

EDITED BY BERNARD WALL AND MANYA HARARI

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# THE CHANGING WORLD

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No. 1 Summer 1947

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GABRIEL MARCEL	Technics and Sin
WALDEMAR GURIAN	The United States and the Soviet Union
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KOESTLER's Thieves in the Night and RAYMOND MOLEY's Hays' Code

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# The Changing World

QUARTERLY REVIEW

No. 1

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## *History of Western Philosophy*

BY BERTRAND RUSSELL.

(G. ALLEN AND UNWIN. 21s.).

—Reviewed by Yorick Smythies.

*History of Western Philosophy* embodies what seem to me the worst features of Lord Russell's previous more journalistic works, but it is of poorer quality than any of these, partly because it covers a greater volume of subject-matter and moves through it at a greater speed. Those who are not exceptionally well-trained in avoiding such things will, I think, be likely to pick up its easy short-cuts to judgments on serious matters. It may be said: "Just because this book is, in a sense, journalistically written, it will be read by people who would otherwise never have known anything about the history of philosophy. It is better that these people should know something about what philosophers wrote, even though the thoughts are presented in such a way that their finer organisation is destroyed." This raises the questions: What ideas about philosophy would a reader be likely to get from such a work if he possessed no previous knowledge or training, and no exceptionally fine instinct for distinguishing what is genuine from what is not? What would he think he had learnt?

What ideas, for instance, would he derive from those frequent passages in which Lord Russell uses his lofty manner? Passages, e.g., like these: "In the passion and noise of violent motion there is no room for the fainter music of reason, no leisure for the disinterested contemplation in which greatness is sought, not by turbulence, but by the greatness of the universe which is mirrored." "... the moment of contemplative insight when, rising above animal life, we become conscious of the greater ends that redeem man from the life of the brutes." Nothing more natural than for him to think that this loftiness is characteristic of philosophical thought, all the more as Lord Russell often represents the men he is summarising as thinking in this style themselves. Buddha, for instance, is represented as saying with "calm urbanity": "... Love and knowledge and delight in beauty are not negations; they are enough to fill the lives of the greatest men who have ever lived." Something sickly about this elevated language is easily felt; but if a person studying this book as an introduction felt that such language was in some way weak, he might argue: "Such phrases have for Lord Russell a meaning which non-philosophers cannot be expected to understand. What it is to hear the fainter music of reason, or to experience the moment of contemplative insight, or to mirror to oneself the greatness of the universe, only Lord Russell and others among 'the greatest men who have ever lived' know. I can only take such experiences on trust."

Lord Russell is in a position above the "great men" with whom he deals, and passes upon each one summary judgment of his character and intellectual integrity: the impression being given that Lord Russell sees through him and even beyond him. For instance, it is said of Plato that he was "hardly ever intellectually honest"; of Socrates, "He is dis-

honest and sophistical in argument and in his private thinking he uses intellect to prove conclusions that are to him agreeable, rather than in a disinterested search for knowledge. There is something smug and unctuous about him, which reminds one of a bad type of cleric... he was not scientific in his thinking, but was determined to prove the universe agreeable to his ethical standards. This is treachery to truth, and the worst of philosophical sins...." Pascal and Dostoevsky "have both something abject in their virtue.... I agree with Nietzsche in thinking Dostoevsky's prostration contemptible." Lord Russell is a more reliable judge of human conduct than these men he is criticising, and knows more intimately what "intellectual honesty," "disinterested search for knowledge," etc., are. His own more general moral observations have a character of moderation and common sense contrasted with the more eccentric character of many of the moral views of others which he expounds. For instance: "A life dominated by a single passion is a narrow life, incompatible with every kind of wisdom"; "A certain uprightness and pride and even self-assertion of a sort, I should agree (with Nietzsche) are elements in the best character; no virtue which has its roots in fear is much to be admired." The reader who cannot, from Lord Russell's exposition, understand the depth of the moral views criticised is led to the opinion that these views are obviously one-sided compared with Lord Russell's own, more balanced, views.

A student is likely to find himself in difficulties if he tries to follow Lord Russell in the "disinterested thinking" which, we gather, forms an important part of the "good life." We gather that this disinterested thinking involves a familiarity with certain emotions and temptations which could not be experienced for the asking. It is necessary to feel the temptation to find "comfort" in the "fairy tales" of theology, and of philosophers like Plato and Socrates; fairy tales which, if you accepted them, would generate in you "a kind of impertinent insolence towards the universe." Refusing to accept these fairy tales, you are "faced by the terror of cosmic loneliness" and "the paralysis of utter despair." You can, however, find an "antidote" to it, and even some comfort, in entertaining certain reflections which Lord Russell describes, e.g., the reflection that "human life with all that it contains of evil and suffering is an infinitesimal part of the life of the universe." The reader may become depressed because he isn't familiar, in the way in which Lord Russell is, with the "terror of cosmic loneliness" and "the paralysis of utter despair"; and because he isn't moved by reflecting, e.g., by reflecting on the infinitesimal proportions that human life bears to the universe. Even if such reflections do come to him, they may not come in the right, disinterested, way. For, in order to be disinterested, they must necessitate the use of courage in the person who reflects, as, we must assume, they do in Lord Russell's own case. They must not have anything facile about them.

Alongside the synopses of Philosophy, Social Theory and Religion, Lord Russell provides synopses of historical events. But if a student asks himself

"What have I learnt from these summaries of the Old Testament, Greek and Mediaeval History, the Renaissance, etc.?" he is likely to be troubled by the fact that the events described run together in his mind in a blur, in which no one concrete shape can be seen. Many of these summaries are nearly as condensed as the following: "The first person mentioned in the Old Testament of whom there is an independent record is Ahab, King of Israel, who is spoken of in an Assyrian letter of 853 B.C. The Assyrians finally conquered the Northern kingdom in 722 B.C. and removed a great part of the population. After this time the kingdom of Judah alone preserved the Israelite religion and tradition. The kingdom of Judah just survived the Assyrians, whose power came to an end with the capture of Nineveh by the Babylonians and Medes in 606 B.C. But in 586 B.C. Nebuchadnezzar captured Jerusalem, destroyed the Temple and removed a large part of the population to Babylon." If someone didn't possess further knowledge of Judah, the Assyrians, the Babylonians and the Medes, and "the Israelite religion and tradition," such a passage, with its string of proper names and dates, would not mean much to him. It is difficult to see how such a person could pick up valuable knowledge from a list of facts of this kind. Or how he could pick up valuable knowledge from many of the general historical outlines, which cover the events of hundreds of years in a few pages—sometimes reading like summaries of other popular outlines.

The Preface seems to refer to this difficulty when it says: "Without detail, a book becomes jejune and uninteresting," and states that details, with "some illustrative or vivifying quality" have been provided. Effort, in fact, is made to keep one entertained. For instance, soon after the passage quoted above, there occurs an anecdote describing how an old man and seven brothers, during the persecutions of Antiochus IV, were "first exhorted to eat pork, then, when they refused, tortured and killed." The general observation is made: "In enduring and resisting persecution, the Jews of this time showed immense heroism, although in defence of things that do not strike us as important, such as circumcision and the wickedness of eating pork." But supposing someone (a) didn't find himself entertained by Lord Russell's humour or by these "vivifying details"; (b) wanted serious answers to such questions as: What led the Jews to regard eating pork as wicked, or endure persecution over something so seemingly "unimportant"? What is it like to believe what a Jew of that time believed?—he might feel that Lord Russell's "vivifying details" and humorous observations were more useless to him than the synopses in which they were embedded.

This humour consists, essentially, in portraying the man or philosophy under consideration as something semi-absurd. For example, Pythagoras "may be described, briefly, as a combination of Einstein and Mrs. Eddy. He founded a religion, of which the main tenets were the transmigration of souls and the sinfulness of eating beans." If a person's ideas are summarised in a few sentences, and that which made them serious is either left out or not represented seriously, they will appear faintly absurd of

their own accord. Especially, if these ideas are not recent, they will appear as something left behind by "modern science." (For what primarily justifies the assumption that "we" are more intelligent than the men represented is the popular conception of modern science we carry with us.) People's lives and ideas, served up in this way, become unattractive and insipid. The most positive taste one gets from these presentations is that of Lord Russell's prose (which has a tinny, flat quality peculiar to itself).

These historical summaries are intended to make us see the individual philosophers as "effects of their social circumstances and of the politics and institutions of their time." One would, however, be at a loss if one were asked to give a detailed justification, on the basis of the historical facts provided, of the social-philosophical generalisations which Lord Russell makes. One would have to show, for instance, how "Greek philosophy down to Aristotle" was the "effect" of the Greek City State; and how philosophy since Descartes "tends to embody the prejudices of the commercial middle class." This would mean, I suppose, showing for each of the Greek philosophies down to Aristotle that it couldn't have existed, or would have existed in a different form, if the constitution of Greece had been different; and it would involve saying something about the courses Greek philosophy might have taken if the history and constitution of Greece had been different. Similarly, one would have to say which philosophical propositions held by philosophers since Descartes embodied which prejudices of the commercial middle class, and what development of philosophy one might have expected if all philosophers had, *e.g.*, lived in an aristocratic environment. It would be equally impossible also to establish in detail, on the basis of the facts and summaries provided, those wide causal generalisations which Lord Russell frequently makes. For instance, how would we substantiate the generalisation: "But for him (Pythagoras), Christians would not have thought of Christ as the Word; but for him theologians would not have sought logical proofs of God and immortality"?

It might be objected: "Even if there is nothing to be learnt from Lord Russell's historical representations, there is something to be learnt from his representations and criticisms of philosophical arguments." This has the truth in it that, if a person is by nature philosophically inclined, almost anything which could come under the head "philosophy" may stimulate him to ask philosophical questions. But if a student read Lord Russell's book in order to learn about philosophy—as he might read a book on mechanics in order to learn about mechanics—and if he then tried to explain in his own words what a philosophical "theory" is, or what any particular philosophical "theory" is, he would find difficulties which prevented him from doing this—difficulties of a kind which he hadn't in any way foreseen.

Supposing, for instance, he wanted to know the differences between philosophical and scientific "theories" (this is the primary difficulty that beginners in philosophy have). The specimen questions of philosophy

presented in the Introduction wouldn't be likely to help him; e.g., "Has the universe any unity of purpose? Is it evolving towards some goal?" or "Is man what he seems to the astronomer, a tiny lump of impure carbon and water impotently crawling on a small and unimportant planet?" After studying such questions he might ask: What is it which makes these questions philosophical as opposed to scientific? Is it that they are general, vague, and, as Lord Russell explains, unanswerable by existing "laboratory techniques"? Or is it that they have a certain lofty quality, and deal with things too elevated to be reached by laboratory techniques, such as unity of purpose?—he is presented with an insoluble problem because these questions, in the form in which Lord Russell presents them, are not strictly questions of science or of philosophy, but primarily questions of "popular science" and "popular philosophy." The astronomer referred to, for instance, to whom "man seems a tiny lump of impure carbon and water impotently crawling on a small and unimportant planet" is an astronomer writing popular science. The questions could only properly be explained or understood under the heading "journalism."

These specimen questions are preceded by the following general explanation: "Philosophy, as I shall understand the word, is something intermediate between theology and science. Like theology, it consists of speculations on matters as to which definite knowledge has, so far, been unascertainable; but, like science, it appeals to human reason rather than to authority, whether that of tradition or that of revelation. All *definite* knowledge—so I should contend—belongs to science; all dogma as to what surpasses definite knowledge belongs to theology." This, if it is interpreted literally, seems to mean: A theological question is one that hasn't so far been answered in a definite way; and if it were answered, would be answered by scientific methods. A philosophical question is therefore something intermediate between an answered scientific question and an unanswered, though scientifically answerable, question. It has the further property that it "appeals to reason" for its answer; that is, it claims that its answer can be definitely known; that is, it appeals to science for its answer—but in this case it seems indistinguishable from a scientific question. (Elsewhere it is explained that certain "ultimate questions of value," such as "Is it bad to enjoy the infliction of cruelty?" are also "traditionally included" among philosophical questions; but that these are "legitimately" "matters of feeling" and are settled by "an appeal to the emotions.")

The primary difficulties which, more or less explicitly, bewilder beginners in philosophy are such difficulties as these:—If philosophical theories are about matters of objective fact, as they give the impression of being, why should it be so difficult to see what these matters of objective fact are? These "facts" seem slippery, retreating from us as we look for them more closely, so that there is the obvious temptation to say (as there isn't over scientific disputes), "No facts are in question," or "It is all a matter of words." Why is it that, if philosophy deals with something objective, analogously to science and mathematics, there doesn't

seem to be a single statement over which philosophers agree, or which could be said to have been "established"?—How can philosophical proofs be said to "prove" if they are never generally accepted as proving? What does "progress" in philosophy consist in, if nothing is ever established? Why can't one clear "advance" that has been made ever be clearly described? One kind of "advance" does seem to have been made: scientific questions have gradually separated from philosophy. But what is there left for philosophy to ask when all scientific questions have been separated off?

The natural tendency of someone presented with "philosophical theories" for the first time is to interpret them on the model of scientific theories. Lord Russell presents philosophical theories in such a way as to encourage this tendency. And his own more general account of what the difference is between philosophical theories and scientific ones would also tend to encourage a confusion between the two. But if someone wished to understand wherein the similarity between the two consisted, and looked closely into the philosophical "theories" expounded by Lord Russell in order to grasp this analogy more precisely, he would find that, as he looked more closely, the inclination to speak of such an analogy became less.

Supposing, for instance, he tried, with this purpose in mind, to make clear to himself from Lord Russell's exposition the nature of Hume's "theory of the Self." This exposition begins with the sentences: "Hume banished the conception of substance from psychology, as Berkeley had banished it from physics. There is, he says, no *impression* of self, and therefore no idea of self." The passages from Hume are then quoted in which he says that he can never observe in himself "anything but the perception" and "ventures to affirm of the rest of mankind that they are nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions." At this point, in order to help oneself become clearer as to how an investigation of this "theory" would differ from a scientific investigation, one might ask: How can one banish a "conception"? What alterations are made in physics or psychology when the conception of substance is banished? When such a conception is banished, do some people still continue to have it, or think they have it, and, if so, how are they persuaded not to have it, or made to admit that they don't have it? How can one know what the idea of the Self is which one can't have, unless one has that idea? Is the question solved by introspection or intuition, some saying "I have the idea," others saying "I haven't"; but, in this case, why do they argue, or what is there to argue about? Is it that this perception or idea is extremely difficult to describe; or that it is too evanescent to catch; or that some people are self-blind as others are colour blind? Could any fact be mentioned which was relevant in answering the question, "Are people bundles or simple Selves?"—or which would follow from one or the other being the case? If Hume's "theory" is correct, does that mean that I am mistaken in some way when I talk or think about "myself," and that I ought to speak about a "bundle"? But what could be meant

by saying to someone, "You are making a mistake whenever you employ the word 'myself'?"—Lord Russell then explains Hume's "theory" as follows: "Using modern terminology, we may say: Ideas of unperceived things or occurrences can always be defined in terms of perceived things or occurrences, and therefore, by substituting the definition for the term defined, we can always state what we know empirically without introducing any unperceived things or occurrences. As regards our present problem, all psychological knowledge can be stated without introducing the 'Self.' Further, the 'Self,' as defined, can be nothing but a bundle of perceptions, not a new simple 'thing.' In this I think that any thorough-going empiricist must agree with Hume."—This explanation introduces new difficulties, but of precisely the same kind.—If I say "he is imagining lions" or "I am imagining lions," would these statements be expressions of what Russell means by "psychological knowledge"? If so, does just using the words "I" and "he" involve "introducing the 'Self'?" If the words "I" and "he" can be defined away, why doesn't Lord Russell say what this definition is? Why can't a definition be easily given—e.g., "Imagining lions is occurring" or "The event, imagining lions here—now, is part of that bundle of events of which events A, B, C, etc., are also members" (specifying A, B, C, etc.)—and the adequacy or inadequacy of this definition clearly settled? When it is said that "every thorough-going empiricist" must agree with Hume, does this mean they all do agree, and why can't those who are not empiricists be persuaded to agree also? Is the argument too subtle or too difficult for them to follow?—Finally, Lord Russell says: "It does not follow that there is no simple 'Self'; it only follows that we cannot know whether there is or not, and that the Self, except as a 'bundle' of perceptions, cannot enter into any part of our knowledge. This conclusion is important in metaphysics, as getting rid of the last surviving use of 'substance.' It is important in theology, as abolishing all supposed knowledge of the 'soul.'" This seems to confuse anything that may have seemed clear before. If it is only that "we cannot know" whether there is a "simple Self," then this implies that we do have an "idea" of it (whatever this means), but don't know whether that which we have an idea of exists. If the Self can only "enter into our part of our knowledge" as a bundle of perceptions, why is it that it doesn't seem to "enter our knowledge" at all in this way? Generally, what do the "theories" that the Self is a "bundle" or is "simple" explain or make clearer? How is such a "theory" meant to function as explanation?—If someone tried to compare closely the question "Is there a Self?" to a scientific question—trying to state the analogy in precise terms—he might be led to ask questions of this kind. But I don't think he would find that Lord Russell's explanations helped him to answer such questions. The assumption that philosophical "theories" are analogous to scientific ones would appear less and less tenable to him, the more closely he searched for particular kinds of analogy.

Given such difficulties, the most incomprehensible philosophy outlined

in the book is what Lord Russell calls "modern analytic empiricism" or "logical empiricism." This, by "its incorporation of mathematics and its development of a powerful logical technique" is said to be "able, in regard to certain problems, to achieve definite answers which have the quality of science rather than of philosophy," and to use methods about which there is "general agreement." These problems and their "definite answers" are not mentioned in detail, but (with the exception of the Ontological argument and its destruction by the theory of descriptions) only hinted at.

(1) Some of these problems which have been definitely answered concern universals. "In quite recent times, although no decision has been reached, a new technique has been developed, and many incidental problems have been solved. It is not irrational to hope that, before very long, a definite agreement may be reached by logicians on this question." But these incidental problems and their solutions are not mentioned; and at another point it is said "the question of particulars and universals cannot be adequately discussed" until "all the words of ordinary languages will have yielded to analysis and been replaced by words having less complex significance." It is made clear that "this labour" hasn't yet been "performed."

(2) Lord Russell's own theory of descriptions "clears up two millennia of muddle-headedness about 'existence' beginning with Plato's *Theaetetus*." But it is left wholly unclear what philosophical problems (other than the Ontological argument) the translation of "An *A* exists" into "There is an *X* such that *X* is an *A*" clears up, or how it does so. It is not made clear, also, whether the theory of descriptions clears up the muddles about existence which Lord Russell is expounding and criticising throughout the book; e.g., muddles about the "existence" of universals, selves, material objects, etc.

(3) It has been shown that mathematical knowledge is "merely verbal knowledge" and that "mathematical knowledge ceases to be mysterious. It is all of the same nature as the 'great truth' that there are 3 feet to a yard." But, it is said, the proof that "'4' means the same as '2 plus 2,'" from which and similar proofs all this follows, are too long to be given.

(4) References are made to what logical analysis "may" do in the future. For instance, the "decision" between Solipsism, Idealism and Realism, if possible at all, "can only be made by an elaborate investigation of non-demonstrative inference and the theory of probability."

When it is said that philosophical problems can be, or have been, solved by scientific techniques it is implied that (1) a scientific "solution" to the philosophical problem in question is known by Lord Russell, but is of too advanced a nature to present to the general reader; (2) this is generally accepted as constituting a solution, in the way in which scientific or mathematical solutions are generally accepted. The truth behind this is that logical-mathematical proofs exist which some philosophers think constitute solutions to philosophical problems. But such statements as, e.g., that the problem of universals will be solved by the invention of a

logical language, or that "mathematical knowledge is merely verbal," made as if they resulted from scientific investigations, are likely to mislead to the greatest possible degree; as also is the implication that all reputable philosophers who know the appropriate logical proofs agree that these have relevance to philosophical problems (the books in which discussion of these proofs are to be found are never mentioned). In fact, no agreement of this kind exists. The "general agreement" about these "methods" to which Lord Russell refers exists among those who hold the opinion that these methods are useful in philosophy. But they have no more justification for speaking of general agreement than any other group of philosophers.

It is not surprising that Lord Russell wishes to assimilate philosophical problems to scientific ones, because, as he uses them, "science" and "scientific" act primarily as words of approbation. Also, these constant references to "science" distract attention from awkward questions. "It would all be quite clear to me if I knew as much about these things as Lord Russell. I take a mathematician's word for it that circles can't be squared; similarly, I take Lord Russell's word for it that 'science' and 'scientific' philosophy have made the discoveries he mentions, although I don't understand what exactly these discoveries are."

I have imagined someone who realises that there is something unclear in what Lord Russell says, and who asks questions in order to try to follow what has been said more clearly. But these smooth, easy sentences are not designed to be questioned. It is easy to glide through them, feeling, vaguely, instructed and entertained. But any search for greater clarity exposes some underlying shoddiness of thought which is covered up. The sentence *looks* straightforward. A typical sentence is, for instance, "While physics has been making matter less material, psychology has been making mind less mental." One might demand greater clarity by asking, *e.g.*, the questions: How does a physical thing—this chair, for instance—become "less material"? And, from what propositions of physics does it follow, and how does it follow, that statements attributing physical features to chairs are in some way false? What propositions in physics contradict, *e.g.*, the statement that this is solid, has such and such a size, shape, position, etc.? If you ask even such vague and general questions as these, you begin to see what happens to the apparent straightforwardness. The unclarity of thought was covered up, partly, by the crisp and "clear" manner in which the sentence reads, if one just skims through it. Would someone who, after reading this sentence, recited this "fact" (perhaps with some vague reference to "electrons" and "indeterminacy") have learnt anything except how to appear and to feel knowledgeable about "big" subjects, on the smallest possible basis of actual knowledge?

Academic historians are usually content with manipulating imitatively the terminology of the philosopher they are expounding. What they do in making these paraphrases isn't quite philosophy, or history (that it is insipid goes without saying). Lord Russell also paraphrases philosophical "theories" in this way. Besides this, a philosophical theory in passing

through his hands undergoes, roughly, the following treatment:—(1) It is either made to look, or stated to be, like a scientific theory, but its precise relation to science or the precise nature of a possible "proof" left blank. (2) It is made "easy to understand" by having the difficulties, muddles, puzzling questions surrounding it (which make up the problem which the "theory" attempts to answer) removed, or made as little visible as possible. (For the more clearly one describes what a philosophical theory is, and how it works, the more difficulties come to light, and the less like a theory it looks. Popular expositions of this kind, in smoothing out the difficulties from a problem, smooth out of existence the problem itself). (3) A number of other ingredients are mixed in with it—the now fashionable talk about "social surroundings"; facetiousness; lofty, or moralistic, reflections; fragments of popular science, etc.—and finally it is handed out in sleek prose.

I fear that Lord Russell's book will teach successfully a popular substitute for thinking and for knowledge, and that it will both appeal to and stimulate slipshod thinking. Popular works of this type seem to be widely accepted among educated people, including University men, as contributions to philosophy, or to history, or to whatever their subject is. It is not, therefore, surprising that this work has gone down so well. A few people, including University men, may object to it as "over-simplified" or "vulgar," but they will, all the same, enjoy reading it. And, in any case, they wouldn't apply strong words to something so unexceptional; so similar to what many of them do themselves.

YORICK SMYTHIES.

### *Portrait of the Dalai Lama*

BY SIR CHARLES BELL. (COLLINS. 21s.).

—Reviewed by Marjorie Villiers.

Europeans describing Tibet have tended to focus their attention on the esoteric aspect of the Tibetan religion; one of the most valuable assets of Sir Charles Bell's book is that his approach is quite other. Informed by an open and respectful mind, his main preoccupation is with the character and the administrative and political activities of the thirteenth Dalai Lama and with the daily lives of "The Precious Protector's" subjects; he writes without emotion and is apparently impervious to the glamour which has often blurred travellers' accounts of Tibet. Much can be learned about Tibet in these pages, but also much about the way in which, despite lack of constructive directives and failure to give adequate power to the official in charge, individual British government servants