

## **Russell and Critical Thinking**

### **William Hare, Guest Editor**

No serious history of philosophy in the twentieth century could be envisaged without significant attention to the prolific writings of Bertrand Russell (1872-1970). Russell, who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1950, was an enormously influential scholar who made fundamental contributions in several areas of philosophy, especially mathematical logic, epistemology, and the philosophy of mind -- contributions which continue to inform philosophical discussions today. He was also a gifted writer with the enviable ability to discuss complex philosophical ideas with grace and lucidity, and who succeeded in reaching a wide general audience in his numerous popular books on political sexual morality, religion, and education.

In Quine's wonderful phrase, Russell's life was as broad as it was long (Quine, 1972, p. 1). Apart from the breadth of his writings, from the most technical work on logic to popular essays on the cinema and prohibition, Russell led a full and eventful life which involved university teaching, political activism, the founding of a progressive school, international travel, radio and television appearances, celebrated court cases, and two terms in prison. Following the notorious affair in 1940 when Russell's appointment as Professor of Philosophy at the College of the City of New York was overturned in a judicial decision deeming him morally unfit for the position, and reflecting on the public outcry concerning his views, Russell commented that "it is not controversy and open difference of opinion that endanger democracy. On the contrary, these are its greatest safeguards" (Russell, 1940, p. 165). Russell's tireless efforts to raise critical questions about political policies and social mores, however, provoked scandal and outrage, and brought the inevitable retribution. His experience illustrates admirably the point that the practice of critical thinking will very often demand courage, a quality Russell possessed in abundance.

For all its rich diversity, Russell's academic and political activities reflect a common allegiance to what he saw as the central value of philosophy, namely the ability to loosen the grip of prejudice, unexamined convictions, and what is thought of as pure common sense. Russell said that he had one constant philosophical preoccupation throughout his life namely to discover how much we can know and with what degree of certainty (Russell 1959, p. 11). The great merit of philosophy, as Russell saw it, is to enable us to raise questions which challenge any tendency we might have to slip into dogmatic and complacent assurance. This commitment to the spirit of critical inquiry animates the whole of Russell's multifarious activities, from erudite inquiries into the theory of types, to questions about the Kennedy assassination, to speculation about the future of the human race in the nuclear age.

Russell's writings dealing with education go back almost 100 years. One of the very earliest is a 1902 essay entitled "The study of mathematics" (reprinted in Russell, 1953 pp. 60-73) which opens with a fine example of his ability to formulate a deceptively simple yet powerful question. Russell asks of mathematics, What is its purpose and ideal? He argues that mathematics has a place in every liberal education, not primarily for the help it offers in practical life, but for its beauty and sublimity, and especially for its ability to awaken the learner's belief in reason and love of truth. He sees mathematics, properly taught, as capable of sustaining "a lofty habit of mind", an outlook that involves turning away from a timid acceptance of what passes for truth and a blind submission to a set of unexamined rules, towards the cultivation of a skeptical and inquisitive spirit. The habit of mind in question is what we would now call critical thinking, and this idea is invoked and explored in many places in Russell's books and essays over the years.

Russell warns, however, against critical thinking degenerating into absolute skepticism where the spirit of inquiry succumbs to dogmatic doubt. Philosophy does, of course, encourage us to press our doubts to see to what extent they can be resolved, and it is good, Russell thinks, to be extremely cautious in claiming to have knowledge (Russell

1927, p. 3). At the same time, however, we should have a strong desire to gain knowledge and such a desire would to some extent offset any tendency to fall into a complete skeptical attitude about the possibility of knowledge. The kind of criticism needed, Russell says, is not that which is determined to reject an idea without reason, but that which considers each knowledge claim carefully in order to retain whatever still appears to be knowledge after it has been critically considered (Russell, 1973, p. 88). Attaining knowledge is notoriously difficult but not quite impossible. Russell looks to science for the clearest example of the outlook he has in mind, and characterizes the true attitude of science as critical, undogmatic receptiveness (Russell, 1977, p. 117).

This special issue provides a welcome opportunity to reflect on various aspects of Russell's contribution to our appreciation of the nature and value of critical thinking, and the vantage point gained will help to illuminate contemporary discussions of these issues. In this discussion leads any readers interested in critical thinking to explore Russell's ideas further, they will be amply rewarded and this collection will have achieved its aim.

## References

- Quine, W. V. (1972) "Remarks for a memorial symposium", in D. F. Pears ed. (1972), Bertrand Russell: A Collection of Critical Essays, New York: Doubleday, pp. 1-5.
- Russell, B. (1927) Philosophy New York: W. W. Norton.
- Russell, B. (1940) Letter to The New York Times 26 April, quoted in B. Feinberg and R. Kasrils eds. (1973), Bertrand Russell's America Vol. 1 London: George Allen & Unwin, p. 165.
- Russell, B. (1953) Mysticism and Logic London: Penguin. Collection originally published, 1918.
- Russell, B. (1959) My Philosophical Development London: George Allen & Unwin.
- Russell, B. (1973) The Problems of Philosophy London: Oxford University Press.

Russell, B. (1977) Sceptical Essays London: Unwin Paperbacks. Collection originally published, 1928.