

# The History of Western Philosophy

*B. Russell*

July 8–25, 2008

Whitehead, collaborator with Russell, once famously claimed that all of Western Philosophy is but a sequence of footnotes to Plato. Russell admittedly devotes less space to Plato than he does to Aristotle, yet the spirit of Plato hovers over his work, sometimes explicitly but mostly tacitly. One may come to philosophy by a number of ways as Russell notes in his chapter on Bergson, but the true way is the love of knowledge, a love that is unusual and only present passionately in a few individuals. Who more than Plato personifies this esoteric passion and the ruthlessness of inquiry which comes with it? No wonder that philosophers identify with him and his quest, even when they might be highly critical of its details. Each generation may reinvent their Plato, because profound insights have a validity far beyond the imagination of their original proposers. This is why I call philosophy the poetry of science, although this might offend most professional philosophers and provoke their ire. Philosophy is about thought and its ability to both interpret and change the world. This is a very exalted notion, making even the most timid of philosophers privy to an aristocracy not of matter but of mind, the supreme example of which is Plato.

Russell is thus a Platonist, i.e. he is committed to the notion of Truth, however evasive and divorced from common sense it may turn out to be, and admitting only rational inquiry as the legitimate way to approach it. Firmly wedded as he is to this notion, he has a firm perspective on the philosophers of the past, able to distinguish the goats from the sheep, although of course realizing that most philosophers are a mixture of both. This gives to his approach an opinionatedness, which may irritate more fair-minded and pedestrian souls, but inspires his account with a sarcastic wit and an illuminating irony, without which it would be unreadable. The fact is that while Russell is a great philosopher, he is no historian, and in particular not erudite in the traditional classical way. The book is an product of reading and reflection that is not always fully digested. The shortcomings are obvious, but they are all forgivable, because the book is written in good spirits, and with the ambition of entertaining author and reader alike. Sometimes he does allow himself to get mired in irrelevant detail, bursting at the seams to inform the reader what he has just learned. This might be devastating for pure scholarship, but for the reader that accepts the basic tenets in his initial contract with the author, it only adds to the charm, if sometimes exasperatingly so. Charming are his short historical surveys as well, although one suspects that their persuasive character owes at least some to what he censures in the more ambitious efforts of a Hegel and a Spengler, namely the willful distortion of some facts combined with a massive ignorance of most of the rest.<sup>1</sup>

In the beginning science, poetry, religion and philosophy were indistinguishable, not unlike the fundamental forces of nature unified until successive breakage of symmetries. The beginnings are hidden in misty pre-history although possibly provoked by an evo-

---

<sup>1</sup> A censure no doubt equally applicable to the present essay as well.

lutionary flash. Russell starts traditionally with the old Greeks. Thales, Anaximander, Anaximenes all of the Milesian school, those are well-known to any educated reader. Even at that early time the notion of deductive science, i.e. mathematics, was clearly introduced and understood, as well as the impetus to form daring and highly imaginative speculative hypothesis<sup>2</sup>. One may claim that those two aspects of the human mind form the basis of his success in his quest for knowledge. The early philosophers were concerned with knowledge as yet unclassified as to philosophical, religious or scientific aspects, and often expressed through poetry. What was matter made of, where was the Earth? There is no need to concern ourselves with the details of their speculations, suffices it to mention Anaximander placing the earth in the void, arguing that there was no need for it to be supported, because all directions being the equivalent by symmetry, there would be no one preferred along which to fall.<sup>3</sup> This is indeed a beautiful example of the power of thought to transcend the limitations of common sense and experience. A source of mental intoxication liable to overwhelm even the strongest mind.

With Plato one may say that philosophy was fully formed. He certainly set the agenda, ever since Plato, in addition to epistemology, ethics and political philosophy have belonged to the tradition of Western Philosophy. His ethics may be primitive, and his political theories outdated, not to say offensive<sup>4</sup>, but his major philosophical contribution is the theory of forms. This can of course be taken very literally, and then it quickly degenerates into silly mysticism, it can be taken technically and then it becomes a question of universals pertaining to the meaning and use of language as well as forming the impetus of modern Cantorian set-theory<sup>5</sup>. Its true significance it only acquires when taken poetically and metaphorically. Science becomes only possible when we are willing to go beyond the mere appearances and look for underlying principles.<sup>6</sup> Plato being an ancient had very little empirical knowledge, be it of mathematics or science. His speculations as to the latter have only historical interest, but his appreciation of mathematics (often attributed to Pythagorean influences), had profound implications. One of the problems he set was to give a simple mathematical explanation of the erratic movements of the planets; Russell makes fun of him as the final explanation involved ellipses not circles. But is this not missing the point? What could be a more beautiful illustration of a simple principle

---

<sup>2</sup> The latter aspect is very much emphasized with admiration by Popper in one of his essays on the Pre-socratic philosophers.

<sup>3</sup> The notion of support naturally leads to an infinite regress, so often encountered by thought in the most varied of circumstances.

<sup>4</sup> Plato is a very ironic writer, incidentally one of the reasons for his high regard among people who pride themselves on being clever. and it is not clear to what extent the whole exercise of 'the Republic' and related dialogues were not done tongue in cheek. Whether the case or not, it is anyway of marginal interest.

<sup>5</sup> Plato may have been a philosophers God, but he was also of flesh and blood, suffering from usual human confusions. In particular he got himself into a muddle when the form of goodness was considered as an example of goodness. I.e. a confusion of categories, which he addressed in a later dialogue.

<sup>6</sup> Whether those revealed principles are real features of the universe or just convenient fictions of the human mind provides the watershed between Platonists and Post-Modernists of the modern age. Of course the dispute is not fixed for all at this level, there is always another 'higher' level to take it to.

underlying a confusing appearance, than Newtons law of attraction? Another problem, that of constructing a dialectic to fill up the gap of the deductive method based as it is on the assumptions of self-evident truths, was interpreted by Russell and some of his predecessors, as the challenge to base mathematics on logic. Russells attempts at this constituted his professional engagement with philosophy and as such turned out to be one of those interesting failures of which its history is littered.

Aristotle was a disciple of Plato. As such he both needed to emulate him as well as oppose him. Where Plato was lofty, Aristotle was down to earth. His interests were more eclectic, he was practical and technical, and had no aristocratic contempt for empiricism and the world of the senses. While Plato was a philosopher by temperament, Aristotle was a scientist, although he was not necessarily aware of the distinction. Consequently he interpreted Plato and challenged him as to details. His synthesis was thus both an improvement as well as a vulgarization. More than Plato he lends himself to instruction and commentary. Thus in the history of Western Philosophy his influence has been more direct than that of Plato, but not as pervasive. Russell treats him at length, and cannot but remark that his ethical theory smacks of smugness and trite observations, the most shocking feature to us moderns, being his taking of granted of social hierarchy, in particular the notion that slaves were more or less on the level of domestic animals. This certainly gives us a window into the mindset of the ancient Greeks, systematically confirmed by many other sources. Truly a gulf separates us from the ancient world, at least as far as the conventions of political correctness go. One interesting question to ask is whether the idea of the equality of men was a result of Christianity. Russell does not pose the question head on, but certainly suggests that it can be put.

Plato and Aristotle do not encompass all of Greek intellectual thought. There were other speculators in the tradition of the Milesian philosophers, one thinks in particular of the materialism of Democritus, and there were certainly mathematicians, such as Archimedes, whose individual achievements may well be thought as more formidable than any tangible products from the mind of either philosopher. But when it comes to philosophy the latter ages produced nothing comparable in scope. The Stoics and the Epicureans turned away from the true sources of philosophy pertaining to knowledge<sup>7</sup>, and instead diverted it to the practical question of how to live a 'good' life in the sense of the modern usage of taking a philosophical attitudes. Of the Stoics Russell is greatly critical finding it grossly egotistical.<sup>8</sup> Then of course in Hellenic times there were radical skeptics. Skepticism is a fragment of philosophy, by itself intellectually barren, and also not really a feature in the historical development of philosophy. It is more in the nature of a temperament, spontaneously arising in individuals throughout the ages, independently of previous instruction. It became historically interesting only to the extent significant philosophers are obsessed by it. Hellenic philosophy had one last flourishing, namely the

---

<sup>7</sup> This is of course not exactly true, the Stoics were interested in the formalization of logic, and certainly knew about truth-tables close to two thousand years before Wittgenstein, just as those were implicit in Aristotle; although they had not yet our modern notion of an implication, in the sense that a falsehood implies everything. Still this is but a detail, and not fundamental in any way to their main concerns.

<sup>8</sup> Elsewhere Russell has taken the position that the only proper case for a stoical attitude refers to your own personal death.

revival of Platonism under Plotonius, known as Neo-platonism. This was a simplification of Platonism, focusing on its religious overtones, with a more literal interpretation of the world of forms and the immortality of the soul than Plato might have been willing to sanction<sup>9</sup> Russell writes approvingly of Plotonius and asks why Neo-Platonism did not get a more general following, as a religion it is congenial to him. The answer he provides is that philosophy is simply too difficult, appreciated only by the few. The masses need something more palatable and palpable, which leads him into investigating the historical emergence of Christianity and its profound influence on human thought, not only on that of the uneducated.

This is a very interesting question, and one suspects that Russell for the first time became involved in it while writing this book. This might explain the bloated middle part of his historical treatise, in which he in great detail reports on what seems to have been his recent reading. The tenets of Christian faith have fettered the minds until the end of the 19th century, when it became acceptable if still somewhat shocking to profess yourself an atheist<sup>10</sup>. Much of the popular success of Russell, according to his at times maliciously critical biographer Monk, is due to the fact that he gave the general public gentle instruction in how to divest themselves of conventional faith. The most effective way of so doing is not to confront it head-on and challenge its foundations. This only leads to a polarization and a further confirmation in those who are being attacked. By showing how Christianity emerged as one sect among many others, and to explain its success in psychological and social terms, as just one aspect of human history among other aspects of human inventions, it becomes humanized and cut down to size instead of being presented as a metaphysical alternative exalted by opposition. The study of religious history is a classical subject, and Russell is hardly the prime authority on the subject. Thus one should take his conclusions and explanations with a grain of salt. However, as suggested initially, this is not really a drawback as long as one is aware of it. What Russell does, if at all, is to inspire the reader to pursue those questions elsewhere, having convinced him that they are of wider interest than their intrinsic. In fact that they are more interesting to the irreligious than to the religious. Christianity is the blend of many things, in the vision of Russell parts of it comes from Asia, more precisely Persia, attaching itself to the monotheism of the Jews (who handily provided a ready-made Scripture) and absorbing important features of Platonism as interpreted by Plotonius.<sup>11</sup> The result is a potent brew, which has something for everybody, the saint, the intellectual and the simple man, and which develops through a shrewd mixture of dogmatism and pragmatism. Paganism is seamlessly absorbed whenever convenient and advantageous and competing interpretations are being

---

<sup>9</sup> The literal belief in the immortality of the soul must embarrass any modern Platonist. A more congenial interpretation is that intellect is immortal, and that we all partake of a common human intellect, through our rational sense. Our personal soul on the other hand is just a manifestation of this intellect, and will not survive the bodily extinction.

<sup>10</sup> Clearly most of the scientists of the 19th century professed traditional Christian pieties, which in no way interfered with their work. In fact many of the advances in geology and natural history earlier in that century were effected by ministers of the church, a fact that on closer thought is hardly surprising

<sup>11</sup> Platonism itself had religious underpinnings, Russell is particularly fond of referring to the Orphic sects.

extinguished as heretical, a necessary step for survival and expansion. And not only that, from being a persecuted creed it eventually acquires political power, and as the Roman Empire disintegrates, it turns into a Church, a supra-national institution. The process is indeed fascinating, the reconciliation between the spiritual and the secular remarkable and filled with contradictions. The classical Roman world declined due to a combination of external pressures (the invasions of barbaric tribes) and internal inconsistencies. The emerging Church both repudiated the classical heritage as well as preserved it. The so called Dark Ages was both a radical break with the past as well as a continuation with other means. The history is indeed fascinating, in some sense even more fascinating than modern history, and it is no wonder that Russell digresses on it to the extent of losing track of the real theme of his book.

A short sketch would not be out of place. The church developed and its eventual features which may be seen as canonical not to say God given in retrospect, were in a rather fluid state at its conception. The notion of a priesthood with a privileged access, quite common in ancient religions, was not a foregone conclusion initially, in particular celibacy of its members was a later addition. The emergence of monasteries was yet another accidental aspect of the Church, which would turn out to have many fortunate consequences<sup>12</sup>. The crucial political backdrop to the emergence of the Catholic Church was the splitting of the Mediterranean into three. First there was the division into the Western and Eastern Church that antedated the split of the Roman Empire and was never really that decisive in the sense that the one condemned the other for heresy<sup>13</sup>. The Eastern Orthodox Church with a common heritage provides an interesting second, or rather parallel run of history. The similarities as well as the differences are fascinating, but it is hardly the occasion to delve into that deeper<sup>14</sup>. Secondly and more significantly there was the spectacular rise of Islam, which at one time threatened to overrun the whole of Christendom.<sup>15</sup> On Islam, Russell has not much to say<sup>16</sup>, except referring to its cultural

---

<sup>12</sup> The institutions of universities may be seen as inspired by them, on the other hand there were many other more natural precedents for learning, such as the ancient traditions of Schools, that of Plato being the most notable example. But as in evolution, you take what you have.

<sup>13</sup> As usual there was a mixture. On one hand civilized councils in which both parties agreed to disagree, on the other hand in connection with the crusades Constantinople was sacked in an attempt to bring the Byzantine into the fold of the Roman Church. No doubt the sack was far more devastating than the city would experience a few centuries later in 1453 under the Turks.

<sup>14</sup> The practice of indulgences, which as will be noted elsewhere the foundation of the wealth of the Catholic Church was not as established, and hence it was not subject to the same erosion of ethical authority. It is tempting to ascribe the lack of a reformation to this. And indeed the typical Eastern Orthodox Church is far less splendid than its western counterpart (partly reflecting a less affluent society) and gives at least to the casual observer a sense of being much closer to original Christianity.

<sup>15</sup> It did not do so, but was checked, and as a result it never really regained momentum, except for a brief period a millennium later with the temporary expansion of the Osman empire.

<sup>16</sup> Islam, racked by divisions very much alive to this day, never developed the same stable and encompassing institution of the Catholic church. It has often been remarked that Islam as a religion was much more tolerant of scientific inquiry than the West, and consequently that religious bigotry hardly can be an excuse for the failure of a scientific tradition in the East.

flourishing keeping in storage, so to speak, the written documents of the Antiquities, doing the West a favor it has never really fully acknowledged.

Who are the great philosophers of the Christian persuasion. Two examples come to mind - St-Augustine and Tomas of Aquinas. Of the two the former clearly is the most fascinated and charismatic both as thinker and as a human being, and who certainly has had a profound influence on the development of Christianity. Active in the fifth century, he comes to the scene after the founding fathers and also after that the Christian Church has been established in the Roman Empire. He led a dissolute youth, in particular not indifferent to sensual passion. Sound normal instincts he later came to repudiate, leading to the Christian obsession with sin, so deep and pervasive that only the grace of God can expiate it. And the grace of God is erratic, at least as far as mere human understanding goes. As everyone is worthy of damnation, this holds in particular for those who get damned and hence they are not entitled to protest just because others are going to be spared. The notion that you cannot transcend your own shortcomings presents an irresistible business proposition on which the wealth of the Catholic Church would be founded based as it was on indulgences. As a pure thinker Russell thinks fairly high of St-Augustine, noting that he anticipated the radical doubt of Descartes and started his ascent from ignorance from the very same rock bottom of the indubitable fact of his own existence. St-Augustine also had an argument for eternal truths based on formal logic<sup>17</sup>. Finally St-Augustine was very much taken by Plato and Neo-Platonism in particular. Aquinas on the other hand based himself on Aristotle instead, maybe because at his time the writings of Aristotle were much more known and extant (and as noted above, more congenial to commentary). Russell thinks this a pity, Plato is temperamentally more religious than Aristotle and would have been more congenial in a synthesis. The remarkable thing that Aquinas achieved was to produce a synthesis which was accepted by the Church and to this day remains the accepted one in the Catholic Church. The basic guiding philosophy was to try and reconcile the demands of reason with the articles of faith, showing that there were no contradiction between them. Sometimes they reinforced each other, but faith would reach vistas inaccessible to reasoning alone. In this case proof of veracity had to be suspended and revelation had to be accepted as unquestioned authority<sup>18</sup> In particular Aquinas was

---

<sup>17</sup> A simplified version is to be found in Bolzano. Consider the statement 'there are no truths'. If this statement is true, than there is at least one truth, namely the statement itself, which hence must be false. Thus the truth of the statement would imply its falsity, hence it has to be false, thus the negation must be true, namely that there are truths (if only the assertion of such). The similarity to the Russell paradox must be obvious to the reader. The hidden assumption is that we are referring to both a formal truth and a real truth, one concerning the discourse itself and the other the discourse on the discourse. Actually in the case of the Christian sage, an element of time is introduced to vouchsafe against merely temporary truths and show the existence of eternal ones. We might laugh at it, yet the arguments we inveigh against the frivolous Post-Modernists who claim that there are no truths just social constructions and conventions are exactly of the same nature.

<sup>18</sup> One may compare this with modern science, where empirical investigation maybe likened to the study of scripture. However, in modern science the strains of rational thinking and empirical testing are intimately intertwined, one not being able to exist without the other, as contrasted between the duality of reason and revelation characterizing orthodox theology.

concerned with proofs of Gods existence. A variety of those exist the most elegant due to Anselm and referred to as the ontological proof. The argument is simply in its most succinct formulation that God is the most perfect being and existence being an attribute of perfectness its existence is assured. Or in the form given by the medieval scholastics. Imagine the most perfect being conceivable by human thought. If to this concept existence would be added, it surely would be even more perfect. Hence it exists. The argument is hardly convincing, but as Russell notes it is quite not so easy to pin down what is wrong with it.<sup>19</sup> We sense instinctively that such a momentous question cannot be settled within the narrow confines of formal logic (analytic reasoning), but when we are asked to pinpoint its fallacy we are tacitly asked to do so within that formal structure itself. Russell points out that Anselm really did philosophy a favor by stating the argument in such a stark way. This males for honesty, the same type of argument obfuscated through specious sophistication might not be as easily spotted as being less than credible. Aquinas was not particular enamored by this particular proof, but there were others stemming from Aristotle, noteworthy that of the first mover, which met with more favor. The claim that any series must have a first member is contradicted by the negative integers, although infinite regress is shunned in all logical thinking. More interestingly though is what kind of God is conjured. Clearly it must be a rather abstract kind of God, far from the charismatic larger than life anthropomorphic God we encounter in the Old Testament; namely a God of no historical provenance, as accessible to the pagan Aristotle as to a believing Christian. What can we say about him beyond that he is omniscient and omnipotent? But the notion of omnipotency is self-contradictory<sup>20</sup>, so the scholastic philosopher became fascinated by what God could not do. He could not create another God, he could not change the past, and he could not bend the laws of logic, to give some examples. Clever as Aquinas may have been, and Russell finds no reason to disparage his achievement as a synthesizer, he nevertheless sinned against the most fundamental of all rules of philosophical and scientific inquiry, namely to keep an open mind, to allow the arguments to lead where they want, even if they lead you into deplorable territory, and not to have your conclusions fixed beforehand. But this is exactly what Aquinas is ultimately doing. He knows what he wants in the end, thus he engages not in a true inquiry but in special pleading, and his professed arguments run the risk of becoming mere ornaments<sup>21</sup>. The big question is

---

<sup>19</sup> Kant claimed that he had demolished it by pointing out that existence is not an attribute, unlike say color, extension, etc. This argument does not seem very convincing. Is truth a legal attribute of a sentence, or only those that pertain to its formal structure such as the language in which it is articulated, its number of words, the structure of its syntactical construction? Less technically one may also simply ask whether there should exist a most perfect concept, as there is e.g. no largest number, and even so by adding existence does it necessarily improve matters. (cf. most perfect spouse).

<sup>20</sup> cf the child Einstein asking whether God could create a stone too heavy for him to lift

<sup>21</sup> This abuse of thinking and science is very much with us also in the 21st century, too often politically correct notions, such as to be found in feminism and gender studies say (and formerly in white racial superiority), are asked to get scientific blessings as well. That the issue is a sensitive one, is illustrated by the fact that a truly scientific study of say Nazism, cannot have the object of proving its authors to be more profoundly critical of it than any other previous ones if it is to remain a scientific study. Maybe there is no one capable of undertaking such an ambition, and maybe there should be none.

whether this could be applied to all scholastic thinkers? Were they confined by certain dogmas that they were not allowed to question? Heresy was common, but heresy concerned different interpretations, not the denial of God. But to what extent did the idea of God restrict the natural curiosity of man and his freedom to speculate? If God is a sufficiently abstract idea, shorn of anthropomorphic overtones, does it have any significant influence at all? The lip service made to God persisted far into modern times. Descartes professed to believe in God, so did Spinoza, Leibniz and Locke and almost any philosopher you care to mention until the 19th century, with the exception of Hume. How come this held such a firm hold on the imagination of man, when other precepts of Christian thinking did not. The disregard of human charity and compassion and the admonishment to turn the other cheek were systematically violated throughout the Catholic centuries. Maybe as man was steeped in sin anyway, you could as well enjoy it? One would think that thoughts would be harder to control than action. On the other hand, habits of thought are deeply ingrained and social pressure on compliance in thoughts and opinions more coercive than one is ordinarily aware of. The liberation from religious habits and dogmas has been a long process, and perhaps not always a happy one. From our vantage point we tend to underestimate the power of religion, to think that it is incompatible with sophistication, at least philosophical, and that the men of the Middle Ages must have been simpletons. This is a notion Russell is set to demolish, without questioning the basic limitations under which thinking nevertheless was laboring. Finally as a further illustration of the sophistication of medieval thinkers, Russell brings up some Franciscan monks such as Occam and Oreste who contributed significantly in retrospect (Occams razor and the pre-calculus of Oreste along with his pre-copernican speculations) but who were born in the wrong period to have any influence.

According to Russell the authority of the Church was eroded before there was science to replace it. The centuries of the Renaissance were indeed heady times, according to Russell, when mans curiosity to explore, to trade, to war, and simply to enjoy himself engaging in art and speculation were given free reins<sup>22</sup>. As the first modern philosopher Russell choses Descartes. Descartes famous doubt was of course not unprecedented, but where he differs from his predecessors is the systematic use he puts it to. Power of thought, so vocationally congenial to a philosopher, plays a central role; and the part played by pure thinking, i.e. deductive exploration has of course never been replaced by induction in empirical science, only getting more grist for its mill. However, Descartes focus on the conscious thinker, has put too much subjectivism into his philosophy and those who have been inspired by him, according to Russell. Descartes only lifts himself out of solipsism (just as Berkeley) by conjuring a God. To Descartes the truth of an idea is to be judged by its clearness and persuasiveness, inevitable by a philosophy centered on thought. Such notions are clearly subjective, and brings to mind the notion of Plato that learning is

---

<sup>22</sup> Indeed the Italian city states could be profitably compared with the republics of the Greek. A political diversity, not necessarily democratic, making for a freedom of authority. Once again an instance of history repeating itself under similar circumstances. Also, materially and technologically, the world of the Italian renaissance was not that different from that of the Greek classical era. Certainly Plato would have felt more at home in the court of the Medicis, than say at a modern conservative think-tank in the America of Bush.



a form of remembering, because after all is this not our instinctual reaction to a piece of persuasive deductive reasoning, that we recognize it and wonder how we could ever not have thought of it. Descartes was modern in his ambition to set up a method of philosophizing, a kind of analogue to his invention of Cartesian coordinates enabling a systematic approach without resources to great originality (in modern jargon, duplicable in different individuals, and thus making education feasible). In retrospect his influence is occasionally censured because of it having encouraged a split between natural science and the humanities<sup>23</sup>. Descartes as a natural scientist is of course overshadowed by Newton, and his dualism between mind and body has been a source of embarrassment among philosopher ever since. The reconciliation of the two aspects is almost as evasive as it was in Descartes time, but the distinction is nowadays in principle assumed to be spurious. The explanation by Descartes that there are two parallel universes which are synchronized but non-interrelating, verges on the desperate<sup>24</sup>.

In the spirit of Descartes one should also include Spinoza and Leibniz, both designing metaphysical systems, based on necessary deduction. One obvious consequence of necessary deduction is necessary causality, and Spinoza does envision a deterministic universe, which in its entirety is fathomed only by God. Determinism of course is incompatible with free-will and hence empties the notion of sin of its true spirit. According to Spinoza the universe is necessarily good, even if only so in the all-encompassing vision of God. Leibniz holds a similar view and has been ridiculed for his claim that our universe is the best of all possible ones. His theory of monads, single entities each with a soul, mutually isolated, each one mirroring the entire universe, is also the result of unchecked deduction, and as such merely phantastic. Russell assures the reader that Leibniz is indeed far more interesting in his unpublished work, than in his published, where he allows his diplomatic tact and caution get the better of his intellectual daring. While Russell knows the actors of his work only second-hand, Leibniz is the one exception, on which he has done an independent study. He regrets that Leibniz did not go public, his discoveries of formal logic were two hundred ahead of its time, and clearly his status as a philosopher and scientist would have been even greater. Unfortunately Russell is not at all explicit on what progress Leibniz achieved, maybe realizing that relations are as important as simple predicates? Maybe Russell felt hampered by writing a popular treatise, on the other hand his enthusiasm to lecture and illuminate the reader surely ought to have risen to the occasion<sup>25</sup>.

Continental thinkers were metaphysical in the 17th century, English were empirical, starting with Locke, who was successively refined by Berkeley and Hume with the latter finally exhibiting, one would suspect unintentionally, the limits of the empiricist approach. While the deductive spirit formed pyramids precariously balanced on their vertices, the humbler approach by the British empiricists turned the pyramid firmly on its basis. Instead of relying on one single insight and going on from there, they tended to amass many supporting ones, working out the consequences, and drawing humble conclusions. Locke

---

<sup>23</sup> One should cf Collingwood, especially in his 'The Idea of History'

<sup>24</sup> yet of course its refutation is not as obvious

<sup>25</sup> He does mention Leibniz vision of a formal calculus that would allow men to simply compute whenever there were differences of opinions and come to conclusions amiably. This clearly anticipates the ambitions of formalizations that have dominated much of 20th century philosophy.

is in a sense the most influential, if the least profound. Known for his metaphor of the blank slate, he rejected the idea of innate ideas, claiming that all our ideas are based on experience. His theories were not free from contradictions, but he always abstained from pursuing them to the bitter end, allowing his common sense to stop short of the ultimate conclusion. For most men this shows admirable soundness of judgement, but a logician regrets his constraint and lack of ruthless intellectual honesty. Berkeley carried his reasoning further, leading to a rejection of the material world; instead the world which we seem to perceive is a creation of our minds. This is of course known as the doctrine of idealism, which incredible as it may seem at first, makes indeed a disturbing amount of sense. How minds can be in communication with each other, and why his theory does not lead to undiluted solipsism, is not clear. As remarked before Berkeley invoked God as the supreme mind that keeps the illusion of a material world consistent. Berkeley, temperamentally a gregarious fellow certainly could not take his philosophy literally in his daily life, and indeed his thinking combined with his instincts, lead to a kind of proof of the Deity, at least accessible and convincing to his own mind. With Hume skepticism was carried to its logical conclusion. He denied everything, even the notion of self-hood, without which not even solipsism makes sense. There is nothing but a bundle of perceptions, each succeeding upon the other with incredible speed<sup>26</sup>. In particular there is no rhyme nor reason to those successions, and hence Hume is known mainly for his rejection of induction and the denial of causality. And without induction how are we ever able to gain knowledge from experience? The inevitable conclusion is that the orderliness of the world is a basic assumption we make on it, a kind of innate idea if you want, and not something we can learn from experience. Hume himself, like Berkeley, refused to take his speculations seriously in the mundane world of practical contingencies, and when Hume wrote on other subjects, his philosophical skepticism was kept at bay. As Russell notes, no philosophy has ever been both credible and internally self-consistent. When there is emphasis on the latter, credibility inevitably suffers; and conversely reasonable philosophies are bound to be logically unsatisfying. And even with Hume for all his endeavors to carry his thought to the bitter end, Russell gleefully finds inconsistencies. Is not his rejection of induction based on induction? How can we assume that our expectations always are going to run the risk of being denied? How do we know that our expectations will stay constant? But of course this remarks may be made tongue in cheek. After all any skeptical account is bound to be the subject of its own medicine.

The empiricists along with the spectacular success of Newtons celestial mechanics made quite an impression among the intellectuals of France. One may without too much exaggeration claim that it made the way for the Enlightenment, a movement primarily associated with France. In school we all learn about the philosophical trio - Voltaire, Montesquieu and Rousseau as epitomizing the movement. Now Voltaire was not too much of a philosopher, but he was of course a brilliant satirist and propagandizer, the like of whom the world has seen but rarely afterwards. Montesquieu is hardly noted for any brilliancy or depth, but of course his political influence was undeniable, his thesis of checks and balances, no doubt borrowed (if admittedly somewhat refined and clarified) from Hobbes and others, became part of the American constitution. With Rousseau it is different. Russell

---

<sup>26</sup> This he maintained somewhat sadly and with exasperation one presumes

writes that after him philosophy never became the same again, and he does not mean this as a compliment. On the contrary he credits Rousseau from sowing dissension within the ranks of philosophers, before him there was a certain unity to all philosophical thought, after him not. He paved the way for charlatans. In fact with Rousseau there was a reaction against the enlightenment, a reaction known as romanticism and basically taken up by Germans. Russell sees a splitting of the liberal tradition (that started with the British empiricists) in a hard and a soft line. The hard line moves via Kant to the British utilitarians, (Bentham and the two busy-bodies Mill, father and son) via Marx to Stalin. The soft line involves Rousseau, who substituted the erratic dictates of the heart for the measured fruits of reason (which up to then had been the tacit approach by all serious philosophers), via the German romantics, leading to Schopenhauer, Nietzsche and Hitler (Russell does not even mention Heidegger, probably below contempt<sup>27</sup>). Even Russell admits that this is a bit too crude, but obviously it has become a darling of his, and he refers to its possible 'geographical' use. Most professional philosophers would reject it as pointlessly superficial.

You cannot avoid Kant, he being if any the philosophers philosopher (with Plato being their deity). One cannot but admire the earnestness of the fellow, and Russell treats him respectfully. At the heart of Kant is the table to be filled in, synthetic versus analytic on one hand, *a priori* and *a posteriori* on the other. Not all the slots can be meaningfully filled, and Kant is concerned with the synthetic *a priori*. This is indeed a classical philosophical problem, and Kant deserves the credit, both for recognizing as an important problem and giving it his careful attention. Synthetic statements are clearly more interesting than analytic, the latter being more or less tautological, and as such innate. But are there innate synthetic judgments? If arithmetic is analytic, maybe geometry is synthetic? Kant has incurred much undeserved ridicule for claiming that euclidean geometry is innate in us, that in fact we conceive space in euclidean terms being part of the very categories with which we think<sup>28</sup>. The faith in induction, i.e. of an orderly universe, is something we have learned from Hume, that we cannot learn from experience, but is something with which we make up expectations<sup>29</sup>. The notion of innate mental abilities has achieved a new significance with evolution. It is often remarked that our language capabilities are innate, hardwired into our minds, and not the result of mere imitation, as a Locke would

---

<sup>27</sup> The occasion to show such contempt by omission does not even present itself as Russell wisely refrains from mention himself or any of his illustrious contemporaries

<sup>28</sup> The most natural and direct geometrical perception we make is that of spherical geometry, looked from within and not from without. Although we find it next to impossible to imagine a finite space without a boundary, we have no problems getting accustomed to a finite space of (visual) directions as being unbounded and there being nothing outside. Euclidean geometry involves extending the line of vision indefinitely, why this is so natural is an interesting question.

<sup>29</sup> Kant explicitly declared his indebtedness to Hume from having awakened him from his dogmatic slumber. Maybe the fact of induction inspired him to state the categories with which we are endowed in the organization of our thinking? But Kant was apparently not familiar with all of Humes publications, maybe even not his most important treatise published in his youth with disappointingly scant success? Russell also remarks sarcastically that Hume may have woken him up, but that he subsequently designed his own sophoric potion to allow him to continue his slumber unaffected.

have us understand<sup>30</sup>. Finally as to Kants ethics, it is not as interesting as his criticism of pure reason. It is perfectly reasonable, and thus hardly original. He tries to set up some basic principles of conduct, more or less indistinguishable from those of Christian teaching, of which he must have been deeply influenced. Consequently we find with Kant no real contradiction between his ethical theories and his private conduct, which seems to have been impeccable.

With the Romantics philosophy entered a new path, and not necessarily a more developed one. The central figure of 19th century philosophy is Hegel, and his dominance has later been bitterly regretted. Popper does not mince his word denouncing him as an unmitigated disaster and setting back philosophical progress by a century. Russell is surprisingly gentle in the beginning of his account, seemingly acknowledging his status as a great philosopher and with even for a philosopher an impenetrable prose, whose subtleties do not easily yield themselves even to the most exacting of study<sup>31</sup>. Yet in the end he remarks that unlike other philosophers who let their logic lead them into territory which they might find deplorable, Hegel departs from his logic to pursue criminal ends. In what sense his aims are to be considered criminal Russell does not disclose, maybe he refers to his adulation of the State. Hegel is the last grand metaphysician, who erects a system more elaborate than anyone has seen before. It is about the world spirit manifesting itself through history and reaching greater and greater heights. Dialectic is a key feature, any thesis invariably bringing forth its anti-thesis, the contradiction to be resolved by a synthesis, which effects a step upwards. Why is this necessary? Russell remarks sarcastically that the world spirit is in fact engaged in studying Hegel. Another feature of his theory is the emergence of super-structures, the State is bigger than the sum of its parts (i.e. such in particular as the human individuals which make it up). With such a grand structure it becomes somewhat anti-climactic that the pinnacle of development is achieved by the Prussian state of all institutions<sup>32</sup>. Indeed Hegel is often caricatured as a prophet of the Prussian state, exalting the Prussian civil servant.

Now why did Hegel become so popular? One elitist answer is to be found in proclaiming him as being essentially a charlatan. Up to the 19th century the writings on philosophy constituted but a thin veneer, involving very few peoples, writing books read only by the intermittent<sup>33</sup>. After the French revolution and the upheavals caused by the Napoleonic wars education became somewhat of a mass-movement (although a very modest one compared to today). While before there had not been any professional philosophers, only men

---

<sup>30</sup> Chomsky famously has postulated a universal grammar, i.e. giving the structure that underlies all languages, His efforts to make this explicit have not been successful, maybe because unlike most linguistics he seems not interested in the idiosyncrasies of individual languages, and he has been reported to renounce many of his original claims. This does of course have no bearing on the general assumption, only Chomskys inability to provide an explication.

<sup>31</sup> William James disparagingly speaks about the expectation of always finding meaning in well-formed sentences, noting that some people extend that ambition even to the writings of Hegel.

<sup>32</sup> Perhaps not quite, in all fairness, Hegel looked upon the America as the new stage, an no doubt he would not have been adverse to extra-planetary developments in a distant future.

<sup>33</sup> However, much of the intellectual discussion was carried on by the e-mail of the time, involving 'chat groups'.

of leisure and esoteric tastes and interests, nor any students of philosophy; with the beginning of the 19th century philosophers became employees of academic institutions, teaching the young for instruction and remuneration (not unlike the old sophist tradition?). Hegel is seductive, he appeals to the idealistic streak in any young sensitive man (and woman?), and in an age on the threshold of modernity and the abolishment of superstition, he provides a secular alternative to religion.

One man certainly seduced by Hegel was the young Marx. On the other hand Hegel was probably the only thing available to him in terms of philosophy. Marx, like most of his contemporaries, was deeply influenced by Hegel, maybe not in details, (Marx did boast of having put Hegel on his head), but in the general attitude towards philosophy, that is of taking the large view, of the systematic pursuit based on erudition. Hegels ambition had the trappings of science, whose emergence at that time became even more noticeable as finally the fruits of its pursuits were being made tangible as technological advances deeply affecting the lives also of so called ordinary people. The 19th century was indeed the century of industrialism, and political activism. The feudal order was being dismantled, partly as an effect of the military adventures of Napoleon, exporting the French Revolution. It saw the rise of nationalism as well as the emerging dreams of internationalism<sup>34</sup>. Marx is peculiar. He is the only philosopher who is not mainly judged as a philosopher. How would we have judged him, had there been no Marxism to inspire a successful Communist movement? If ever the face of any philosopher has become an icon it is that of Marx. Probably far more known and studied than any other philosopher. As a theoretical philosopher he is second-rate and non-original, at least compared to the very best. It is not hard to find faults and glaring mistakes in his philosophy when it is unsentimentally scrutinized. His ideas of the inherent value of labor, and how that ought to determine price, a theory supposedly lifted from Ricardo, can be shown to be a piece of sentimentalism. There is nothing intrinsic to prices, they are just an outcome of circumstances. (And of course this materialistic fact might have incensed the idealistic Marx, as it still does to many of us independently of political sentiments.) No Marx was foremost a prophet and a visionary, who according to Popper revived a flagging smug Christianity, taking into account the realities of industrialism and unchecked capitalism. Prophets and visionary have, more or less by definition, far more of an appeal than mere philosophers. People who are set to change the world, not just to interpret it. People who revive the moral element in philosophizing. Now Marx cannot be separated from his vision and the tragic forms in which it manifested itself in the succeeding century.

Schopenhauer is given short shrift. His only possibly contribution to philosophy, according to Russell, was that he brought in non-western elements. Pessimism is just a lazy front to absolve yourself of responsibility for the world, and he has little regard for the individual Schopenhauer, a quarrelsome fellow, for whom his system was just a theoretical construction with little implication on his own personal life (except of course the license for moral laziness, just noted). But this is of course the case with most philosophers. He makes little of Schopenhauers bitter opposition to Hegel, but dismisses it as yet another manifestation of pathetic vanity (just imagine scheduling his lectures on the same times

---

<sup>34</sup> The young Hegel hero-worshipped Napoleon and rejoiced in his triumph at Jena, which crushed the Prussian Nation

as Hegels!), but he admits though that Schopenhauer must be the patron philosopher of artists, whose willingness to be taken in is tacitly deplored by the author.

When it comes to Nietzsche, his account of him shocked me as a young man when I first dipped into the book. In fact I was so disgusted by Russells frivolous rejection of him as a pathetic professor who dreamed about being a Spartan warrior, that I did not open the book for years afterwards. A student of Nietzsche will find nothing valuable in the portrait, as little as a corresponding student of Schopenhauer will benefit from that corresponding chapter. But his history of philosophy is not written for the specialist but the interested public. Russell admits that Nietzsche is a far more intelligent and profound a philosopher than Schopenhauer, and that his philosophy makes up a more or less consistent whole that can only be rejected from the outside and not made to collapse through internal flaws. Atheism is one thing, quite another thing to turn the ethics of Christianity on its head. This is how I first encountered Nietzsche as still a boy. His aggressive atheism frightened me at the time, later I was fascinated by his tragic fate, so fitting to such arrogance. The arrogance of Nietzsche, of concentrating on a superior elite, does of course go against the grain of Christianity; on the other hand what he does openly and honestly is in fact not too different from what Russell does slyly. There are differences between people, especially as to intellectual power and the sophistication of intellectual taste. Russell surely considers himself belonging to an elite who should deserve some special treatment and consideration, but of course such appeals should be tacit and not made too desperately.

Russell may be faulted for his unsympathetic treatments of Hegel, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, but at times his debunking serves a purpose, a case in point is Bergson. Bergson was at the turn of the century a very influential philosopher. If my notion of philosophy as poetry be taken literally, Bergson fits the bill beautifully. His prose was poetry, aimed at persuasion through painless seduction by means of beautiful words and cadences rather than painfully effected by cogent arguments. Russell is charmed, as were the many, but unlike the many Russell refuses to be taken in<sup>35</sup> Bergson had an exalted idea of time, contrasting the living time to the dead time of the mathematicians. But if you dig deeper below the glittering surface of words, what do you find? Bergsons idea of the continuity has no progressed beyond that of Zeno. So much for the arrogance of the untutored. Maybe if there ever was a charlatan in philosophy Bergson was his name. Would he be found out I guess he would only shrug it off, not taking himself too seriously, unlike a Hegel or a Nietzsche.

Russell choses to conclude his account with William James and John Dewey a disciple of the former. I doubt that Russell ever met James, although opportunities ought to have arisen. Russell was almost forty when James died, and James philosophical activities blossomed late in his life. With Dewey he had personal relations, hence the politeness he shows when assuring the reader (and Dewey) that on almost all matters he and Dewey are in perfect agreement. Now Dewey is a very reasonable man holding reasonable opinions, and by definition the intersections of reasonable opinions are very large (almost dense in mathematical jargon), so this is hardly surprising. What is of most interest is where reasonable people differ. Russell attacks the pragmatism proposed by the two, the fact

---

<sup>35</sup> This did not apply to Russells collaborator - Whitehead, nor to William James, and other intellectuals, especially artists, whose modern patron he no doubt strived to become.

that there is not only not any absolute standards of truth, but that we should instead identify truth with what is good for us. Think positively and it will become true, the ever optimistic yankee James exhorts. As with all relativization of truth it does not hold up to closer logical scrutiny (and is in fact never meant too), so Russell demolition is predictable. Russell is no believer, but with the believer he shares the sanctity of truth. The idea to believe in God because it might be good for you, fills the saint and the atheist alike with revulsion. (Atheists take religion very seriously, that is why they do not believe in it). However, both James and Dewey are men of straw as far as serious philosophy is concerned (Russell gives credit to James for his attempts to dismantle the traditional dichotomy between mind and matter, just calling both 'stuff'). Peirce himself would be a worthier opponent, and all modern science is based on some level of pragmatism (cf Poppers falsifiability criterion) something Russell has fully acknowledged elsewhere in his historical treatise.

Russell concludes his book with a chapter on recent advances in the formal and the mathematical domain. He refers to Cantor without going into any depth (thus showing to the expert the necessary superficiality of his ambition). He states that the truths of mathematics are of the same nature as that there are three feet to a yard. Russell is famous for having declared that mathematics is but a sequence of tautologies. This is indeed a materialistic point of view. Did he really believe it? If so his interest and aptitude for mathematics never rose above the purely epistemological level. It is often argued that deduction never gives you any new knowledge, that it is all just formal and tautological. This is of course a very superficial view characteristic of people who have never delved into mathematics, only having a passing acquaintance with some simple deductive reasoning. There is no real difference between empirical reasoning and extended so called deductive. As noted above modern empirical science is intertwined with deductive reasoning, one demanding the other. In mathematics there is no mechanical method of finding the truth, no algorithm to churn (although there are of course methods to be sought for limited quests, the development and invention of the methods being part and parcel of mathematical investigation itself<sup>36</sup>). It is a matter of forming questions and hypothesis, of, as just noted, developing tools and technology, just as in science. To say that everything is in principle known by stating the basic premisses, is no more meaningful than to say that everything is known in the universe, because it is deterministic. The discoveries in mathematics and the concepts created to make those possible is if anything as remarkable, if not practically relevant, as anything discovered in science.

July 26/28 2008 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden ulfp@chalmers.se*

---

<sup>36</sup> What is the secret of elementary euclidean geometry? The congruence theorems, leading to the game of searching for relevant triangles to compare.