

# BERTRAND RUSSELL: COGNITIVISM, NON-COGNITIVISM AND ETHICAL CRITICAL THINKING

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## ABSTRACT

Bertrand Russell converted from ethical cognitivism to ethical non-cognitivism and this was historically important, as it gave rise in part, to meta-ethics. It also clarified the central problem between cognitivism and non-cognitivism. Russell's view was that defining "good" is the basic problem of ethics. If "good" is not amorphous, the rest of ethics will follow. He did not believe in ethical knowledge per se and asserted that reason is, and must only be, the servant of desire. A factual statement is thus true if there is an equivalent fact, but as ethical statements do not state facts, there is no issue of a corresponding fact or the statement being true or false in the sense in which factual statements are. Ethics has no statement whether true or false, but consists only of desires of a general kind and people know intuitively what is "right" or "wrong". To Russell critical thinking is entrenched in the structure of philosophy. His epistemological conviction was that knowledge is difficult to attain, while his ethical conviction showed that people should be expected to exercise freedom of inquiry when arriving at conclusions of something being either "good" or "bad".

**Keywords:** Ethics; cognitivism; non-cognitivism; utilitarianism; desire

## INTRODUCTION

Bertrand Russell (1872–1970) was one of the great British thinkers of the twentieth century. He wrote more than 50 books, over 74 years, and established the terms of the debate in logic and philosophy. He was married four times and lost three elections to parliament. Russell led a movement for nuclear disarmament and was twice incarcerated and discharged from three jobs for his pacifism and eccentric views on the issue of

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sex. Russell was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1950 and died at the age of 97. He is widely acknowledged for bringing techniques of logical analysis to the core difficulties of philosophy. Along with his forerunner, Gottlob Frege, who published similar definitions to him of number in 1884, and his acolyte Ludwig Wittgenstein, Russell was a founder of analytic philosophy. A number of his philosophical works are still read today. Most notably, *The Problems of Philosophy* and *History of Western Philosophy*, are very popular reading. Russell was the trailblazer of the British “revolt against idealism” in the early part of the twentieth century. In 1950 he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in acknowledgment of his wide-ranging and noteworthy writing, in which he supported humanitarian principles and the notion of freedom of thought. His work essay *On Denoting* (1905) was deliberated upon as being an exemplar of philosophy (Kreisel 1973). This work, in particular, greatly impacted upon inter alia logic, philosophy, mathematics, epistemology, metaphysics and language (Ludlow 2008).

Russell was elected as a Fellow of the Royal Society (FRS) in 1908. Shortly after this he co-authored the three-volume *Principia Mathematica*, with Alfred Whitehead, which was published in 1913. For Russell, *Principia Mathematica*, was a *tour de force* which he published in three volumes in 1910, 1912 and 1913. The first volume was co-written with Alfred Whitehead (Russell 1948); however the last two were virtually as a result of Russell’s own endeavours. It should be noted that although the Latin phrase “*Principia Mathematica*” can be translated as “The Principles of Mathematics”, in the case of the following publications of Russell, they are in fact not the same.<sup>1</sup> Russell went beyond the traditional mind-matter distinctions and developed a metaphysics similar to Whitehead’s. In *Principia Mathematica* he sought to develop all of mathematics from solely logical axioms, by utilising a theory or system of “types”, from which every mathematical unit is assigned to a type inside a hierarchy of types. They thus demonstrated how all mathematics could be deduced from a few basic axioms of logic. However, we need to also consider the circularity demanded in Russell’s posture. If we carefully look at his definition of the number “2” with the aid of his supposedly purely logical concept of a class, we find that the logical class concept, he claims, enables the reduction of mathematics to logic. For example, the number “2” is “defined” in the following way: “1 + 1 is the number of a class  $w$  which is the logical sum of two classes,  $u$  and  $v$ , which have no common terms and have each only one term. The chief point to be observed is that logical addition of numbers is the fundamental notion, while arithmetical addition of numbers is wholly subsequent” (Russell 1956b, 119). It is nonetheless ironic that Russell already had to use the original meaning of number in order to distinguish between different (“logical”) classes. He expresses ideas about the

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1 Thus, Bertrand Russell and Alfred North Whitehead, 1910–1913, *Principia Mathematica*, (3 volumes), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, and Russell, B. 1956, *The Principles of Mathematics*. London: George Allen and Unwin (first published in 1903, 2nd edition 1937, 7th edition 1956) are indeed two distinct works.

sum of “two” classes where each of them contains “one” element. This presupposes an insight into the numerical meaning of the numbers “1” and “2”. Accordingly, the number “2”, which had to appear as the result of “logical addition”, is assumed by it.

In his discussion of number and the concept of class, the contemporary of Russell, Ernst Cassirer, displays a clear understanding of this particular circularity (Cassirer 1953, 44). However, this all tended to stimulate the growth of symbolic logic and the development of set theory in modern mathematics. The implication was that objects conforming to a given type are assembled wholly from objects of previous types which are lower in the hierarchy, consequently preventing loops. Individual sets of elements, then, are different in type than each of their elements. Thus, one could not speak of the “set of all sets” and comparable constructs, which lead to paradoxes. This work as well as *The Principles of Mathematics*, soon made Russell world-renowned (Griffin 2003). Prior to Russell advancing his logicist views, the German mathematician, Richard Dedekind, already claimed that the idea of infinity should form part of the logical foundation of mathematics. Yet it soon turned out that the meaning of infinity precedes logic (Fraenkel Bar-Hillel, Levy and Van Dalen 1973, 186). Myhill also alludes to the fact that the axioms of principia do not determine how many individuals there are: “the axiom of infinity, which is needed as a hypothesis for the development of mathematics in that system is neither provable nor refutable therein, i.e., is undecidable” (Myhill 1952, 182). What is at stake here is the foundational role of the meaning of number as it relates to that of the meaning of logical analysis. Every attempt to deduce the meaning of number from the meaning of analysis or even logic is faced with a vicious circle. Cassirer is also explicit in this respect when he asserts that a critical analysis of knowledge, in order to side-step a *regressus* in infinitum, has to admit certain basic functions which are not capable of being “deduced” and which are not in need of any deduction. Russell, however, discovered that Cantor’s naïve set concept is unreliable, although it was independently discovered by Zermelo at the same time.<sup>2</sup>

Russell assumed a utilitarian outlook that the “happiness of mankind should be the aim of all actions” (Russell 1978, 39) to be understandably factual; and he took “the greatest happiness of the greatest number” as the idyllic theory. As he became older he distanced himself from utilitarianism as a result of his attainment of “moral experience” (Russell 1978, 161). Russell now believed that it is very difficult to pre-judge what one’s moral opinion will be at a particular point in time in a particular set of circumstances. He conformed to the notion that one ought to contemplate eternity, or humanity would be doomed and simply consist of well fed “pigs”. The contemplation he proposed would not necessarily, he believed, always lead to happiness, but there would be more happiness than depression (Russell 1978, 161). Russell played with the

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2 See the selections from one of the Volumes of Husserl’s *Collected works*, including: Husserl, E. 1979. *Aufsätze und Rezensionen (1890–1910)*, *Husserliana*, Edmund Husserl, *Gesammelte Werke (Collected Works)*, Volume XXII, Husserl Archives in Leuven, guided by Samuel Ijsseling with the aid of Rudolf Boehm, Edited by Bernhard Rang, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers.

idea of neo-Hegelianism in his early life and reality was thus not always what it seemed to be – it was certainly not as scientifically explicable as we are led to assume. The world is indeed full of numerous incongruities.

## ON CRITICAL THINKING AND PHILOSOPHY

Critical thinking is a core aspect in Russell's philosophy stance. He often changed his views but on reading his work, it is evident that he was to a great extent influenced by the realism of George Edward Moore. His views are articulated in a wide range of works and were never essentially pooled into a fully-inclusive description. His analyses are expressed in, inter-alia, papers such as *Free thought and official propaganda* (1922), *The value of free thought* (1944), *Education for democracy* (1939), *How to become a philosopher* (1942) and *Freedom and the philosopher* (1951); and books such as *Principles of Social Reconstruction* (1916). The notion of "critical thinking" was at this time not in vogue and terms such as reflective thinking and scientific thinking were often used to express it. Russell asks us to be reminiscent that "our most unquestioned convictions may be as mistaken as those of Galileo's opponents" (Russell 1997).

To Russell, critical thinking was part and parcel of philosophy, and it was important in the sciences of rational thought, liberalism and education (Russell 1985). He suggested that reality is fundamentally a series of events, some of which are physical in nature while the others are mental. These events could all be understood through careful use of logic coupled with scientific analysis. Nonetheless, such analysis does not support a range of beliefs such as the existence of God or the objective reality of moral values. Russell's notion of critical thinking reflects on a wide assortment of skills, characteristics and approaches, which describe a virtue with a combination of moral and intellectual components. It is this virtue which enables one to be anti-dogmatic and non-prejudicial. People should, in terms of such thinking, be able to make what are considered to be reasonable judgements when it comes to working their way through moral mazes and ethical dilemmas. Russell viewed education as an important conveyor of "right thinking" (Russell 1956a). He was at odds with idealistic doctrines and considered the logical-analytic model to be the key to solving philosophical dilemmas. By framing things logically, the relationship between two diverse things could be kept decent, as he states in the *History of Western Philosophy*:

...a great part of philosophy can be reduced to something that may be called "syntax"... some men, notably Carnap, have advanced the theory that all philosophical problems are really syntactical, and that, when errors in syntax are avoided, a philosophical problem is thereby either solved or shown to be insoluble...there can be no doubt that the utility of philosophical syntax in relation to traditional problems is very great. (Russell 1961)

Russell poses important questions about the nature of philosophy and the value of studying it. He observes that many critics immediately dismiss philosophical investigation since they believe it is incapable of yielding any practical, perceptibly true

conclusions. Such critics fail to grasp the essence of philosophical study. Philosophy is at variance with the physical sciences when it comes to their individual efficacy. The sciences are valuable since they make practical applications available which may benefit everyone. Philosophy mainly benefits an individual student, rather than the general public. Philosophy provides particular knowledge and guides students to identify and question assumptions that are made (Russell 1927a/b), which involves learning not to be gullible. Students learn to constructively doubt so as to examine untested ideas, and oppose the view that some philosopher or other person has captured the entire truth. There must be good reasons for anyone to support or begin to undermine a belief. What is essential is critical scrutiny of the facts – evidence is thus important. What becomes critical for students, for example, is to learn how to arrive at a conclusion on any issue when there are insufficient data available (Russell 1977).

In the work *Analysis of Mind* (1921), Russell states that concepts of psychology can be submitted to logical analysis. Therefore belief, consciousness, perception, memory and even desire are all reducible to the ultimate parts used in the analysis of matter, in what became known as “neutral monism”, as matter and mind are made from the same neutral material. The “soul” and even “ego” were not important enough to require construction, and personal identity could be secured by various types of continuity such as in the case of experience. It is evident from his writings that complete rationality is indeed an unachievable ideal. Rationality is a matter of degree – often based on fallacy. One may possess critical skills but that does not make you a critical thinker. When one is educated, one acquires certain mental habits and thus one sees the world in a certain way (Russell 1953). He stresses the need to be impartial, but acknowledges that one cannot be totally impartial when viewing the world. We should try to manage our biases but some of them may be unconscious (Russell 1940). Russell speaks of “the habit of impartial inquiry”, which is important and necessary if one-sided opinions are not going to be accepted by their face value. There is also a habit of weighing up evidence and acquiescing entirely to propositions for which there is no reason to believe them as true. One should try to see things in a truthful manner and should live by being self-directed and with an independent will. Each of these requires intelligent thought (Russell 1995). One should not become a victim of habit, but one should act as a critical thinker and stay open-minded. Inadequate hypotheses must be discarded out of hand, and this calls for one to stick to facts and be true to oneself (Russell 1957). Russell stresses sound judgment and he suggests that critical thinking skills cannot be condensed to any prescription to be regularly applied. Non-cognitivism incorporates both emotivism and prescriptivism, which however, differ on two key grounds. For the prescriptivist a normative sentence is used for unreserved principle prescriptions which may be universalised. “Thou shalt not kill” would be an example of this notion. The emotivists, however, see a normative sentence as one which expresses a writer’s emotion, such as “Whew”. There is also a difference about the likelihood of an authentic logic of norms between these theories.

Critical judgment implies that one must weigh up the evidence and arguments, and a fairly accurate truth must be predictable. Critical thinking also requires people being critical concerning their attempts at criticism. He notes that a repudiation of something is not necessarily final, but rather a lead up to further refinements (Russell 1961). People should be humble enough to understand that their desires and wishes cannot offer them a better comprehension of the world. They should rather be tentative but not sceptical for no reason, and should be critically undogmatic and receptive (Russell 1940), as this is the true essence of a scientist. We should seek a critical outlook that reflects an epistemological and ethical perspective, which stresses *the manner in which* we harbour certain beliefs but not in a dogmatic manner; how we doubt all beliefs; that we believe that knowledge is difficult but not impossible to obtain; where we express our opinions freely; and are truthful and tolerant. We should thus live from our “centre”.

Russell believes that philosophy can contribute much to learning the value of balanced judgment because philosophy is replete with controversies and uncertainties. He makes it very clear that access to unbiased sources of knowledge is critical to good education, since without such access one’s critical abilities cannot operate effectively (Russell 1965). Students should strive to cultivate skills and fine-tune their intelligence so that their knowledge does not make them people who inertly accept what they are told by those in authority in society. They should, for example, be in a position to form their own opinion and ask questions and recognise what is used to mislead them. Where they have preconceived biases and unethical notions, or make assumptions, these should be reflected on and changed for the good.

Russell believes it is important that critical thinking includes critical reflection on what is seemingly critical judgment. Criticism is important because it allows one to consider evident knowledge on its own merits, and because it allows us to maintain whatever endures intense critical scrutiny. A non-cognitivist theory of ethics suggests that ethical sentences are neither true nor false, since they are devoid of any truth-values. Normative sentences, however, play a role, even though they are deficient in truth-values, and this is a fact which is concealed by the indistinct use of such sentences in language. From a canonical perspective, forms of language are primarily divided in two types, namely *cognitive sentences* (the cognitive use of language) and non-cognitive sentences (the instrumental use of language). Cognitive sentences depend on facts or contain truth-values. Non-cognitive sentences, by contrast, are independent of fact and do not contain any truth-values. Where there is a logical analysis, one is able to rephrase badly formed expressions, according to Russell, and make them logically clear and thus uncover where truth and untruth are. Equally, what appear to be profound philosophical questions can be disbanded and seen for what they really are – logical bewilderments.

Ethical non-cognitivism maintains that prescriptions have a more singular nature than descriptive sentences, as they possess no truth-values. Russell states that the world contains facts which remain what they are, irrespective of what we may think about them – and there are also beliefs which refer to facts. Thus, by reference, facts are



either true or false. If we analyse language logically, we can uncover hidden meaning and indeed where truth and untruth lie. More importantly, logic shows us the structure of the facts as they are presented and the nature of the world (Garvey and Stangroom 2012). This theory differs from cognitivist theories, in that it does not accept that ethical sentences are objectively and consistently either true or false. Russell thus adhered to the notion that non-cognitivism is correct, as it claims that the principal feature of normative sentences (namely their lacking of truth-values), is an outcome of the illocutionary role of these sentences, which do not have any cognitive meaning – including assertions or descriptions – but only prescriptions.

## ON ETHICS

Ethics is generally understood to be a branch of philosophy whose focal point is on normative value in human behaviour. It seeks to provide a justifiable, rational way to consider what is either good or bad in terms of human actions. In the early twentieth century, analytic philosophy brought it more under the spotlight. There was a greater emphasis on the denotations of ethical provisos and assertions, rather than on the rudiments of what is considered to be the right conduct. This “meta-ethics” began in opposition to normative theory, which was the conventional Western philosophical mode of ethics from the time of Aristotle to G. E. Moore. Today we speak of normative ethics, applied ethics and meta-ethics.

The foremost developed description of Russell’s ethical views was evident in his 1910 work, *The Elements of Ethics*, which was contained in his book *Philosophical Essays*. In this work, Russell talks about an ethics that was to a large extent founded on G. E. Moore’s *Principia Ethica*. At this stage of his life, Russell was a *cognitivist* in ethics. He thus believed that ethical declarations such as “X is good”, articulate intentions that have truth-value (either true or false) independent of one’s judgments or emotions. Thus “good” is on the whole a fundamental ethical concept and it is essentially indefinable. He also believed that people know *a priori*, or have knowledge that is independent of all particular experiences, in opposition to *a posteriori* knowledge, which originates from one’s experience. Thus, there are several propositions about the kinds of things that are good on their own account. When one states, for example, that the “King of Mars is good”, this is either true or false, and the truth or falsity is independent of our opinions and emotions as such. It was not long, however, until Russell shifted his philosophy from ethical cognitivism to ethical *non-cognitivism*. The latter refuted the notion that ethical proclamation has any truth-value at all. His paradigm shift was predominantly due to the disparagement of “The Elements” in his book *Winds of Doctrine* (Santayana 1913). Russell was convinced that statements about morality are simply expressions of emotion that cannot be logically analysed and they are thus neither true nor false. This does not imply, however, that one should try to overcome one’s ethical feelings. He even stated

that his own actions were always motivated by the sentiment that the desires of human beings should be integrated and coordinated as much as possible.

Russell's understanding of what is "right" in *The Elements* aligns with the notion of right or duty. Russell considered consequences or results to be critically important for judging an action as being either right or wrong. He was thus to all intents and purposes a teleologist or consequentialist, and a utilitarian. This is in line with Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832) and his disciple John Stuart Mill (1806–1873), who believed that knowledge had to emanate from the senses and not just the human mind. The utilitarians were highly technocratic in orientation and sought to found human morality on uncomplicated calculus, which was based on reason as opposed to the altruistic emotions of compassion and genuine concern for others. They were the first thinkers to attempt to reduce ethics into mathematics and economics. The leading consequentialist was John Stuart Mill, who promoted a variety of consequentialism called "utilitarianism". This ethical theory has as its foundation the notion that morality depends on the consequences of human actions and not on the actions that people take. A consequentialist will take the approach that the actions that one performs are neither right nor wrong by themselves. To a certain extent, whether an action is considered to be right or wrong depends only on its ultimate consequences, and whether the consequences are good or bad. Adherents of this theory accept certain things, generally what theorists call "states of affairs", to be either good or bad. Whether something is "right" or "wrong" in terms of good and bad consequences is what is of importance. Where there are acts that produce good consequences these are right, and conversely, those acts that generate bad consequences are considered to be wrong. Consequentialism thus teaches that we should do whatever produces the greatest amount of good consequences in all our actions and thus always consider "the greatest good for the greatest number of people" – as in the case of utilitarianism, which supports the actions that turn out the greatest amount of contentment. To the consequentialist mentality, how consequences are derived and the methods used are morally irrelevant. What we consider to be evil or wrong may in fact be okay, if the ultimate consequences are good. Since Russell was a utilitarianist, he would seek the greatest good for the greatest number of people – so focusing on the consequences of actions is thus very often referred to as utilitarian. Bentham's definition of utility is evident when he says:

By utility is meant that property in any object, whereby it tends to produce benefit, advantage, pleasure, good, or happiness or to prevent the happening of mischief, pain, evil, or unhappiness to the party whose interest is considered: if that party be the community in general, then the happiness of the community; if a particular individual, then the happiness of that individual. (Bentham 1907)

Russell's ethical non-cognitivism in its developed structure is established in *Religion and Science* (1935). The work was published a year prior to A. J. Ayer's *Language, Truth and Logic*. This book became a celebrated account of ethical non-cognitivism during the first half of the twentieth century. Russell was an ethical non-cognitivist and did not accept as true that there is any such thing as an objective ethical fact: "When



we assert that this or that has ‘value’...we are giving expression to our own emotions, not to a fact which would still be true if our personal feelings were different” (Russell 1949, 230–31). This viewpoint had significant implications for his idea of ethics as a philosophical discipline, and also as a niche of knowledge, and he asserts it fails on both counts. Russell’s most significant ethical writings include *The Elements of Ethics* (1910), *Religion and Science* (1935), and *Human Society in Ethics and Politics* (1954), which were his final views on ethics. Other works, including *What I Believe* (1925), *An Outline of Philosophy* (1927), the “Reply to Criticism” in *The Philosophy of Bertrand Russell* (1946) and *Bertrand Russell Speaks His Mind* (1960), encapsulate his ethical mindset. He asserts in *Portraits from Memory and Other Essays* (1956a) that:

Ethics is traditionally a department of philosophy, and that is my reason for discussing it. I hardly think myself that it ought to be included in the domain of philosophy, but to prove this would take as long as to discuss the subject itself, and would be less interesting.

Due to his non-cognitivist approach, Russell asserts that aspects related to “values” such as ethical dilemmas and what is good or bad on its own account, fall beyond the field of science and he also questions if “values” are not in fact absolutely beyond the field of knowledge. He consequently discards the notion that ethics facts and knowledge are even possible. Russell reiterates the view he would like to bar all value judgments from philosophy, except that this would be too violent a breach with usage (Nath 1993). People may well have a subjective intellect to understand what is “right”. Thus, if someone asks himself: “What should I do in this situation?” and then acts on his answer, based on what he judges to be correct after careful reflection, he can be considered to have acted correctly from a subjective perspective. This is not to say that he is correct when viewed objectively. In *Religion and Science* (1953) Russell makes it clear that ethical statements are not facts, but rather are desirous of expression. In *Human Society in Ethics and Politics* (1954) he says:

It may be that there is some similar way of arriving at objectivity in ethics; if so, since it must involve appeal to the majority, it will take us from personal ethics into the sphere of politics, which is, in fact, very difficult to separate from ethics.

He thus adopted as his lead principle David Hume’s aphorism that “Reason is, and ought, only to be the slave of the passions”. An ethical opinion can only be fortified by an ethical axiom, but once that axiom is not acceptable, there is no way of arriving at a rational conclusion. What Russell says in *Human Society*, is similar to what he says in *Religion and Science*. If there exists an ethical discrepancy about means for achieving definite ends, it could be determined by the use of reason. If, however, an incongruity is about ends, reason is not of any use. This is because whatever conclusion we may seek, it ultimately depends on what we wish for. Russell further discusses ethics in his work *What I Believe* (1925). In this book, which is part of *The Basic Writings of Bertrand Russell*, he unmistakably states that ethical disagreements about the “good

life” are open to argument only when people differ as to the *means* to achieve a given end. However, when a real difference exists as to ends, no argument is likely. “I cannot, therefore,” says Russell, “prove that my view of the good life is right; I can only state my view, and hope that as many as possible will agree” (Egner and Dennon 1961, 372). To Russell, a yearning for something cannot in itself be either rational or irrational. One may desire X because it is a means to Y, but at the end, when we have done with the means we need to arrive at something, which we desire for no reason whatsoever. All the same, the yearning cannot be described as irrational just because no reasons can be provided for feeling it. Russell maintains that “the good life” is one yearning for which one is inspired by love and directed by knowledge. Love devoid of knowledge and knowledge devoid of love can produce a good life, but love is in a way primary, since it leads intelligent people to search for knowledge so as to find out how to advantage those whom they love. “Knowledge” is not “ethical knowledge”, since this does not exist. “Knowledge” means only “scientific knowledge and knowledge of particular facts” (Potter 2006). Knowledge is imperative as it shows us the means to achieve something – and this knowledge may thus pass as being “ethical”.

To Russell anything which is outside human desires has no moral standard. When we investigate acts, which stimulate emotions of approval or disapproval, we discover that acts which are accepted are those which are believed more likely to have particular effects, while opposite effects are usually expected from acts that are frowned upon. Consequently, the effects that are approved are defined as being “good” and those leading to disapproval are defined as being “bad” ones. A right act is thus one from which the effects are better than another act. Such acts are intuitively known by people to be “good” or “bad”. What people “ought” to do is thus, by definition, the act which is considered to be right. Such definitions and propositions provide a logical body of ethical propositions, which are either true or false. This is to the same extent as if they were scientific propositions. He concludes that there is more agreement between people as to the effects that we should aim for, rather than the kinds of acts that are approved of. Russell agrees that the emotion of approval is caught up in the explanation of what is either “right” or “wrong” and feelings of enjoyment or satisfaction are drawn into the definition of “good” or inherent value. Ethical theory is then to all intents and purposes appealing to emotions and feelings which give rise to the ideas of “right” or “wrong”, and “good” or “bad”. Russell says in *An Outline of Philosophy* that “good” is principally a social concept, so that we call something “good” when we desire it, and because it is a socially used word it then comes to apply to all things that may be desired by an entire social group.

In his work *An Outline of Philosophy*, Russell tackles the difficulty of ethics with the question: “What is meant when a person says ‘You *ought* to do so-and-so’ or ‘I *ought* to do so-and-so’?” He replies that “primarily a sentence of this sort has an emotional content”; it means “this is the act towards which I feel the emotion of approval”. Russell continues: “... we do not wish to leave the matter there; we want to find something more

objective and systematic and constant than a personal emotion” (Russell 1927b). Russell concedes that happiness is the “good” and we should act to maximise the balance of happiness over unhappiness in the world. “Right conduct” is then conduct which is calculated to produce desirable results. Russell further states: “I now think that good and bad are derivative from desire.” He suggests that there is a conflict between the desires of different people and even incompatible desires manifest in one person so that good is “mainly a social concept, designed to find an issue from this conflict” (Russell 1927b). Russell says there is indeed an almost rational approach to ethics, which he terms “the doctrine of compossibility”. “Compossible desires” are those which can be satisfied simultaneously, and which do not conflict with each other. People should strive to live their lives by the greatest possible set of “compossible desires” – and social systems and education at all levels should promote this notion. This will ultimately make the world a happier place to live in.

## A CRITIQUE

Russell undoubtedly had some interesting ethical ideas. Over and above his meritorious works in mathematical logic, which are his main claim to fame, he also dabbled in moral philosophy and became a pioneer of sorts. He created a primal version of an important meta-ethical theory which we now know as emotivism. He maintains that ethical statements cannot be held to be true or false – since they are simply expressions of emotional attitudes. His fault lies in his notion that his assertions are the only ones that matter and that they can be satisfied only within the structure of his personal logical conceptions. What others state is not relevant, and yet he says concerning meta-ethics that he was not personally entirely satisfied with what he had either read or said on the philosophical basis of ethics. Russell, as an ethical non-cognitivist, did not accept as true that there is any such thing as an objective ethical fact. He viewed critical thinking as an important part of philosophy. Meta-ethics is a complicated subject and we can learn from Russell, who got it wrong in a number of ways. This is not to suggest that his *opinion* and *theories* are not interesting. Ethical non-cognitivism upholds the notion that prescriptions have a more singular nature than descriptive sentences, since they own no truth-values.

Russell separated nature and morality and in so doing, has left morality with little or no meaningful effect. He unravels values from natural facts, and then sends morality into a void. Santayana (1913) also asserts that Russell erred by detaching one element of Platonic morality, which is the hypostasis of the “good”. Human happiness is only attainable in a suitable relation to the “good”.

## CONCLUSION

Russell states that the world contains many facts which remain what they are, irrespective of what one thinks about them. There are also beliefs which refer to facts. Thus, by reference, facts are either true or false. Russell suggests that philosophy, if practised as an ethical discipline, can direct our investigation along the path to understanding of the world. Philosophy is able to inspire people to actively seek to improve the world. Russell argued rather forcefully that there are no effective means of achieving moral truths, and they cannot be learned from logic or even experience. He suggested that we achieve moral knowledge by means of intuition. People have a “built-in” ability to distinguish moral facts and ascertain right from wrong. We thus recognise good and evil immediately and are able to keep our belief in the actuality of genuine moral rules. We can argue that intuitions are emotive and not a reliable means of providing us with moral knowledge, since people do not necessarily recognise or understand the reasons behind their intuitions. One’s intuitions may differ from another’s, and so we cannot accept this notion.

In terms of normative ethics, Russell created a rational and benevolent adaptation of consequentialism. Russell sees the value of philosophy in its probable ability to realistically motivate people to have a practical ethical attitude. Such an attitude will cultivate and augment the interpersonal relationships. Philosophy must not be studied for the reason that it helps one to arrive at ultimate answers to important questions. Philosophy ought to be followed and applied to daily living so as to enrich both the intellect and the psyche. Philosophical enquiry is, however, best exercised as an ethical enterprise. Russell does not advocate an unyielding and ethical plan or system for moral behaviour, in which there are prescriptions concerning the duties and rights of people. What he seeks to do is create a context within which ethics can grow and serve a greater purpose. Ethical theory in this sense appeals to emotions and feelings, which give rise to the ideas of “right” or “wrong”, and “good” or “bad”. In any event, “good” is on the whole a fundamental ethical concept and it is fundamentally indefinable.

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