

## MINUTE PHILOSOPHER

'RIGHT', said Crito, 'the modern free-thinkers are the very same with those Cicero called minute philosophers, which name admirably suits them, they being a sort of sect which diminish all the valuable things, the thoughts, views and hopes of men; all the knowledge, notions and theories of the mind they reduce to sense; human nature they contract and degrade to the narrow low standard of animal life, and assign us only a small pittance of time instead of immortality.' . . .

Euphranor. *O Alciphron!* these minute philosophers (since that is their true name) are a sort of pirates who plunder all that come in their way. I consider myself as a man left stripped and desolate on a bleak beach.

So did I consider myself after the 853 pages in which Lord Russell apparently sets himself to the task of diminishing all the most valuable things of our European heritage.<sup>1</sup> I wanted to pass the book by with a shrug, but the editor wanted a review. So I wrote angrily, but of course anger defeated itself. I cried the editor mercy, but he had old-fashioned ideas of justice and insisted on a review. Then I happened to read Bishop Berkeley, and in his contributions to the *Guardian* and in *Alciphron* I found a curiously familiar figure. Whose was it? Toland's? Voltaire's? Russell's? Why, yes, it was Russell himself. Russell down to the ground. Not the formidable Russell, Russell the brilliant logician, but Russell the iconoclast, I had almost said the septuagenarian adolescent, Russell the minute philosopher. There he was, mercilessly pilloried by the excellent Bishop 200 years before he ever appeared on the scene, one of the 6-foot pygmies of the tribe of minute philosophers. And I understood, almost with sympathy, why he had not so much as mentioned these later works of the Bishop's in his *History*: 'All his best work was done while he was still quite young. . . . His writings after the age of twenty-eight were of less importance'. They must indeed make galling reading.

'Diminish and plunder'—it does not seem an unfair commentary on this *History of Western Philosophy*. Here, for instance, are the characters of some of our more distinguished predecessors: Plato, insincere and smug (like a clergyman); Aristotle, a diluted Platonist given to the common sense of 'a person innocent of philosophy' (and to think that once he was simply *Philosophus!*); Augustine and contemporary doctors of the Church, progenitors of cruelty and superstition; Thomas Aquinas, intellectually insincere with 'little of the true philosophic spirit'; Leibniz destitute of 'the higher philosophic

<sup>1</sup> *History of Western Philosophy*. By Bertrand Russell. (Allen & Unwin; 21s.)

virtues' double-dealing with the reading public; Kant, less important than is generally supposed and all wrong about space and time; Hegel, a logically-minded mystic with National Socialist tendencies; Bergson, a poet of the irrational with theories of space and time vitiated by elementary (*sic*) confusion. In the less properly philosophical field St Benedict is a miracle-monger, St Dominic a fanatic, St Francis (approval even more belittling than blame) a poet; the religious idealism of the Maccabees is a squabble about pork, Christian virginity (on which Russell harps) sex-obsession, nobility in the face of death smug illusion about an afterlife.

It is a sorry tale of human imbecility. And all, it seems, because the logic and analytic method of Lord Russell had not yet been vouchsafed to mankind. God may not, as Locke said, have been quite so sparing to men as to make them two-legged creatures and leave it to Aristotle to make them rational, but he does seem to have left a good deal for Russell to do more than 2000 years later.

Now one must, of course, be hardheaded about all this. If our ancestry is as shabby as that we have no right to deny the fact simply because we find it unpalatable. But we have at least the right to ask for evidence. The pedigree is a valuable one and I do not see why we should roll it up and throw it away simply because of panic at Lord Russell's reputation. His reputation rightly stands very high, but here it is being pitted against reputations that are not only high, but also classical; they have stood the test of time. So, what sort of evidence does he provide?

He claims to let his philosophers speak as much as possible for themselves. Alas! their intonations are as jerky, their inconsequences as improbable as those of prisoners providing confessions for examining commissars. There, too, it is part of the technique that they should speak for themselves. Or are these philosophers more like ventriloquists' dolls? Russell has a great variety of admirably dressed out dolls. They sit one after the other in his lap. But always the ventriloquist puts the questions, the ventriloquist's voice fills in the words that the dolls only mouth. And the dolls' silly, set smiles in the end spoil the illusion.

Russell's treatment of St Thomas is in this respect instructive. He takes the *Summa Contra Gentes* as St Thomas's most important work (the *Summa Theologica* is 'another book . . . of almost equal importance'!) and gives a *précis* based almost *ad literam* on the index of questions edited with their affirmative or negative solutions; the result is staccato scholasticism of the kind Russell evidently suspected from the start. His method with Plato is analogous; half a dozen of the dialogues, taken as far as one can see at random, are dissected; naturally the life goes clean out of them. The same with

Kant's ethical theory; the *membra disjecta* of the *Grundlegung* laid bare carry exactly the conviction that Russell intends they should. And so it is with the great majority of philosophers passed in review, a literally faithful, totally external account given of each. Did they not say all that is attributed to them? Yes, indeed, saving some mistakes; and (it is well to note) a good deal else besides. But the words they wrote were alive, inspired, and Russell has laid on them the dead hand of the analyst. Plato insisted that discourse must be like an *ensouled* animal; Russell has analysed the body, but the living thought escapes. And one asks, wondering, whether this is not the inevitable outcome of his whole theory of knowledge, and whether it is possible at all for one who has such a theory to write a history of philosophy.

But Russell does not only *précis*-write; he provides the *précis* in order to criticise, and there are passages, as one would expect from him, of acute criticism. He brings up his most beautiful instruments of logic to operate upon the bodies laid before him. But here again, one asks to what purpose? Russell's logic and analytic method are part and parcel of his philosophy—indeed not part but parcel. Against philosophers who would accept no such logic it is neither availing nor illuminating; to complain for instance that Plato has no understanding of philosophical syntax or that St Thomas's discussion of the existence and essence of God 'points to some kind of syntactical confusion' is like telling a Hottentot, who may be warning you of an approaching thunderbolt, that his trouble is his not having mastered basic English; it gets you nowhere.

Can there, then, be no exchange between philosophers of different schools? Certainly—but only on condition that you, who belong to one school, surrender yourself wholly to another who belongs to the other. You must see the universe with his eyes, interpret it according to his inspiration and principles. There is no other way to understand what he means by particular doctrines as they are found in the context of his whole system, no other way to escape the illusion of deceptively similar words and even thoughts. When that is done you may examine the internal coherence of his system—but if it is a philosophy that has at all commanded the attention of men you are likely to find it consistent enough. Only then may you return, as it were, to your true self, and ask two questions, always retaining in memory what you have learned of him under his own roof. Does he unawares *assume* in his philosophy something of which you are aware but which he explicitly denies or at least disregards? I mean, for instance, that I think the Thomist's strongest line with most other philosophers is that they overlook (and often deny) the character of sheer *being* implicit in their *data*, i.e. in the very fact that they

have data to go on at all and not simply nothing. And then the second question. Does his system taken as a whole fail to account for any at least seeming feature of the intelligible universe which your philosophy does account for and which you can persuade him or his adherents that his ought to account for—whether you persuade him simply by focussing his attention on the point, or better by indicating some concealed confusion or inadequacy in his system which is due to its disregard? I mean for instance that perhaps most philosophies fail to account for the radical heterogeneity of existential fact and reality, a heterogeneity allowed for in Thomism by its radical discrimination of judgment from mere entertainment of ideas; and that this heterogeneity is something of which we have inescapable evidence every time we make any judgment, even attributive—which is to say at every waking moment of our life that is not spent in the comparatively rare suspense of totally unresolved questioning.

This, it seems to me, is the possible interchange of philosophers. But immediately and directly to oppose point for point in different systems seems to me as vain as to say that a map on Mercator's projection is wrong because it does not bear the same markings as a map on some other projection. It becomes an idle comedy of cross-purposes, even when it is not merely *lis verborum*. For even with the most constant concepts of philosophic tradition it is always more probable than not that they have undergone complete transformation at the hand of every new thinker of genius. Russell devotes several pages to the explosion of Aristotle's theory of substance; but what he explodes is, I think, an amalgam of Aristotelian logic, Lockian metaphysics, and perhaps idealist epistemology, that bears as much relation to Aristotle's highly metaphysical and extremely aporetic theory of substance as soya-bean ersatz to genuine coffee.

Now it is because the business of comparing philosophies is as arduous as this (how many of us have either the time or capacity for this surrender to successive philosophers without losing ourselves?) that we so need the help of histories of philosophy written by authors who shall have done the thing on our behalf (as far as that is possible) and shall have traced the connections and interferences of different systems; whose resultant judgments may be relied upon to be at once sympathetic to those whose thought they have inhabited, but firmly founded, too, upon a clear position of their own. Such histories, no doubt, are ideal, scarcely to be attained. They must be the work not merely of the exact historian but still more of the philosopher. To produce such a history, or the approximation to such a history, would be a not unfitting crown to a life devoted to philosophical study. So when Russell's history was announced

there must have been many who looked forward to it with pleased anticipation.

Such hopes seem to me to have been sadly disappointed. What sort of philosophic sympathy with past thinkers is found in Russell's pages I have tried to show. But even as an historian Russell hardly displays that 'habit of careful veracity' which he claims to be a special attribute of his own philosophical school. Prejudice is strangely insinuating. For instance, on p. 164 the Platonic Socrates is 'dishonest and sophistical in argument', but on p. 484, when the aim is to discredit St Thomas, he becomes by comparison one who 'sets out to follow wherever the argument may lead'. On p. 309 where the aim is to bind the medievals under the spell of Plotinus St Thomas is 'nearer to Plotinus than to the *real* Aristotle', but on p. 484 'he knows Aristotle well and understands him thoroughly'; on p. 486 the 13th century Dominicans 'were in trouble with the university authorities, and were suspected of heretical sympathy with the Averrhoists', but on p. 474 they are despicable enough as 'impeccably orthodox'. It is, as a matter of verifiable fact, not true that St Thomas considered a series which had no first term an impossibility (cf. *Summa* I, 46, 2, ad 7); nor is it true that belief in innate ideas or principles was universal from the Stoics till Descartes (p. 292) (where does St Thomas maintain it?); nor is it true, though it lends colour to accusations of bigotry, that only one MS of Lucretius *de Rerum Natura* survived the Middle Ages (unless Renaissance scholars forged the others mentioned by the editors of the Oxford edition). This list could no doubt be prolonged indefinitely by a trained historian; enough has been said to make one hesitate to trust the guide at any point where he may have an axe to grind; and what true philosopher has not dozens of such axes?

Philosopher certainly Russell is. But if it is true that history of philosophy needs a philosopher to write it, this is no less true of parody of history of philosophy. *1066 and All That* had, I believe, to be written by trained historians; the present *History of Western Philosophy* could not have been written by anyone except an expert philosopher. But then why not have called it *Thales and the Others*, or some such title? It has all the devices proper to the genre; meiosis, bathos, zeugma, the misleading phrase, innuendo, mock-heroic. Only its title is misleading, suggesting that the author is really taking his subject and his public seriously. He should have remembered that his book would find its way into every public library in the land; and that readers in public libraries, being universally educated, are desperately serious-minded, and desperately gullible. I am afraid they will believe every word he has written.

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