

Human Society in Ethics and Politics

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The present book is actually an amalgamation of two. One treating Ethics and written back in 1946 the other Politics composed seven years later, one chapter of which is actually the lecture given at Stockholm on the occasion of his Nobel Prize. Each of them, as well as taken together, reveal the main defects of Russell, whose lucidity may be an advantage to him as a writer, but not necessarily as a thinker¹. The universe he presents harbours no shadows, in spite of his protestations of gloom, his vision is ultimately one of simple-minded optimism barred from coming to fruition simply by the accidental fact of human folly. Admittedly the book was written when he was way past his prime having become habituated to the writing of philosophical pronouncements geared to the general reading public; yet as a thinker on social issues, in spite of the obvious fondness he brought to the task, he was never one of originality. You read him for his dry wit and trenchant commentary, not for instruction. It is true that his unquivering faith in rational thought provides an anti-dote to much nonsense, yet it seldom gives birth to an arresting idea. Everyone is a child of his times, Russell being no exception coming into age during an anti-Hegelian backlash in British Academic philosophy. This inbred animosity against metaphysics served him well², and he was lucky indeed to grow up in the happy and exciting decades just prior to the First World War. He was honest enough to take advantage of his social position as well as not apologising about it. Thus the reading of the book is above all an indulgence in nostalgia. The author was a hero during my youth, and certainly as far as heroes and role models go one could do much worse.

The three parameters of human philosophical thought concern the true, the good and the beautiful. Those three independent make up three mutually orthogonal axes, and it is impossible to think of philosophical thoughts made up of truly different components. They constitute in fact the space of philosophical inquiry, the three, often incompatible ideals, towards we all strain. Yet metaphors should never be carried too far, lest they cease to be evocative and become merely silly and misleading. Instead they should be constantly changed, and another metaphor may be with the fundamental forces of physics, which once upon a time were united before they split. The three magnets of thoughts, by being so intertwined as to making neat separations contrived not to say impossible, also seem to point to a common origin. Nowadays we equate the quest for truth with science, the concern with the good with religion, and the pursuit of beauty with art. Objectivity is a non-controversial issue, as far as science is concerned, barring the confused so called

¹ There is a famous saying by the Swedish Bishop Tegnér to the effect that confused expressions are rooted in confused thought *Det dunkelt sagda är det dunkelt tänkta*. Yet, too much of a facility with words is somewhat suspicious

² It is tempting to attribute his disparagement of Marx, and by implication Communism, to the former's ties to Hegel.

post-modernists; while what is good and what is beautiful is supposed to be far more subjective, or at least meaningless in the absence of men or other sentient beings.

Logical analysis fails in the elucidation of ethics and thus, in particular in the view of the great variety of moral codes that have arisen in the history of mankind, it is tempting to revert to a total state of moral relativity. Russell certainly starts out as if he would like to do that, emphasizing over and over again the superstitious nature of many of the most fervently held ethical dogmas. But when it comes to morality, total denial is as impossible as total scepticism in matters of truth. Every man has his bedrock, and Russell has his own, which he disingenuously believes to be shared by the overwhelming majority of mankind. True, the ethical principles he presents are simple enough, not to say innocuous, as to meet with wide approval. Thus in a sense ethics has an axiomatic foundation, although he is careful, lest he would incur the censure of exaggerated rationalism, not to formally present his tenets. After initial chapters of making fun of conventional moral and moralists, it becomes something of an anti-climax to learn that his solution to the objectivity of ethics, essentially lies in a slight variation of Jeremy Bentham's aim of happiness optimization. The problems with morality are of two types Russell repeatedly instructs the reader, one dealing with ends, and those are seldom controversial, the other with the means. Ends are formulated by human passions, and as such are devoid of rational motivation or justification, while means are subject to reason and thus amendable to profit by the same³. Ends are considered in terms of good and bad, while means are judged according to right or wrong. The ethical injunction is to do the good, and thus to adhere to the right. The problem with a benefit calculation is, as every mathematician knows, that any conditionally convergent series can be arranged to justify any answer. In particular without a priori horizon any atrocity in the present can be retroactively justified by the purported good it will effect in the (distant) future. Happiness maximization, tautologically unobjectionable as it is in the present, becomes totally meaningless when viewed in terms of indefinite stretches of time. The matter of good and evil is a far more profound question⁴ In particular the way we ethically judge an action is as much, if not more, concerned with the intention of the action as its actual effects. An action accidentally resulting in a death is far more leniently judged than wanton cruelty even if thwarted.

Incidentally Russell does touch upon something very interesting without really realising it let alone developing it further. It is the phenomenon of the personal conscience. When I first heard about conscience in religious instruction in school I was very puzzled, and rightly so. Logically conscience seemed redundant once there was a God who decided what was right and wrong. Conscience points to an important as well as pervasive dichotomy, namely that between the formal and the codified and the intuitively knowledgable, a dichotomy that goes beyond the issues of ethics, although in its particular form its main relevance is to ethics. An external God makes his will known either primitively by injunctions of tabus or more sophisticated in terms of moral codes or laws, the consequences of

³ Russell is obviously stung by being accused of exaggerated cerberality, and eager to assure the reader that he too possess powerful passions

⁴ As the reader no doubt recalls, Dostoevski in his 'the brothers Karamazov' presents the idea of the world being saved through the sacrifice of a young innocent boy, only to categorically reject it. Prevalent utilitarian moral policy would probably not agree with him.

which are not usually immediate but have to be worked out. An internal God, like that of conscience, follows no principles, but works on an ad-hoc basis. With an external God you obey and conform, with an internal one you are compelled. To obey and to conform there has to be a reason, and traditionally the reasons are the dual ones of reward and punishment, which incidentally makes it so notoriously difficult to extricate egotism and self-interest (be it enlightened) in the doing of good deeds. Tautologically it seems impossible to act altruistically. With your conscience there is no question of obeying, when you conform to it, you do not do so to avoid punishment or curry a favour (even if a bad conscience might be as painful a punishment as any, and a good one providing an excellent pillow) but because you cannot do otherwise and still remain yourself. Thus when there is a conflict between the demands of an external code and your own internal compass, there is a rebellion of the latter against the former. But you never rebel against your own conscience, in fact only conscience itself can provide the impetus of rebellion. External codes are intricably connected with man as a gregarious animal. One may argue persuasively that moral codes have evolved in order to further the survival interests of the herd. Conscience, on the other hand, is a manifestation of man as a solitary being. To what extent conscience can actually be thought of an internalization of an external code, making the latter the fundamental is a question we can safely ignore, preoccupied as we are with the purely philosophical issue of conscience as conscience⁵. It is conscience which is at work when we deem something beautiful or true. We never do so by selfish calculation, such judgments are truly disinterested as far as our social well-being is concerned. In fact this ties up with a lot of traditional dilemmas, one, to pick a seemingly farfetched example, whether to do say pure mathematics. Pure mathematics, as any kind of truly scientific endeavour, is ultimately motivated not by social use but by curiosity, and as such a purely solitary decision, prompted by the urgings of your conscience. In particular there is a difference between asking why to do something and why to be paid to be doing something. The former is a question confined to your conscience, the latter one to be squared with the prevailing codas. One may think that to follow your conscience is an act of total self-centeredness, and this may be true, but there is a difference between egocentricity and egotism. Moral codes work on the basis of rewards and punishments, and thus logically an act, however heinous, which would bring great rewards to yourself yet be exempt from discovery, would be perpetrated, would the mechanism of external constraints be the sole ethical inhibition. But you do not abstain from killing an innocent child in order to obtain an advantage, not mainly because it is forbidden to do so, but because it would contradict a vision you have of the world. The act not to do so is thus similar to an esthetic impulse. Something has intrinsic value and you cannot violate it. You do not conform to social conventions nor obey instructions when you chose not to commit the act, you are simply compelled to refrain; and the compulsion is not felt as an intrusion of your nature nor as an infringement on your will; your will and your nature are in automatic compliance with

⁵ In modern evolutionary thinking it is natural to think of conscience as to a large extent innate. In fact there have been (Wilson) speculations as to altruistic 'genes'. Russell seems to imply that conscience is to some extent independant on social conditioning, at least some strong individuals have on the basis if their consciences opposed the usual social mores.

the compulsion⁶. One should not, however, conclude that the internal voice of conscience makes an external coda superfluous. The latter is unavoidable in any civilized society, and in fact one may compare with Max Webers two notions of justice. One the material, which is concerned with the actual result; the other the formal, which is mainly concerned with the methods. In the former case the judge has the main responsibility, he creates justice based on the particular case, thus playing the role of conscience. In the latter principles are paramount to serve justice in the sense of treating everybody equally. It goes without saying that formal justice is a prerequisite for democracy by reducing the scope of its authority. People tend to forget that not all crimes are falling under legal jurisdiction, petty shop-lifting does but not defecting on a friend⁷. This failure of appreciating the distinction makes it also very hard for people in general, and even those who should know better, to really understand what freedom of expression really entails. It is a matter of form not content. The individual life must let the inner voice take precedence, society, however, cannot afford to, in fact is not even able to, there being so many conflicting inner voices, and thus it must resort to the formal, this being the essence of democracy⁸. With such power conceded to conscience, one should never take its decisions lightly⁹. And in fact traditionally men true to their consciences have been respected, even if the dictates of the same have not met with approval. Thus ironically, the solitary contemplation, rather than make man look inward it makes him look outward and transcend himself through a commitment; while man in a social context, finds himself reflected in others and thus thrown back on himself and his selfish concerns.

After this digression we may briefly return to one of Russells main objects of attack, namely the notion of sin and punishment. Sin, according to Russell is simply a transgression against some arbitrary moral code, and as such not usually worthy of censure. Thus when Russell thinks of sin, he is not primarily thinking of say murder, although it is listed along that of adultery in the Ten Commandments. There may be some justification to this, as usually most people are not worried about having committed murder only sexual transgressions, often no worse than enjoyment. As to punishment it has three justifica-

⁶ One may argue that in the circumstances compulsion is not the right word, but surely when given the choice, the failure to act in your own petty interests, will be felt as a compulsion.

⁷ Russell is a proponent of abortion, and this is clearly not a controversial issue nowadays among those of liberal persuasions. But he was also a proponent of euthanasia, apparently with equal conviction, and this still makes most people uneasy, maybe more so now than during the time of Russell. Nevertheless one may well sympathise with people who act according to their conscience, but this is clearly a case by case situation, when nobody should have the comfort of general rules of sanction, but only act in defiance of law. If they are not prepared to do so, their consciencial compulsion is not strong enough. One may also argue, that what made the German extermination possible, was not so much the virulent anti-semitic propaganda, but the breaking of tabus, as to the elimination of the infirm and the mentally handicapped, which at the time was seen even by the liberals to have its points.

⁸ In an undemocratic society, one inner voice may take precedence, or at least there may be a systematic ambition to exercise divine or poetic justice. No doubt the majority of people may opt for this, thus showing that democracy may after all be an imposition from above by a liberal elite, and if given the opportunity, as has happened in the past, a majority may well opt for abolishing democracy itself!

⁹ It may provide the most compelling argument for say the activity of pure mathematics.

tions, of which Russell only approves the first two, namely deterrence (and that only with reservations) and reformation, while he rejects pure punishment as a sadistic indulgence in the suffering of the wicked. As to deterrence he rightly observes that it would work as well if criminals were only publicly sentenced harshly but in reality brought to a paradisaical existence on some South Sea Island, but for the fact that this might sooner or later leak out. He also claims repeatedly that back when murderers and rapists were hanged those crimes were more common than they are in our more enlightened age. As to make the wicked suffer just for being bad, as the Germans were collectively after the First World War with disastrous consequences, there is nothing, as noted above, but the enjoyment of suffering given an exalted excuse. Still, as so often, I find Russell a bit too superficial. There is a strong impulse in us to see transgression punished, not just as a deterrent, nor as a means of reform, but simply as retribution. Justice must have its course, just as falsehood must be detected and eliminated. As a child I was very much impressed by the story of Moses, and how he finally was denied entrance into the promised land due to the fact that he had as a young man committed a murder. I certainly approved of this blind justice being meted out, even if the actual circumstances of his murderous transgression were just short of heroic. This satisfaction had nothing to do with Moses suffering, more to do with the beauty of a consistent application of a moral code, and as such akin to the working of a conscience (although of course the inner voice would have made a different judgment).

The second part of the book, the one concerned with politics, is somewhat livelier. While the first may be seen as a hack-work, the second is at least inspired by the passion Russell felt at the end of his life against the self-destructing folly of mankind. Written in 1953 it is now dated and thus interesting as a historical document reflecting the moods of the early years of the Cold War. Russell is concerned with the Third World War, whose occurrence is almost a foregone conclusion with him. He scores many a good point. In particular he points out that the antagonism between the West and the Soviet Union has nothing to do with ideology. Had Soviet Union still been Greek Orthodox, had they had a free press and general elections, we would still have feared and hated them. The crux of the matter is power and the rivalry of it. A country that is too weak to threaten us, and which in no way interferes with our vital interests, can be as irreligious, fanatical and undemocratic as it wishes, and we simply would not care. Furthermore he discounts much of idealism as the manifestation of a love of power, and incidentally he remarks that moralists exclusively focus on the temptations of the senses and completely ignores the temptation of power, to which they invariably fall prey themselves. Domination is another key concept in his psychological analysis, remarking that the simultaneous desire to be dominated and to dominate can easily be combined in a single breast, and to a large extent explain the rise of religion¹⁰. Yet too often enough his naivety shines through, like his statement that intelligence can be nourished by known methods of education.

At the end of the book he gives a brief crash-course on history remarking that human progress proceeds by fits and starts, although for the past four hundred years there has been a steady acceleration. Like most reflective people he is somewhat dismayed by contemplating its extrapolation, and then miraculously pronounces that the future of mankind

¹⁰ In particular he goes at length elucidating what made somebody like Loyola tick

is bright, that happiness and universal satisfaction is within reach, and in a thousand years the average person will be like a Shakespeare, and we can then only speculate as to the heights the geniuses will attain. All of that seems to be in the offings would we only be able to ride over the present crisis.

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