartiality, a preparedness that attempts to transcend the limited conceptual boundaries of humanity and is open to the diversity that is a *more-than-human* universe. Bertrand Russell insists that to acquire real knowledge of a subject, we must shed self-interest and the inclination to homogenize our findings to fit an inherently anthropocentric worldview. The universe created by ourselves to suit ourselves is flavorless; embracing the nuances of our philosophical subjects (or the objects it contemplates) brings us closer with the brilliance beyond the human sphere.

Though Russell's philosophy might seem to reside beyond the realm of the practical, he strives to enhance the essential nature of human interactions. When we live through an unprejudiced worldview we will also see other humans as equals. As Russell explains, such a philosopher will "preserve something of the same freedom and impartiality in the world of action and emotion" (28). Rather than expecting something of other people as we would in predictable test subjects, we embrace and value their differences. Emotions such as tenderness and appreciation become valuable in all aspects of the social and moral realm – not just when directed selfishly to the "useful or admirable" (28). As parts of an intricate universe, our moral and emotional dealings with humanity should reflect the possibilities inherent in those we live with. Russell believes we are "citizens of the universe" with the responsibility to broaden and amplify human interactions by liberating ourselves from the prejudices of "narrow hopes and fears" (28).

In Russell's process of ethical contemplation, admission of this immeasurable Otherness, or uniqueness, is central to all authentic philosophical inquiry. Preparation of our minds for an impartial query precedes any actual inquisition, but is only the foundation of morally sound contemplation: every revelation that we receive acknowledges a simultaneous retreat of some other information away from our line of inquiry. We realize that philosophical inquiry, investigation, and ultimately understanding are limited and therefore unable to acquire any absolute knowledge.

Ironically, this understanding of immeasurability is the closest we can come to a universal truth. The limited amount that we can glean from our questioning connects us with the moral realm when we recognize the absence of predictability, human identity, and absolute categorical knowledge in what we achieve. For every discovery we make and the insight we gain about our subjects, more questions emerge and more depth is added to an ever-diversifying understanding of our more-than human environment. Russell states that direct “utility does not belong to philosophy,” but that the questions that our philosophical actions uncover are the indirect benefits of an impartial, inquisitive practice (25).

According to Russell, the secondary benefits of an impartial philosophical inquiry awaken us even further to the complexity of the universe that we live in. Guiding our objects of exploration through a process that treats them as means to a predictable end can only categorize, homogenize, and devalue the brilliance of their diversity. As inhabitants of a grand, complex universe we do best to see and treat other human beings as moral equals by establishing receptive relationships through ethical contemplation.

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#### Works Cited

Russell, Bertrand. “The Value of Philosophy.” *Philosophy: The Quest for Truth*. Ed. Louis Pojman and Lewis Vaughn. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009. 24-29. Print.