

Unpopular Essays

B. Russell

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Russell can be flippant. Very flippant indeed, especially when he writes for money and tries to reach a large audience. Everything he writes in those essays is simplified, not to say vulgarized, and the professional will find more than a thing or two, to make his temper flare. Yet he writes with customary verve, and there seems to be little effort indeed involved in churning them out. Many of the titles are intriguing, such as 'Ideas that have Helped Mankind' and 'Ideas which have Harmed Mankind', although afterwards it is hard to recall what those ideas really are. One thing is clear, the majority of those essays were written when the world was threatened by nuclear annihilation, and in comparison with that, most things seem pretty petty. Russell is an advocate of a world government having a monopoly on military force. He is well aware that such a government may very well be oppressive, most governments are he concedes, but governments may improve, and even if it takes several thousand years, the scenario is preferable to the inevitable alternative. Total obliteration. In fact, he gushes somewhat sentimentally. It would not be so bad if only mankind was exterminated, if the world would be made safe for deers, squirrels and birds, but the idea of an empty ball devoid of any semblance of life circling pointlessly around the sun, does indeed bother him.

The essays are very similar, and after reading it is very hard to keep them apart. It is the same theme over and over again. The unfortunate lack of rationality, the widespread stupidity, even at the highest and most responsible levels. Sometimes he makes a good point, as when he questions why we should attribute superior virtue to the oppressed. Would that in that case not be a good reason for keeping them in their downtrodden state. He has not much good things to say about Hegel, and Marx is of course tainted by the former. He agrees with James that Hegel is pure nonsense dressed up in fancy impressive language. He is also critical of Plato, and refers approvingly to Poppers denunciation of him. Although Plato cannot be dismissed in a few lines, elsewhere he is quoted with some appreciation. He does relay some hackneyed opinion, such that the Greeks, exemplified by Aristotle, did not avail themselves of observation and experiment. The real situation is obviously much more complex, but of course the setting of a popular essay, coquettishly classified as unpopular, is not the proper place for such discussions, which cannot be but confusing to the ignorant and uneducated who craves black and white to get a proper bearing.

One essay, which stands out a little, is the one on 'Eminent Men I have known'. For one thing it is a rambling one, and Russell clearly does not know as he starts out how to organize it. There are some politically correct references to the fact that the most eminent men are the obscure ones that do not seek the public eye but do their good deeds in secret and show such innocence as to their own social advancement. Of course these qualities can also be found among those acknowledged great, such as Einstein. He does not dwell on Einstein though, and mentions in passing that William James was the most impressive

(non-living) philosopher he ever met. This is somewhat surprising, in view of the sarcastic reception he provided of James' pragmatic ideas, on the other hand he did include James in his book on Western Philosophy, a rare accolade if any. But most of the essay deals with Gladstone and Lenin. As the grandfather of Russell had been a British Prime Minister (one of seven Russell had personally known) it was not an unusual event that somebody like Gladstone would one day visit his home. The seventeen year old Russell found himself alone with him after dinner, being the only male in the household. He was terrified by the great man. which seems to have had a natural authority that could scare the wits out of anyone who came under his gaze, including Russell and his grandmother, who became so uncharacteristically meek in his presence. At the time the Gladstone's cutting remark to why such good port was served in a glass intended for claret, struck the young Russell to his quick, and still ranks as one of the most humiliating social faux-pas in his life. Russell also met Lenin in 1920, and Lenin also had many of the qualities of Gladstone, including the major one, the conviction of being in the right, of having divinity on his side. But while Gladstone was immersed in the British liberal tradition, acknowledging rules, not so much averse to bending them as to breaking them, Lenin acknowledged no rules except those that furthered his aims. As in the case of Gladstone, those aims were not personal, which of course made their commitment so much more intense. No one can be as much in love with himself as with an idea.

The collection ends with an obituary Russell wrote tongue in cheek back in 1937 intending to die after turning ninety. This was of course a rather optimistic prediction, but as it turned out not optimistic enough, he would live on for another eight years. At the end of his life he no doubt felt young and healthy and expected to become a hundred, but many are those who are foiled at the last moment, but it would not have been impossible and a triumph he would no doubt have savored.

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