

# Perplexities of Bertrand Russell

—preliminary notes on his most creative decade—

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The good life is not contemplation only or action only, but action based on contemplation, action attempting to incarnate the infinite in the world. A life devoted to knowledge or beauty or love is a life inspired by the vision, a life in the infinite. (Russell, 1912)

It was in 1912 that Russell completed his first fictional work, *The Perplexities of John Forstice*. While his later stories which he was to write more than thirty years later are more relaxed and entertaining, this first novella is very serious and strictly personal. Above all, this work is intensely remarkable in that it is an attempt to express in the form of a story his personal agonies and philosophical ideals which had occupied him throughout the previous decade. The decade I refer to here is the years of his most strenuous intellectual efforts between 1903 and 1913. More concretely, in 1903 he published *Principles of Mathematics*, the first major summing up of his philosophy of mathematics, and in 1913 the third and final volume of his magnum opus, *Principia Mathematica*, was finally published. Even a rough listing of his works during this period may justify my calling this decade the most creative. Besides his purely theoretical creativity, Russell was during this decade most self-consciously literary and confessional and *The Perplexities* may safely be regarded as a personal record of his intellectual and spiritual pilgrimage during the decade.

Writing more than fifty years later, he expressed a dissatisfaction with the novella, especially the second part because it seemed to him now too sentimental and too favourable to Christian religion against which he had been fighting so fiercely between the two periods. Indeed he had not permitted it to be published until after his death. (Its actual publication was in 1972.) My intention to pursue the themes developed in the work, however, may be justifiable because, despite its later deprecation by himself, they can be regarded as offering a valuable clue to the development during this decade of his ideas and beliefs, both philosophical and religious, and of his views on life in general. In the notes presented here, I should like to trace his mental development centering round the novella and other essays written during the period, so far as it will throw some light upon this aspect.

### 1. Representative personae in *The Perplexities*

Identifying Forstice with Russell himself, we may select five characters as representing the main ideas he was then eager to examine and analyze. They appear in Part II of the novella: Forano, the mathematician; Nasispo, the philosopher; Pardicreti, the poet; Chenskoff, the novelist; and Alegno, the ordinary man. Excepting Alegno they are all classified as among the men of 'contemplation,' as against those of 'action.' This reflects evidently Russell's strong bias towards the 'contemplation' aspect of life during this period. Now I proceed to take up briefly each of them one by one.

1. 1 Forano reminds one of Frege and Peano, the two mathematicians who had profoundly influenced Russell's philosophy of mathematics. Frege's *Begriffsschrift* was undoubtedly the first framework of symbolic logic, while Peano played a key part in its development, which was further to stimulate Russell into the construction of a magnificent building of mathematical philosophy. Forano finds in mathematics perfection which gives him a kind of restfulness existing nowhere else. He stresses the twofold pleasures

of mathematical delight: the delight in human capacity and the aesthetic delight in logical structure. With joyful resignation he contemplates the unchanging hierarchy of exact truths subsisting in lofty independence of Man, of time and place, of the whole universe of shifting accidental particular things. With a mystic in communion with his God, he feels at once the vastness and strength of the nonhuman world of mathematics, and the enhancement of Man's glory by his power of knowing and loving such a world.

1. 2 Nassispo the philosopher is the next speaker, who is reminiscent of Spinoza, whom Russell continues to love throughout the rest of his life. The true philosopher, according to him, will so discipline his heart and so foster the spirit of contemplation that he will see the eternity incarnate in the passing show. The joy and peace of this contemplation is Spinoza's intellectual love of God, that 'infinite love with which God loves himself', and our eternal life consists in the contemplation, where everything is transcended. This mystic timelessness swallows up good and evil in the infinity of the world.

1. 3 Against this too contemplative and receptive idea of life by the philosopher proposes the poet Pardicreti a more active and creative conception of the universe which poets have done much to create. He despises a strange belittling of the universe involved in all anthropomorphism. By making the universe subordinate to himself, man shuts himself out from the greatness of which he is capable. Against this tendency the poet emphasizes the greatness of impartial contemplation, of rising above human hopes and fears, and of seeing undismayed the majestic mystery of the passionless pitiless cosmos; he encourages man to go forth freely to toss on the uncharted sea. Here hope and despair become world-embracing, and end in reconciling man to the universe by the discipline of desire and the victory of thought. Finally he points out as the one quality needed to make poetry truly great the indefinable quality of magic. Behind the shows of senses the poet sees the unknown something which is the life of all the highest beauty; it is the poet's aspiration, the one supreme glory in comparison with which all else is nothing.

1. 4 Following the poet, the novelist Chenskoff also stresses the

quality of magic as the highest quality of art, the suggestion of another world behind the world of common sense. His greatest emphasis is on the infinite pain that lies at the heart of life. Without pain, a man may be an appreciator, but not a creator. Life is built on the infinite pain, from which there is no escape. Accepting it, we can come through a moment of unimaginable anguish to a new life so filled with mystic glory that the pain no longer dominates and no longer makes all existence a burden. Pain is the gateway to the good, and survives in the best we know.

1. 5 As a representative of common people Alegno speaks last. He does not deny the importance of aristocratic goods discussed in the previous discussions by great men. He, however, doubts them as a universal gospel, their advice being in essence 'First become King, and then enjoy your Kingdom.' Now that ordinary mortals refuse to be ignored, a measure should be taken to make a gospel as accessible to the poor and needy or to find some other one which does not demand exceptional powers in them. Asked what purpose is served by human life in general, he cannot answer. If any purpose is, however, served, it must enter into the lives of common man, not the one realized only by the few, to whom all others are ministering slaves.

## **2. Mysticism vs. Rationalism**

### **2. 1 mathematics as a surrogate for religious belief**

In 'The Study of Mathematics (1907)' a conscious literary effort is made to stress 'the essence' or the intrinsic value of mathematics. He concludes this essay, saying that 'every great study is not only an end in itself, but also a means of creating and sustaining a lofty habit of mind: and this should be kept always in view throughout the teaching and learning of mathematics. Greatly owing to his efforts, the foundation of symbolic logic had been being built by the time of his writing this, and based upon it, he can now say that the principles underlying our logic and mathematics can now be brought to light and that all mathematics follows inevitably from a small collection of fundamental laws. Like a palace emer-

ging from the mist, the stately stores of mathematical edifice appear with an overwhelming sense of revelation, thus enhancing the intellectual beauty of the whole.

Despite his later tremendous changes of philosophical and religious ideas, it is worth noticing that very little alteration has been made in the fundamental conception of his mathematical ideal. Here he abandons rather exceptionally his usual skepticism towards everything. Mathematics might safely be regarded as his equivalent of religious belief. Or, if this is going too far, mathematics may be permitted to remain at least his only hold on which he can maintain his eager quest for a spiritual certainty after having abandoned traditional Christian beliefs. Mathematics is very akin to what the great religions of the world inculcate: the largeness of contemplation, the impersonal disinterestedness, or the freedom from daily preoccupations. A closer examination of his mathematical philosophy will be made in another paper.

## 2. 2 the place of Science in a Liberal Education

This is the title of an essay (1913) which is often reprinted in his anthologies, beginning first with *Mysticism and Logic* (1918). Alongside of his deep concern with mathematics, his inquiry into the method of science has been evident from his earliest times. He finds the kernel of scientific outlook in the refusal to regard our own desires, tastes, and interests available as a key to the understanding of the world. In spite of its seeming trite truism, to remember it consistently in matters arousing our passions and intense feelings is by no means easy, especially in the cases of uncertain and inconclusive evidence available. His illustration of his assertion, taking up Aristotle and Malthus, is fairly convincing. His emphasis is here not on the truth of scientific doctrines proposed, but on the temper and method of the scientists' inquiry.

It is noticeable that his concern with the science has always been its fundamental method just as has been his concern with mathematics. Rather than praising scientific achievements and discoveries, he tends to emphasize the depressing effect of another

aspect of science, namely the irrelevance of human passions. Hence truly representative of his view of science is his famous remark that "I don't think the proper study of mankind is man — on the contrary, mankind seems to me greatest when it forgets man."

As the title of the essay indicates, he values the place of science in a *liberal education*. It may be his intention that the scientific method he proposes should be one of the main objects which form the basis of liberal education. It is rather ironical that the method of science and its consequent attitude of mind which he so earnestly proposes has been least realized in the very discipline he has been engaged in, i. e. philosophy. That will be an incentive to his subsequent inclination towards philosophical analysis. His philosophy of 'neutral' monism, or that of logical atomism for example, may be interpreted as representing the scientific method of neutrality which involves sweeping away all other desires in the interests of the desire to know, suppressing the whole subjective emotional element without bias, without any wish except to see the universe as it really is.

Finally this paper is also valuable because it indicates perhaps the first step towards the 'action' aspects of his life, one of which is to lead to his formulation of the theory on education and its experimental concretion at Beacon Hill.

### 2. 3 the earlier conception of religion

His concern with religion, in the narrower sense of the word, is another remarkable aspect of the intensive contemplation during the decade. In *The Essence of Religion* (1912) he stresses the quality of religion which frees men from the prison of eager desires and little thoughts. Indeed the very name of the unfinished fragments of drafts was intended to be *Prison* (1911), the liberation from which religion will give. He sees the essence of religion in the subordination of the finite part of our life to the infinite part and seeks union with the universe. Thus in union with the world the soul finds its freedom. He mentions three kinds of union: union in thought, in feeling, and in will. The first leads to knowledge, the second to

love, and the third to service.

Earlier in 1903, he wrote an essay which might be called *The Pilgrimage of Life*, in which he discusses very seriously the true essence of religion. There he regards religion as the passionate determination that human life is to be capable of importance, irreligion being the feeling of the triviality of life. His most famous *The Free Man's Worship* (1903) apparently gives an opposite literary expression to this conception of religion found in *The Pilgrimage*; the sense of cosmic despair is obvious throughout the whole. In the last analysis, however, the conclusion might be not so different: 'A free man thinks of nothing less than of death, and his wisdom is a meditation not of death but of life.'

We have already noted his insistent emphasis upon mathematical values of the universal point of view which makes us rise above the life of the senses. And here can be found a remarkable affinity with his conception of religion. An insight of mathematics deeper than piecemeal knowledge of our daily life takes us beyond the world of particulars to the world of what is general and always open to all men. In essence his ideal of religion is not far from this conception.

### **3. Contemplation leading to perplexities**

His predominant tendency during this decade is undoubtedly a 'contemplation', as against an 'action' approach to the world. Various essays on religion, ethics, history, as well as on mathematics and philosophy, and the novella in question are all the products of 'contemplation.' At the same time the manifold contemplation during this period prepares the way to his later activity outside the strict confines of philosophical analysis.

As the title of his famous essay 'Mysticism and Logic' (1914) aptly suggests, there is a bipolarity in Russell: mathematics, logic, or intellect in general on one hand, and religious, almost mystic, humane feelings on the other. His logical side tends to be predom-

inantly sceptical and analytic. And even in his mystic moments the logical side may interfere somehow with him, with the ideal of 'love of truth' always remaining.

Notorious and vehement is his attack against traditional Christian dogma and its institution, as seen in "Why I am not a Christian" (1925), where he regards traditional Christianity as a kind of fear, or cowardice, as a product of defeatism. His quest for religious belief, nevertheless, has never been given up.

His literarily most famous *Mysticism and Logic* no doubt embodies his inherent 'perplexities' between reason and intuition, or logic and mysticism. At the same time, the perplexities he suffers from, actually here on earth between the two opposing poles are clearly stated in part three of *The Perplexities*. In this final part John Forstice, alias B. Russell, has been haunted by the two truths after he had visited his uncle's spiritual object of love, Mother Catherine: they are the truth of science and the truth of vision, struggling to be united, mutually destructive. He tries to unite them, bearing in mind that neither need be wholly sacrificed to the other.

The two truths, not wholly separable one from another, are revealed by the vision and survive the critical scrutiny of science. The first of these gives a contemplation of the actual world more vast, more impersonal than the view of daily life. The other truth which the vision reveals is the possibility of a life here on earth immeasurably greater than the life of the actual society. In the end he comes to the realization that because the fullest vision requires the fullest knowledge, loyalty to science is not hostile to the vision but a necessary outcome of it. Thus synthesized, all search for truth is a kind of reverence, while all fear of truth is a blasphemy. Having summed up and solved in his own way the perplexities besetting him, Forstice resumes with resolute hope his research in physics, suggesting that Russell himself determines to set out anew both for contemplation and for action based upon it.

Irrespective of its literary value, I conclude by repeating, *The*



*Perplexities* is indeed very valuable simply because the novella expresses candidly the real perplexities the philosopher has been undergoing and trying to solve during his critical decade.

#### **Chronological List of Russell's Works referred to in the paper**

- \* [Mar. 1903] "The Pilgrimage of Life" writing began
- \* [May 1903] *Principles of Mathematics* published.
- \* [Dec. 1903] "The Free Man's Worship" published.
- \* [Jul. 1904] "On History" published.
- \* [Oct. 1905] "On Denoting" published in *Mind*.
- \* [Nov. 1907] "The Study of Mathematics" published.
- \* [Dec. 1910] *Principia Mathematica* vol. 1 published.  
*Philosophical Essays* published.
- \* [Sept. 1911] "Prisons" perhaps written.
- \* [Apr. 1912] *Principia Mathematica* vol. 2 published.
- \* [Jul. 1912] *The Perplexities of John Forstice* completed in first draft.
- \* [Oct. 1912] "The Essence of Religion" published.
- \* [Apr. 1913] *Principia Mathematica* vol. 3 published.
- \* [May 1913] "The Place of Science in a Liberal Education" published.
- \* [Jul. 1914] *Mysticism and Logic* published.

#### **acknowledgement**

Throughout this paper frequent references have been made to *The Collected Papers of Bertrand Russell* Vol. 12 (Allen & Unwin, 1985)

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