ON RUSSELL'S ARGUMENT CONCERNING PHILOSOPHIC CONTEMPLATION

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Introduction

Within his classic discussion of the value of philosophy in *The Problems of Philosophy*,[1] Bertrand Russell presents the following argument against those philosophies that assimilate the universe to humankind:

> Knowledge is a form of union of Self and not-Self; 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. . . . This view [i.e., the conclusion] . . . is untrue [and] it has the effect of robbing philosophic contemplation of all that gives it value, since it fetters contemplation to Self. The true philosophic contemplation, on the contrary, finds its satisfaction in every enlargement of the not-Self, in everything that magnifies the objects contemplated, and thereby the subject contemplating. (159-60)

An ingenius argument: it is clearly directed against any of the varieties of idealism, and at the same time it is supportive of realism; but, there is more to it than this debate. Is this a sound argument? There may be several reasons why it is not, but one I have discerned in particular is worth noting because of its technical associations with which Russell was undoubtedly familiar. (Even if he wasn't, which is highly unlikely, my point still stands, especially for whoever would be inclined to use this deductive argument against idealism.) Other questions asked of the argument are: What is its context, and what does that reveal? Where did the argument come from? This is not a likely topic for Russell, so it has some

historic interest.

Analysis of the Argument

The flaw in Russell's argument lies in his understanding of "union." He asserts that knowledge is a form of *union* of Self and not-Self, and *like all union, it is impaired by dominion.* Russell's conclusion—namely, any attempt to force the universe into conformity with what we find in ourselves is futile—does not follow for the following considerations. One implication of Russell's assertion is that unions are not supposed to be so impaired—and that "impairment" is a deficiency. In ordinary English, "impair" means to make things worse or weaker, or even to damage, and not just to reduce. Negative value judgments are obviously associated with the term and they are implied in Russell's argument. But not all union is *impaired* by dominion. Where did Russell get the idea that it was? It was not entirely from mathematics. Given any two sets, *A* and *B*, a third set may be formed from the combination of their members. The union of the two sets {1, 3, 4, 5} and {2, 4, 6} is {1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6}; that is,

$$\{1, 3, 4, 5\} \cup \{2, 4, 6\} = \{1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6\}.$$

This is probably what Russell had in mind. But it is only one possible union from the sets. A union set could be the elements from either set besides the members from both sets. As Edna E. Kramer says: "No particular pattern is required in forming the union of two sets."[2]

A standard, set-theoretic definition is as follows. The *union* of the two sets, *A* and *B*, is the set of all elements that are in the set *A*, or in the set *B*, or in both sets *A* and *B;* or, formally,

Definition. $A \cup B = \{x \mid x \in A \quad \text{v} \quad x \in B\}.$

This definition usually follows a discussion of equal sets, since a union of two sets may be an identical set.[3] But this is not

always the case: if we unite two sets into one, we may fail to obtain a set of the original collection. Kramer illustrates with two examples: "combining two sets of china will yield an enlarged set but not necessarily a set identical with one in the original collection, and a similar statement applies to the fusion of two classes in a school" (I, 156). The union set may also diminish, as in my numerical example—there is one four instead of two. So, mathematically, union may be "impaired by dominion." There are two valid instances in which the union set will be dominated by either the constituents of *A* or the constituents of *B*. Consequently, Russell's definition of "knowledge" has three set-theoretic interpretations: (1) where the members are all the elements from any given two sets (this is Russell's reading); (2) where the members are from the Self alone (the position Russell is arguing against); and, (3) where the members are from the not-Self (another position Russell is in favor of, one which he thinks dissolves into the first interpretation).

The upshot of this brief discussion is that Russell's argument does not exclude an idealistic reading of "union"; and, hence, his argument against philosophic contemplation of the Self is not decisive because of the second interpretation. If the third interpretation of "union" is permissible, then the second one should be also. Our set-theoretic definition demonstrates this reciprocal, disjunctive situation. My analogy with set theory poses a genuine problem for Russell's argument, since he accepted mathematics as a paradigm for human knowledge. In other words, if there are acceptable readings or interpretations of "union," they would surely come from mathematics. Such a reading from set theory is compatible with idealism; hence, Russell's argument doesn't establish its intended refutation.

Why would Russell have not thought of the mathematical senses of "union"? One plausible answer is that he was preoccupied with Hegel in the previous chapter (XIV) and Hegel's definition of "absolute knowledge" as the union of subject and object. In one of the several descriptions of absolute knowledge, Hegel says:

> The goal, however, is fixed for knowledge just as necessarily as the succession in the process. The terminus is at that point where knowledge is no longer compelled to go beyond itself, where it finds its own self, and the notion corresponds to the object and the object to the notion.[4]

In the preceeding argument, Russell was attempting to make the world within, the world without. But there is more to this argument than the above points.

Context of the Argument

Before the argument, Russell gives us some additional reasons why he thinks that contemplation must not be self-contemplation. In an anti-Humean moment, he tells us that: "Philosophy, though unable to tell us with certainty what is the true answer to the doubts which it raises, is able to suggest many possibilities which enlarge our thoughts and free them from the tyranny of custom" (157). He continues by saying: "it [philosophy] keeps alive our sense of wonder by showing familiar things in an unfamiliar aspect" (157). Russell contrasts this with the life of the instinctive person by adding: "In contemplation, on the contrary, we start from the non-Self, and through its greatness the boundaries of Self are enlarged; through the infinity of the universe the mind which contemplates it achieves some share in infinity" (159). Russell must have been re-reading Spinoza's *Ethics* when he wrote this.

Following the argument is this important elaboration:

> The true philosophic contemplation . . . finds its satisfaction in every enlargement of the not-Self, in everything that magnifies the objects contemplated, and thereby the subject contemplating. Everything, in contemplation, that is personal or private, everything that depends upon habit, self-interest, or desire, distorts the object, and hence impairs the *union* which the intellect seeks. By thus making a *barrier* between subject and object, such personal and private things become a *prison* to the intellect. (160; emphases added)

Russell never explains how in every enlargement of the not-Self or the objects contemplated that it thereby enlarges the contemplating Self. This becomes a basic causal postulate for his argument, and it can be explained if we turn to Oriental philosophy, especially the expositions written on Zen training.[5] The closest Russell comes to offering an explanation is in the section, "Action and Contemplation," in *The Collected Papers*,[6] where he claims that contemplation is impartial and action is partial or produces a change that makes the possession smaller. The Self becomes greater than what it possesses: "But they do so by making the possession smaller; thus they do not enlarge the Soul. Contemplation is not limited, like Power, and does not demand that the object shall be made small. It enlarges the Soul to the greatness of the object" (103).

In a strikingly Eastern tone, Russell then concludes that "action, as well as thought, becomes impregnated with contemplation; it becomes calm, not insistent; and the greatness of the soul remains independent of its success or failure" (104). This statement assists us in appreciating Russell's remark in *The Problems of Philosophy:* "The mind which has become accustomed to the freedom and impartiality of philosophic contemplation will preserve something of the same freedom and impartiality in the world of action and emotion" (160).

History of the Argument

The argument was written in 1911 and came from one of the least finished of Russell's unfinished books, *Prisons*, in which the title was a metaphor for life: "life is so full of prisons, and I love the free spaces of the world" (from the

correspondence with Lady Ottoline, dated April 1911, quoted in *The Collected Papers*, XII, 97). Russell transplanted passages from *Prisons* into the final chapter of *The Problems of Philosophy*, which contains the argument we have examined above and is seen in sections entitled "Contemplation" (XII, 102-3), "Action and Contemplation" (XII, 103-4), and "The Good of the Intellect" (XII, 105-6). With these three parts we can elaborate on Russell's argument and come to a better understanding of it and of what motivated Russell to write on such a subject.

The editors of *The Collected Papers*, Rempel, Brink, and Moran, suggest that the argument came as part of his emergence from a life of rarefied intellect and conventional morality (XII, 105-6). His affair with Lady Ottoline through poetry, nature, and a re-reading of Spinoza (XII, 99) would lead Russell into "the larger life of interpersonal contemplation" (XII, 103). The three sections from *Prisons* are riddled with the use of the word "union," and they give a more complete picture of what Russell thought of contemplation. He writes:

> The immediate objects of action are only things within our power. These are few and comparatively small. Thus the active life alone never achieves a free vision or a true proportion and never knows that its success or failure is not of fundamental importance; nor, if it does come to know this, can it bear the knowledge without being paralyzed by it. But the life which is primarily contemplative is not hemmed in by limitations of human power; it is limited only by the limitations of human knowledge—and these, great as they are, are not comparable to the limitations of power. Moreover to the active life, what is unconquerable is hostile; to the contemplative life this is not so. Thus contemplation gives proportion, shows our active life as the transitory thing that it is, and raises us out of the anxieties that beset eager desires. It enables us to live in a world where most

> of what concerns us is stable, and where, if our actions fail, what is lost is an infinitesimal fragment of the things that fill our life. Hence acquiescence becomes less difficult. (102)

Russell continues with a recurrence of the prison metaphor, and the text provides a clue as to why he is so vehemently against the idea of self-contemplation:

> What is prison? Self-interest, subjectivity, insistence. Why a prison? Because it shuts out the love, the knowledge, and the attainment of goods otherwise possible. What the universe allows, what it forbids: It forbids the freedom of omnipotence; it permits the freedom of contemplation. It permits the freedom of oneness with it; three forms of union: love, admiration, knowledge. All three are escapes from prison. All three combined give wisdom, peace, virtue; joy in part, infinite melancholy, too. (102-3)

The prison metaphor becomes fully focused in the next paragraph of "Contemplation" where Russell sounds more like Spinoza than Hegel:

> Self in all its forms—in thought, in feeling, in action—is a *prison:* it shuts out the soul from that complete *union* with the world, in which true freedom consists. . . . But to become progressively freer, to live more and more the larger life of impersonal contemplation, is possible, and is the road by which we pass into the world of freedom from the *prison* of strife and private hopes.[7] (103; emphases added)

However, the most important section from *Prison* is "The Good of the Intellect." Russell used most of this section in the final paragraphs of *The Problems of Philosophy.* These will

sound familiar to the reader:

> All the good men consist in *some* form of union of Self and not-Self. The union sought by the life of instinct, which belongs to the particular soul, starts from the Self and consists in domination over the not-Self. Thus when this good is attained, the not-Self is made smaller than the Self, and the Self sets bounds to the greatness of its goods. The union sought by the life of reason, which belongs to the universal soul, starts from the not-Self and consists in knowledge, love, and service of the not-Self: by this union, the boundaries of Self are enlarged, and the greatness of the not-Self becomes the greatness of the Self. The good of the intellect is *knowledge*. (105; emphases in Russell)

And, concerning the intellect, Russell then adds another dimension to his description:

> The intellect, *like every other passion*, may be instinctive or rational. It is instinctive when, starting from what already is, it decides to subdue the known world to its pre-existing faculties. It is *rational* when, by impartial contemplation, it attains to knowledge of what is wholly other than itself. The *instinctive* contemplation desires to assimilate the world to man. (106; emphases added)

Most of what follows in this section was incorporated into the closing of *The Problems of Philosophy*. This is all very Spinozistic in outlook on the nature of the human intellect.

Conclusion

What can we say about this argument after having viewed it logically, contextually, and historically? Logically, the

argument is not a good one. Russell offers no further reasons for philosophic contemplation other than those we reviewed, and so these we can take as being basic, that is, they are ones that should stand alone. Can they? I suggested that they couldn't because he elevates them to causal status and that relation is not made clear from either the context or the history of the argument. Also, there are logico-mathematical reasons to bring against the argument and its interpretation of "union."

Why should we show any interest in this argument? Our immediate answer is that this last chapter of *The Problems of Philosophy*, although it is read by many undergraduates in America and England, is not taken seriously as a central portion of Russell's philosophy. I think it should be. Russell was tender-minded and displayed non-analytic interests that are often overlooked when assessing his overall philosophy. Most philosophers think of Russell's thought as logical atomism and mathematical logicism, and the sort of concerns that I have discussed are lost in the shuffle. As G. J. Warnock estimates: "They [Russell and Moore] were not at first, and perhaps never have been, opposed in general to metaphysics."[8] But in the chapter on Russell in *English Philosophy Since 1900*, Warnock concentrates on the essays in Russell's *Logic and Knowledge*;[9] and Russell's encounters with traditional metaphysics and idealism in particular are omitted. Warnock is not unique in this respect—this is true of most historical accounts of the period. It is ironic that Russell's prison metaphor became a literal situation in his life in 1918 when he was imprisoned for protesting against the first World War. Moreover, the editors of *The Collected Papers* give some insight into this period of Russell's life and why he wrote what he did:

> The tenor of the statements [in "Contemplation and Action"] prepares the reader to understand what Russell wrote when he was most urgently searching for meaning outside the confines of strict philosophical investigation. The period 1901 to 1914 was momentous and disturbing for him. It is

> plausible to say that the religious and moral transformations through which he went in these years set his attitudes as a social prophet for the rest of his life; later deflections were from standards at which he had arrived intuitively by his "conversion" of 1901, and reinforced by his relationship with Lady Ottoline Morrell, and had supported by reasoned arguments such as those found in "Prisons." (XII: xiv)

Needless to say, these are not good arguments. Because they are not well-reasoned is probably a manifestation of the religious and moral transformations that took place during this time in his life. Lady Ottoline was more on Russell's mind than the arguments he was formulating during this period. Some of these he wrote to please her.[10]

NOTES

[1]Bertrand Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy* (London: Oxford UP, 1912).

[2]Edna E. Kramer, *The Nature and Growth of Modern Mathematics* (Greenwich: Fawcett Publications, 1970) I: 48.

[3]See, for example, Flora Dinkines, *Elementary Theory of Sets* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1961) 10-11.

[4]G. W. F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Mind*, trans. James Baillie (New York: Humanities P, 1977) 137-38.

[5]For example, see Katsuki Sekida, *Zen Training: Methods and Philosophy* (New York: John Weatherhill, 1975), especially the discussions of *kensho* (realization) and *samadhi* ("concentration" or contemplative awareness).

[6]*The Collected Papers of Bertrand Russell, Volume 12, Contemplation and Action:1902-1914*, ed. Richard A. Rempel, Andrew Brink, and Margaret Moran (London: Allen & Unwin, 1985).

[7]Interestingly, the prison metaphor extends to Russell's pupil, Ludwig Wittgenstein, by way of David Pears, who has recently published a study of the development of Wittgenstein's philosophy entitled *The False Prison*, 2 vols. (London: Oxford UP, 1987, 1988). "The false prison" is easy enough to extract from Pears' important study. For example, in speaking of the general thesis of the *Tractatus*, Pears describes it as a *reductio:*

> . . . the limit of factual knowledge and of its correlate, the world, can be drawn only from *the inside.* [This is the false prison.] From this it follows that it would be incoherent first to identify the ego in the common world, and then to go on to cut out of that world a microcosm based on the ego; and similarly, it follows that it would be incoherent first to identify a phenomenal base-line *within* experience, and then to go on to shrink the world into the area bounded by that base-line. (II: 330; emphases added)

Russell's argument concerning contemplation could be enhanced by such a line of reasoning derived from the later Wittgenstein via Pears.

[8]G. J. Warnock, *English Philosophy Since 1900* (New York: Oxford UP, 1958) 8.

[9]Bertrand Russell, *Logic and Knowledge* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1956).

[10]For a fictional account of their relationship, see Bruce Duffy's recent novel, *The World as I Found It* (New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1987). The novel is also about G. E. Moore and Wittgenstein during this period of early 20th-century

British philosophy. It has little bearing on the reality of the past, but it does make for exciting, intimate reading of these fellows' lives and times.