

Bertrand Russell

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During the years 1963 and 1964, some correspondences were exchanged between Mr. Ja'fari and Sir Bertrand Russell (1872-1970), the renowned British philosopher. Due to the importance of these correspondences, we shall cite here some of these letters together with an introduction by Ja'fari on Russell's intellectual career and significance.

Introduction

Undoubtedly, Russell is a thinker with a sharp, dynamic mind and memory, an extraordinary capability of the simplification of difficult philosophical issues and notions as well as a tenuous sense of irony and a prodigious scientific outlook. He is an unrivalled pioneer of mathematical logic and has an understandable interpretation of Einstein's theory of relativity. Generally speaking, he represents one of the first-rate contemporary intellectuals of the Occident whose works are not so unfamiliar to Eastern nations including Moslem societies. The ideas and personality of Sir Russell in some points are so enchanting that have triggered diametrically opposing estimations. Despite having these aforementioned privileges, Sir Bertrand Russell has not offered a systematic philosophy that devotes itself to the explanation and analysis of quadruple issues concerning the ontological relationships of humanity (i.e. human relationships with man himself, God, the world of existence and his fellowmen, "as they are" and "as they ought to be"). Having said these, it is due to relate some of my replies to questions that posed about the philosophical and scientific aspects of the personality of Sir Bertrand Russell.

The following interview has been published in two successive issues of *Etela'at Daily* (13116-13117) on Monday and Tuesday, February 9 and 10, 1970, a few days after Russell's death.

Q1: How did you find Bertrand Russell's philosophical perspective?

Ja'fari: It is not an easy task to mark off the boundaries of the Russellian notion of philosophy as he has offered various definitions of the discipline in his works. In *Bertrand Russell Speaks His Mind*, he has depicted philosophy as the body of theoretical researches of issues which are not yet possible to have an exact knowledge of. In the same book, when Woodrow Wyatt asks him to which group of philosophers he belongs, Russell replies, 'I have not had any label; the only label that I have is "logical atomist".'¹

In his *A History of Western Philosophy* (1964), Russell puts philosophy somewhere between science and theology as "middle term". As you see, Russell has understood philosophy almost in three ways:

I. In his first definition, he has conceptualized the notion in such a broad manner that it even includes those scientific issues that are not possible to have an exact knowledge of for the time being. To put it otherwise, this notion contains every scientific discipline's theoretical part like theoretical physics, theoretical chemistry, theoretical mathematics and theoretical law and so on and so forth, which do not have a purely scientific character when they are being researched and studied.

II. In the second definition, the notion is somewhat clearer, as philosophy has been depicted as a middle zone between science and theology. Russell does not provide enough explanation in this regard for us to presume the existence of such a third realm. Are the principal reasons that will be utilized in this regard in fact issues between science and theology? If these reasons have neither a scientific nor a metaphysical origin in theological sense, then what kind of reasons are these?

III. On the other hand, as to Russell's third designation of his philosophical career as "logical atomism", we must say that this only can serve as a delineation of part of Russellian methodology in philosophical investigations and cannot shed light on the essence of them as a whole as compared to other philosophic enterprises.

Q2: Would you please explain why the method of Logical Atomism can stand for a genuine philosophical school?

Ja'fari: Of course, you know that great ideas on the cosmological scene mark different ways of intellectual activity. Some of them are unconcerned with their deposited units of information and are only to

1- Here it needs to be taken into earnest consideration that whether Russell wishes or not, he has coined many theories in philosophy. Having elaborated these theories, Russell has become part of the very fabric of twentieth century philosophy, as it should have been so, since his philosophical theories are by no means lesser than other philosophers' theses in the West.

construct a system of philosophy by their own data. These philosophers represent a group whose method is synthetic.

The second group hosts those philosophers who start their intellectual movement from cosmological units – which in their turn are sets of subunits – and push their way forward through gradual analysis. And, as Sir Russell states in his book, this analysis must be kept until we reach some point that there would not be units smaller than those reached.

Needless to say, besides the fact that the analytic method as such does not feature a particular kind of philosophical system, it cannot provide an enlightened mind with a philosophical outlook that offers an integrated view of the universe, as there is no doubt that the synthetic method is as much important in philosophy as analytic method is. To state the matter in more telling words, these two methods are like two necessary wings for flying in the air of particular and universal knowledge which are integrative.

Q3: What is your idea about Russell's genius?

Ja'fari: It is beyond all doubts that this thinker has enjoyed a marvelous genius. His genius, as we mentioned earlier, has clearly shown itself in the huge amount of experiences that his memory has recorded through the long span of his life. Moreover, he has easily put this splendid memory into work. The third manifestation of Bertrand Russell's genius is his wondrous power of exemplification, insofar as we can say that his talent for exemplifying as well as the mental activity that he makes on particular events to compare universals is uncommon in our age. However, as to his scientific genius, Russell's creative ideas in modern logic and mathematics are so clear for scholars to comprehend that they do not need any extra elaboration.

Q4: What is Russell's role in contemporary philosophies in your view?

Ja'fari: I think we should analyze this question into two issues and then address each one independently. If you mean by the impression Russell's philosophy has had on contemporary philosophies, as well as the influence that his intellectual method has exerted on contemporary ideas, we undoubtedly must designate a certain share for him in contemporary philosophy as a whole. Here I mean the influence that Russellian liberal musings have had on some issues concerning man and the universe, which need to be approached in keeping with their own respective rules and principles. The consequence that has been accrued to contemporary worldviews through the application of this method is a considerable amount of information along with horrible paradoxes and gaps that have struck the contemporary body of knowledge. Of course, by Russell's intellectual method, here we are referring to the methods he has applied in philosophy rather than

those that he has used in scientific researches.

However, if you mean that Russell has founded a systematic school of philosophy that influenced other philosophers, of course the answer is no, for if we gather all Sir Russell's works together and seek to break down their paradoxes and gaps and derive a systematic school of philosophy out of them as an effort to offer to the world, we shall end up in an utter failure. Accordingly, many groups of thinkers consider Russell as an intellectual man of genius, but they do not regard him among the philosophers who have had a school of philosophy their own.

Q5: Would you please brief us about a number of his philosophical paradoxes?

Ja'fari: I have recognized countless philosophical paradoxes through reading his philosophical works. Here, as an example, I shall refer to those cases that are easy for the reader to spot in Russell's works:

I. Sir Russell denies "subjective freedom" and the category of "free will," and regards it in contradiction with dynamical rules. In this spirit, he argues:

For free will, I think the argument was not a valid one, and I don't any longer think it is still conclusive. But I thought that because of the motions of matter are determined by the laws of dynamics, the motion of a man's lips when he speaks must be so determined, so that he can have no control over what he's going to say. I don't think that was a valid argument, but it convinced me at the time.¹

This represents Russell's negative view of human free will. Now if we align this deterministic perspective of Russell's with his indefatigable efforts in defense of humanity, freedom and peace to which he might owe much of his global fame, the paradox will unmask itself. These two lines of ideas (the denial of freedom and the defense of humanity, freedom and peace), considering the denial of the fundamental reality of conscience – from which love in humanity, freedom and peace originates – cannot be compatible with each other, because the denial of subjective freedom requires the refusal of conscience by the rejection of which the love in humanity, freedom and peace becomes meaningless.

In regard to this critical issue, I wrote a letter to Sir Russell in 1961; unfortunately, however, he did not respond. Then in August 18, 1963, I asked him to explicate a phrase in his dialogue with Woodrow Wyatt. 5 days later, Russell sent me a letter that still did not address the freedom and determinism dilemma, but

1- Ja'fari, M. T., *An Analytic Exposition of the Russell-Wyatt Dialogues*, 4th impression, 2008. (Originally in Persian).

nonetheless merely provided an expression of a kind of leniency before the argument that I had outlined, as the reader can see it:

From: The Earl Russell, O.M., F.R.S.
23 August 1963

Dear Mr. Ja'fari,

Thank you very much for your letter. Quantum theory introduces certain doubts about the complete predictability of behaviour in theory; the admission of doubt, however, does not imply adherence to the opposite of that doubted.

Yours sincerely,

Bertrand Russell

Bertrand Russell.

*e.g. It is not certain that it will rain tomorrow,
but this does not imply that it is certain
it will not rain.*

Dear Mr. Ja'fari:

Thank you very much for your letter. Quantum theory introduces certain doubts about the complete predictability of behavior in theory; the admission of doubt, however, does not imply adherence to the opposite of that doubted.

Bertrand Russell

After signing the letter, Sir Russell added the following example:

For example, the fact that it is not for sure that it will rain tomorrow does not imply that it definitely will not rain tomorrow.

As you see, the problem of freedom and determinism has remained in limbo in Russell's words, and his argument does not prove any of the two theories.

To state the matter otherwise, if freedom is to be denied, then conscience – particularly moral conscience – should also be declined; thus, by no means shall we be able to demonstrate the right of life, right of dignity and the modality of committed freedom for mankind. This is to say, we have no longer any reason to defend humanity and its values as well as for rising up for the oppressed. This is the very sore consequence that Alfred North Whitehead – who in my view is the greatest Western philosopher in the twentieth century – has underlined in his *Adventures of Ideas* (Chapter 3, Part 2). There, he manifestly argues:

Although Hume and Huxley both denounce slavery, they still deny the existence of any independent dignity for man who makes humanity a worthy object of love.

This is the consequence that has been engendered by Russell's paradoxical method of thinking. As I mentioned earlier, I

reminded Russell of this statement of Whitehead's, but he had no answer for it.

- II. The other striking point is that of the problem of God's existence. Regarding the whole corpus of Russell's works, he is not the denier of God's existence. In other words, Russell is not an atheist, since he explicitly says:

I don't think that there is definitely nothing as God, although those reasons proposed by the proponents of the God hypothesis are all disputable.

It should be said that man may be able to dispute even the most evident principles including his own existence, in the same way that Sophists did, but impartial and unbiased thinking cannot cast any doubt upon Divine Existence, as indicated by prominent Western and Eastern theosophists.

Russell argues:

Their method is that of justification-based logic, in which the pretension is firstly presumed demonstrated and then some proof is being provided for its veracity.

This theory of Russell's is itself a justification for the necessity of doubt about God's existence, a point of view Russell has already taken.

In *Bertrand Russell Speaks His Mind*, Russell introduces three sources for fondness for God:

- *Fear of nature's destructive factors.*
- *Fear of human beings themselves who destroy each other by warfare.*
- *The regrets that strike man after committing carnal activities.*

There is no doubt that fear of destructive factors in nature can be a reason for some people to turn to God and religion, in the same way that a superb work of art can be a mere means of gain for an avaricious person without having even thought about its deep aesthetical and intellectual implications for the beholder! But as to human beings' fear of each other due to their potentiality for destroying their fellowmen, it should be mentioned that this is also correct by way of the particular proposition, however this fear cannot be the universal factor for fondness for God and religion, because history as a whole is fraught with brave resistances before the oppressions of power-drunks and even brilliant victories have been achieved through this path; at the same time, those who struggled were people of God and true adherents of religion.

On the other hand, there are people who have abandoned their faiths in God and religion due to such phenomena as fear of destructive elements of nature, oppressors and grievances and hardships. To have a dependable judgment in this case, then, we need to examine the

character of those who are exposed to these factors. Moreover, Sir Russell has forgotten the factors of human primordial craving for perfection, morality, sense of majesty in existence, love, heavenly endowed nature and transcendental sense of commitment, and at the same time has not mentioned the fact that there had been a huge number of people throughout history who have wholeheartedly turned to God and religion as a result of the same mentioned factors and elements. Furthermore, Sir Russell must have understood a la Max Planck¹ – who is one of the renowned physicists that have revolutionized modern physics – the necessity of a deeper and broader insight into religion as a vital aspect of human life through the prism of which other aspects of *menschenleben* become reflected.

Let us read the following words by Max Planck:

There can never be any real opposition between religion and science, for one is the complement of the other. Every serious and reflective person realizes, I think, that the religious element in his nature must be recognized and cultivated if all the powers of the human soul are to act together in perfect balance and harmony. And indeed it was not by any accident that the greatest thinkers of all ages were also deeply religious souls, even though they made no public show of their religious feelings. It is from the cooperation of understanding with the will that the finest fruit of philosophy has arisen, namely, the ethical fruit. Science enhances the moral values of life, because it furthers a love of truth and reverence – a love of the truth displaying itself in the constant endeavor to achieve a more exact knowledge of the world of mind and matter around us, and reverence, because every advance in knowledge brings us face to face with the mystery of our own being.²

We will not go into further details on this issue anymore,³ because I intended here only to expose Russell's paradoxical stance on the issue of human fondness for God and religion.

Then Wyatt asks, "Couldn't man dedicate himself to the search for the causes of faith, some of which stand outside him and seem to be greater than the human individual? Does he not search for this being not just due to any fear or existential dependence but rather in order to fulfill some tasks merely for the sake of him being him?"

Russell answers:

There are indeed many things that are greater than man himself; I

1- Max Karl Ernst Ludwig Planck (1858-1947), German physicist, father of quantum physics, and the winner of the 1918 Nobel prize for physics (Translator).

2- Planck, Max (1932): *Where Is Science Going?*

3- For more details, see: Ja'fari, M. T., (2008): *An Analytic Exposition of the Russell-Wyatt Dialogues*.

mean family, and the nation and finally the humanity in general, all of whom are greater and larger than the individual and are adequately enough for satisfying any sense of generosity inside human beings.

As you see, Sir Russell has implicitly admitted the existence of a primordial sense of search for a superior being although he suggests that:

We satisfy this sense by family, nation or humanity at large.

This is an unacceptable paradox from a philosopher of such stature as Sir Bertrand Russell, who on one hand ascribes theism and religiosity to fear and human weakness, and accepts the existence of a sense of search for perfection inside man on the other. Accordingly, on September 11, 1963, I wrote a letter to Russell and asked for an answer for this paradox. Sir Russell replied to me in the following words:

The "search for perfection" is rather vague but, in any event, lofty impulses such as the "search for perfection" are not as common as you suggest.

Yours sincerely,

Bertrand Russell
Bertrand Russell.

The "Search for Perfection" is rather vague but, in any event, lofty impulses such as the search for perfection are not as common as you suggest.

Bertrand Russell

It is noteworthy that in Sir Russell's abovementioned words, the existence of an independent drive for a "search for perfection" – that I had broached in my letter – has not been wholly rejected; as a matter of fact, he says, "I don't see this alleged universal sense in all human individuals". Having narrowed down the engendering factors of theism and religiosity to the three previously stated ones, however, Russell should not have accepted this universal impulse (search for perfection) even in this general form as it has been already proved in logic that *a general negation does not imply the generality of that negation.*

To state the matter differently, if you say, the members of the whole audience taking part in this forum are not graduated, it is not as if to say that not even a single person among the audience attending the forum is graduated. Moreover, it is a baseless instilment to introduce the love for family, nation and humanity as extensions of the gratification of the primordial sense of search for perfection, while if Sir Russell had bothered to dig into the depths of human existence, he would have asserted that not only is there no contradiction between theism and religiosity, on the one hand, and devoting oneself to one's

family, nation and humanity, on the other. In fact, the love that the authentic theism and religiosity cultivates inside man as to his family, nation and humanity in general, is deeper and more reliable than those humanistic instilled sentiments that have done nothing for humanity but created an agitated melancholia.

One of the issues that Sir Russell deals with in an obscure and paradoxical fashion is religion. In some of his renowned books, Russell has frequently said, "Religion has always had grave consequences." As we have mentioned previously, he has introduced ignorance, weakness and compulsion as the factors of fondness for religion; in fact, a 19th century stereotype view of the matter. In any event, Russell has two ideas that make his take on religion more obscure and paradoxical.

To begin with, in his dialogues with Wyatt, Russell argues:

But the founders of religions, I mean all religions, have the least contact with the ideas of their followers; this is indeed the case in reality, too.

To make his readers' minds clear on the subject matter, shouldn't Sir Russell have first introduced them into the nature of such a serious phenomenon as religion and then sought to determine the basic intention of its founders, and only after having done these, proceeded to critique the intellectual dependence of religious people on the ideas of the establishers of religion?

Secondly, in *History of Western Philosophy*, Russell has argued:

In the sphere of thought, sober civilization is roughly synonymous with science. But science, unadulterated, is not satisfying; men need passion, art and religion as well.¹

Q6: What result would we reach in your view through comparing Bertrand Russell with other [Western] philosophers like Descartes, Kant, Hegel, and such Eastern philosophers as Avicenna and Mulla Sadra?

Ja'fari: I guess I have already made such comparisons by way of indication and in a succinct fashion. Nonetheless, let us broach some other themes in this regard here. Russell abstains from expressing his conclusive take on many philosophical issues as well as numerous issues pertaining *Geisteswissenschaften*, save those of political sciences. In many cases, at least the intellectual readers of Russell's work cannot determine his final stance on, say, a particular scientific and philosophical issue having the whole Russellian corpus in view. Moreover, comparing Russell with other philosophers whether from the West like Hegel and Kant or from the East such as Avicenna and

1- Russell, Bertrand (1945): *A History of Western Philosophy*.

Sadrulmutalehin, is in one respect like comparing a thinking style with a thinking product, since other philosophers have systematically offered the products of their philosophizations in the form of a school to humanity while Russell's philosophy is being featured by its analytic and critical style of thinking.

If we claim that Russell was a man of philosophy, this is to say that he has engaged himself in the contemplation of a considerable amount of knowledge accumulated around the man and universe and made sizable efforts – that have surely been pleasurable for him – to determine the degree of the reliability of principles and means of philosophical speculations. However, he has not laid down a whole philosophical edifice of his own that can host other philosophers and thinkers within.

Having said this, we can think of comparing Russell with other thinkers and philosophers like Socrates, though with total awareness of the differences between him and other philosophers.

The committed conscience offered the cup of hemlock to Socrates so as to show by drinking it a practical proof for the sacrifices he had made in the path of wisdom and the progression of human noble morals, whereas Russell does not precisely maintain any human value for moral conscience and lofty ethical principles and does not show any positive take on God, either. As a result, his efforts and activities in the path of humanity and "transcendental" commitment require more convincing proofs that neither he has demonstrated in his works nor can the external act substantiate. Of course, we know that he has tirelessly toiled for the establishment of a foundation for peace, which we hope will prove to be effective for humanity.

Q7: What is in your view Russell's stance on metaphysical issues?

Ja'fari: Three points can be outlined in this regard:

1- In a number of cases, Russell clearly acknowledges the existence of metaphysics; for example, in *Mysticism and Logic*, where he argues:

A truer image of the world, I think, is obtained by picturing things as entering into the stream of time from the eternal world outside, rather than from a view which regards time as the devouring tyrant of all that is. Both in thought and feeling, even though time is real, to realize the unimportance of time is the gate of wisdom.¹

Moreover, the stone-deaf example that Russell relates in *ABC of Relativity* – and we have quoted previously – also substantiates the existence of metaphysics.

2- The other evidence to Russell's acknowledgement of the existence of metaphysics is his admission of an independent extra-perceptual

1- Russell, Bertrand, *Mysticism and Logic*.

reality for the objective world as a philosopher who belongs to the realist camp. However, in some other places, to tackle some philosophical difficulties, he says:

By acknowledging the reality of the external world, we can deny the existence of material objects.¹

Undoubtedly, by denying the existence of material objects in the outside world, we shall arrive at a metaphysical reality that cannot have a physical appearance.

3- Metaphysics [in one sense] consists of the underlying principles of issues concerning religion. Russell's stance in this regard is confusing, paradoxical and uncertain.

On this side of metaphysics, Russell has contented himself with mere denial without providing any reason. As we have already seen in the issue regarding God's existence, he has not offered any reason for his denial of Divine Essence. By the same token, he does not provide his reader with any kind of reason for his refusal of the soul's immortality; rather, he only says, "We have no reason to demonstrate that the soul will remain there even after the dissolution of body."

Q8: What is the foothold chosen by Russell for humanity and how do you find it?

Ja'fari: I think Russell has not made much effort in this regard; it might not have been in his eyes the first rate problem that needs to be addressed, since the points that Sir Russell has made in this regard, however significant they may be, are nonetheless by no means satisfactory. He believes:

... anxiety is somehow necessary for the intellectual cultivation of people; however, if they have scientific information of an acceptable size, this information will serve as ballast that can reduce the discomforts resulted from the sense of doubt.²

I don't think there is any intelligible person who would challenge Sir Russell's latter point. Of course, we must struggle and put all of our energy to use in order to mobilize all aspects of life. We Moslems are acquainted with this principle in our literary Islamic culture that:

Verily the man of the world and indeed her only man/ is he who does not count on any man in the world. (Tughraei)

Which man do you know, however, in history who could have unchained himself from all deterministic laws of nature and social life

1- Russell, Bertrand, *Introduction to Philosophy*.

2- Ja'fari, M. T. (2008), *An Analytical Exposition of the Russell-Wyatt Dialogues*, original Persian edition.

and the like, and found absolute power in all respects without being bothered with any need whatsoever!! And even then, are our mental activities indeed merely restricted to finding the stuffs of natural life which we could consume either individually or collectively? We need education, and unless the goal is fulfilled, we have to rely on our teacher or instructor. We require cultural management, and to benefit from this management, we should certainly lean on righteous cultural authorities. We need political management, and to sustain our "intelligible life", we will have to have trust in honest politicians. More significantly, our mind seriously asks us, "Who are you? Whither have you come? Why have you come? Where do you go from here?" It is needless to say, to answer these existential questions we will need to rely on supernatural figures known as prophets and saints. The necessity of depending on these figures is being endorsed by common sense and pure conscience. It is surprising that Russell has argued:

On the other hand, suppose you were stone-deaf from birth, but lived among musical people. You could understand, if you had learned to speak and to do lip-reading, that the musical scores represented something quite different from themselves in intrinsic quality, though similar in structure. The value of music would be completely unimaginable to you, but you could infer all its mathematical characteristics, since they are the same as those of the score. Now our knowledge of nature is something like this. We can read the scores, and infer just so much as our stone-deaf person could have inferred about music. But we do not possess the advantages which that person derived from his association with musical people. We cannot know whether the music represented by the scores is beautiful or hideous; perhaps, in the final analysis, we cannot be quite sure that the scores represent anything but themselves. But this is a doubt which the physicist, in a professional capacity, cannot entertain.¹

According to the abovementioned ideas, Sir Russell ought to have made a distinction between individuals' reliance upon other peoples, and he also should have discerned the dependence that causes one to have a pallid and thin life from that kind of reliance that makes the man conscious of his own power and magnificence and at the same time exposes him to the radiance of the infinite source of power and dignity. Holy Prophets (Peace Be Upon Them) and great figures such as Imam Ali (PBUH) were highly dependent on God. And they would always say that, "There is neither power nor strength but in God". Nevertheless, these men were the most active and serious figures throughout the history of mankind; their life was always full of turbulence. Nonetheless, there are some other figures who, despite of

1- Russell, Bertrand (1925), *ABC of Relativity*.

less significance as compared to holy prophets, have done unimaginable and brilliant works under the influence of a divine personality. Rumi's acquaintance with Shams of Tabriz is an outstanding example of this kind of dependences that revolutionized the poet to such an extent that Rumi says:

*I was a respected man of God;
You made me the plaything of children in the lane.
If you smile, I become a smile as well,
And if you rage, I shall become rage.
I am happy with you, o' sweet-lipped beloved of mine.¹*

Nevertheless, it needs to be conceded that we have scarcely seen such brilliant minds as Rumi's during past seven centuries.

In the same letter (September 11, 1963) in which I had asked Sir Russell about the human primordial sense of the search for perfection, I also asked him a mathematical question about "X", the conventional sign for variables. My question inquired whether it is not correct to use "X" as a sign for variables as it is invariably applicable to every number-concept. Russell replied to me in the following words:

From: The Earl Russell, O.M., F.R.S.,
16 September 1963
Dear Mr. Ja'afari,

Thank you for your letter. "X" denotes no more than variables because the value it represents varies with the problem. These values may be pre-determined but the uses of "X" as a symbol still vary.

The "search for perfection" is rather vague but, in any event, lofty impulses such as the "search for perfection" are not as common as you suggest.

Yours sincerely,

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Bertrand Russell

1- Rumi's *Sonnets of Shams*.