



BERTRAND RUSSELL: PRELIMINARY REMARKS

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Bertrand Arthur William Russell was born on May 18, 1872 into a privileged family. His grandfather was Lord John Russell, who was the liberal Prime Minister of Great Britain and the first Earl Russell. Young Bertrand's early life was traumatic. His mother died when he was two years old and he lost his father before the age of four.

He was then sent to live with his grandparents, Lord and Lady John Russell, but by the time he was six years old, his grandfather also died. Thereafter, his grandmother, who was a strict authoritarian and a very religious woman, raised him.

These early years were filled with prohibitions and rules, and his earliest desires were to free himself from such constraints. His lifelong denial of religion no doubt stems from this early experience. His initial education was at home, which was customary for children of his social class, and later he went to Trinity College, Cambridge, where he achieved first-class honors in mathematics and philosophy.

He graduated in 1894, and briefly took the position of attaché at the British Embassy in Paris. But he was soon back in England and became a fellow of Trinity College in 1895, just after his first marriage to Alys Pearsall Smith. A year later, in 1896, he published his first book, entitled *German Social Democracy*, which he wrote after a visit to Berlin.

Russell was interested in all aspects of the human condition, as is apparent from his wide-ranging contributions, and when the First World War broke out, he found himself voicing increasingly controversial political views. He became an active pacifist, which resulted in his dismissal from Trinity College in 1916, and two years later, his views led him even to prison. But he put his imprisonment to good use and wrote the *Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy*, which was published in 1919.

Since he had no longer had a teaching job, he began to make his living by giving lectures and by writing. His controversial views soon made him famous. In 1919, he visited the newly formed Soviet Union, where he met many of the famous personalities of the Russian Revolution, which he initially supported.

But the visit soured his view of the Socialist movement in Russia and he wrote a scathing attack that very year, entitled *Theory and Practice of Bolshevism*. By 1921, he had married his second wife, Dora Black, and began to be interested in education. With Dora he created and ran a progressive school and wrote *On Education* (1926) and a few later, *Education and the Social Order* (1932).

In 1931, he became the 3rd Earl of Russell, and five years later got a divorce and married his third wife, Patricia Spence in 1936. By this time, he was extremely interested in morality and wrote about the subject in his controversial book *Marriage and Morals* (1932).

He had moved to New York to teach at City College, but he was dismissed from this position because of his views on sexuality (he advocated a version of free love, where sex was not bound up with questions of morality). When Adolf Hitler came to power in Germany, Russell began to question his own pacifism and by 1939 had firmly rejected it, and campaigned hard for the overthrow of Nazism right to the end of the Second World War.

By 1944, he was back in England from the United States, and his teaching position at Trinity College was restored to him, and was granted the Order of Merit. He won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1950. During this time, he wrote several important books, such as, *An Enquiry into Meaning and Truth* (1940), *Human Knowledge: Its Scopes and Limits* (1948).

His best-known work from this time is *History of Western Philosophy* (1945). As well, he continued writing controversial pieces on social, moral and religious issues. Most of these were collected and published in 1957 as *Why I Am Not A Christian*.

From 1949 onwards, he was actively involved in advocating nuclear disarmament. In 1961, along with his fourth and final wife, Edith Finch, he was again put into prison for inciting civil disobedience to oppose nuclear warfare. He spent his final years in North Wales, actively writing to the very last. He died on February 2, 1970.

His range of interests took in the various spheres of human endeavor and thought, for not only was he engaged with mathematics, philosophy, science, logic and the theory of meaning, but he was deeply interested in political activism, feminism, education, nuclear disarmament, and he was a ceaseless opponent of communism. His ideas have greatly influenced the world we live in.

So pervasive is his influence that contemporary culture has seamlessly subsumed the ideas he introduced so that we no longer recognize his impact.

For example, his ideas have forever changed, on a fundamental level, the way philosophy is done, the way logic is dealt with, the way mathematics and science are understood, the view we hold of morality, marriage, the nuclear family, and even the various attempts to stop the spread of nuclear arms – all these concepts owe their beginnings to Russell.

At the very heart of Russell's thought lies the concept, first elucidated in *[The Principles of Mathematics](#)*, that analysis can lead to truth. By analysis he means the breaking up of a complex expression or thought in order to get at its simpler components, which in turn will reveal the meaning or truth.

Thus, the method involves moving from the larger to the more specific, from the macro to the micro. Russell arrived at this process by suggesting that mathematics and natural languages derived from logic. He extended his approach and stated that the structure of logic could be a useful tool in helping

us understand the human experience, which in turn would lead to the working out of disputes.

Thus, in [*A History of Western Philosophy*](#) he shows how the structure of logic is consistent with the way the world works, namely that reality itself is paralleled in logic.

Therefore, this blending of logic and the need to arrive at the truth of reality highlights the second important concern for Russell, namely, metaphysics. In fact, both logic and metaphysics unite and give philosophy its unique approach to uncover truth, which for Russell leads to the understanding of the universe and us. It is this concept that he explores fully in [*Our Knowledge of the External World*](#).

Although logic is essential to Russell's philosophy, it is not synonymous with it. Rather, philosophy is to be seen as a larger construct, which certainly begins with logic, but ends with mysticism. It is certainly true that Russell denied the authority of organized religion all his life and preferred to live a life outside prescribed dogmas.

Nevertheless, he recognized the essential mystery that surrounds life, both in its particular representation in the life of humankind and in the larger sphere, namely, in the life of the universe. It is precisely this mysticism that disallowed him an ultimate denial of God existence, and therefore Russell never called himself an atheist; rather he labeled himself an avowed agnostic, or someone who does not know, and cannot know, whether God exists or not.

Thus, in philosophy he found a quest far greater than that embodied by religion or science, and he described this process in [*Mysticism and Logic*](#).

The [photo](#) shows, "New York Movie," By Edward Hopper, painted in 1939.

