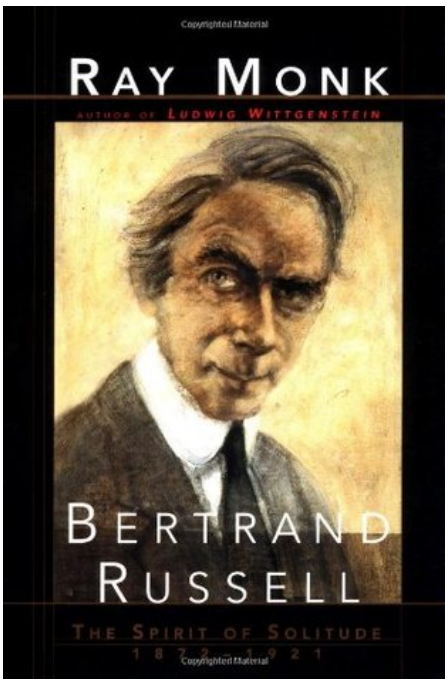

Bertrand Russell: The Spirit of Solitude 1872-1921

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A definitive biography presents a portrait of the Nobel Prize-winning philosopher, uses unpublished letters, manuscripts, and papers that reveal his philosophical creativity, social conscience, and erotic drives.

Bertrand Russell: The Spirit of Solitude 1872-1921 Details

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From Reader Review Bertrand Russell: The Spirit of Solitude 1872-1921 for online ebook

Christine Sandgren says

No one can capture the philosopher's life like a fellow philosopher. One of the more interesting character of the 20th century. Russell was a daring thinker and fearlessly applied his conclusions on life to his own-- with disasterous results. Turns out that thousands of years of human mores may have been there for a reason. Now we know.

Dschreiber says

After reading three hundred pages of rather smallish print, I noticed that World War I hadn't even started. How could Russell's life ever get covered in the remaining 300 pages? Then I noticed that this was just Volume 1. Oops!

So much of this is unnecessary, except perhaps to fulfil some ideal of documenting just about everything that can be documented. The material about Bertie's love life just goes on and on. One wishes he hadn't written so many letters. It seems a nearly week-by-week account of his thoughts and moods about, first, his wife, Alys, then his mistress, Ottoline. At each stage he examines himself and articulates a new ethic based on the current state of his feelings. It holds your interest for a while, sometimes romantically, sometimes pruriently, but finally it just gets boring.

The other main thread is his work in logic and the philosophy of mathematics. The author makes a brave effort to explain what Russell was up to in what was, after all, the most important part of his life, but I doubt that it's an area that can be understood without graduate work in the areas concerned.

Unless you have a deep, deep interest in all things Russell, I'd recommend a biography of a more reasonable length. You might want to have a look a Monk's preface, though, to see what he thinks are the shortcomings of the various books that came before his.

Dozy Pilchard says

At times brilliant, at other times tedious. This book lacks consistency. I spotted a couple of local places misnamed which undermined my faith in some of the other information. it is a monumental first part but I would have preferred it with 300 pages edited out. Far too much relationship info. Not needed. Also excessively negative much of the time. Monk being true to his feelings but not the best Russell biog in my opinion. Need a break before I pick up my copy of pt 2.

Dan says

Even respected intellectuals are plagued by insecurity and foibles which normal people are. Ray Monk is a master of biography.

Phillip says

Ray Monk is very good at what he does. I think this book would have been better if Russell had lived a shorter life. There wasn't that much cross over between the events of Russell's life and his philosophy.

If you are looking for a well written biography that shows how miserable Bertrand Russell was and why then this is the book for you. Unfortunately, that is what it is and it is hard bare.

John Harder says

What a crummy book. I pick this out of the bargain bin to learn a little of the philosophy and mathematical theory of Mr. Russell. True this is a biography not a dissertation, but a man is his thoughts. So when you tell a man’s life it should be a manifestation of his mind. However after slogging through this poorly written book I still have no idea who this man was – I just know the names of all his girlfriends and his romantic tribulations. Who cares who he was kissing under the bleachers at the sock hop.

Liedzeit says

Großartig, besser noch als die Wittgensteinbiographie, aber Bertie war ja auch der größere Schlawiner.

H says

ray monk's vol.1: spirit of solitude

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"I remember an instant of the same pain at Southgate once in thinking of the sadness which is always suggested by natural beauty, when the idea flashed across my mind that when most in harmony with Nature I felt most sad, and that therefore the spirit of Nature must be sad and the Universe a mistake. Then I could not have borne it another instant, for though it came and went like a flash I felt as though I had been stabbed." (40

"What Spinoza calls the 'intellectual love of God' has seemed to me the best thing to live by, but I have not had even the somewhat abstract God that Spinoza allowed himself to whom to attach my intellectual love. I have loved a ghost, and in loving a ghost my inmost self has itself become spectral . . . my most profound feelings have remained always solitary and I have found in human things no companionship. The sea, the stars, the night wind in waste places, mean more to me than even the human beings (40) I love best, and I am conscious that human affect is to me at bottom n attempt to escape from the vain search for God." (41)

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The theme of the book [Arthur Hannequin's, on atomism in science] is that science rests on a fundamental contradiction, needing on the one hand to represent everything atomistically -- as a series of discrete, numerically countable 'things' -- in order that mathematics might be brought to bear upon it, and, on the other hand, having to admit that there are in nature things that are not made up of discrete, atomistic components, but are rather continuous. Motion, for example, is the continuous path of an object through space and time, but, if we are to measure velocity, we have to break this continuity down into discrete 'infinitesimal' differentials and pretend that nothing is lost thereby. (109)

A 'concept', in Moore's rather odd use of the word, is neither a word, nor a thought, but a 'possible object of thought', something close to what Russell would later call a 'logical atom'. Concepts are the building-blocks of the world. 'The ultimate elements of everything that is are concepts,' More wrote to Russell, 'and a part of these, hen compounded in a special way, form the existent world.' Thus, for Moore, and, even more crucially, for Russell, analysis is not - as it is commonly understood now -- a linguistic activity, but an ontological one. (117)

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This feeling was confirmed by his absorption in mathematics, which he had come to believe 'is capable of an artistic excellence as great as that of any music', not because the pleasure it gives is comparable to that of music, 'but because it gives in absolute perfection that combination, characteristic of art, of godlike freedom, with the sense of inevitable destiny; because, in fact, it constructs an ideal world where everything is perfect and yet true'. (147)

"I wonder whether you realise the degree of self-sacrifice (and too often sacrifice of others), of sheer effort of will, of stern austerity in repressing even what is intrinsically best, that goes into writing a book of any magnitude." (150)

"Of course, self-sacrifice is difficult and very real; it occurs whenever oneself as end has to be sacrificed to oneself as means . . . And it is no use pretending that the sacrifice may not be real and ultimate: the best conduct is very seldom that which would make one the best person."
To act for the best, then, is not the same as being a good person. Indeed, on the contrary, acting for the best, doing the right thing, can often involve destroying, sacrificing what is best in one's nature. (154)

She [Beatrice Webb] was too perceptive an observer, however, to believe that Alys's health was the only thing wrong between them. 'It is quite clear to me', she rote, 'that Bertrand is going through some kind of tragedy of feeling.' (156)

"I am constructing a mental cloister, in which my inner soul is to dwell in peace, while an outer simulacrum goes forth to meet the world. In this inner sanctuary I sit and think spectral thoughts." (158)

A phrase that he wrote at about this time which had special significane for him, seeming to sum up his entire mental outlook, was: 'Our hearts build precious shrines for the ashes of dead hopes.' (158)

'It is ghastly to watch,' he wrote a few days later to Lucy Donnelly, 'in most marraiges, the competition as to which is to be the tortuerer, which tortured; a few years, at most, settle it, and after it is settled, one has happiness and the other has virtue. And the torturer smirks and speaks of matrimonial bliss; and the victim, for fear of worse, smiles a ghastly assent. Marriage, and all such close relations, have quite infinite

possibilities of pain.' (169)

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"I did not mean that the objects of mathematical or other abstract thoughts *exist* outside us, still less that there is any universal or divine mind whose ideas we are reproducing when we think. What I meant to say was that the object of any abstract thought is not a thought, either of the thinker or of anyone else, and does not *exist* at all, though it *is* something. Thus in mathematics a new theorem is a *discovery* in the sense that the discoverer for the first time apprehends the fact discovered, which fact has a timeless *being*, not *existence*." (186)

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"So much that goes into religion seems to me important, and I want somehow to make people feel what survives dogmas. Most of the people who think as I do about the dogmas seem to be able to live in the everyday world without windows into a greater world beyond. But to me that would be a prison." (210)

"There is a very great deal -- perhaps the most important part -- of what our love gives us, that is quite independent of what others can do. I feel that if we had to part, I should retain all my life the knowledge of what you are, and the knowledge that I have had the perfect and satisfying love which one dreamt of but never hoped to find. That would permanently enrich the world for me, like great poetry or the beauty of nature." (221)

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In this new paper, Russell sought to define more rigorously these basic metaphysical categories, and to defend the reality of both universals and particulars against those philosophers (like Hume and Berkeley) who insisted that only particulars are real, and those (like, in some interpretations, Bradley and Plato) who insisted that only universals are real. Russell's novel approach to this ancient issue was to give quasi-physical, spatio-temporal definitions of the categories involved. Thus, particulars, the ordinary objects of experience, are defined by the fact that they cannot be in two places at the same time. Universals, in his account, are of two kinds: relations (such as 'to the left of'), which are never in *any* place at any time, and qualities (such as whiteness) which can be in *more* than one place at the same time. (234)

When he [Bergson] is better, he conceives life to be essentially like artistic creation, in which a more or less blind impulse urges one towards something, without one's knowing what beforehand; then, what is created, it is seen to be what was wanted." (235)

"But I simply can't *stand* a view limited to this earth. I feel life so small unless it has windows into other worlds. I feel it vehemently and instinctively and with my whole being. It is what has become of my desire for worship. But I despair of making people see what I mean. I like mathematics largely because it is *not* human and has nothing particular to do with this planet or with the whole accidental universe -- because, like Spinoza's God, it won't love us in return." (248)

"Odd how such passion goes into doing a thing and how cold it is when it is done. A vast amount of various people's solid misery is crystallised in the book, and I wd. have done almost anything to bring about the finishing of it, and now it is a mere moment's interest." (251)

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'Indeed passion is of God,' Russell wrote to her [Ottoline] afterwards, 'the unquenchable thirst for heaven -- it is the power that drives us on to seek out good. We are all exiles in this nether world, and all passion has something of homesickness.' (257)

Russell was not entirely joking about having a 'morality of passion'. In an unpublished manuscript called 'Dramatic and Utilitarian Ethics' written about this time, he asked why Shakespeare was universally admired, even though, in his depictions of Hamlet, Othello and Macbeth, he might be regarded as 'the champion of murderers'. The answer he gave was that 'the average man cares about drama much more than about happiness.' (258)

He and Wittgenstein began to speak of more intimate, even spiritual things, Wittgenstein surprising Russell by saying suddenly how much he admired the text 'What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul', and how few there were who did not lose their soul: 'I said it depended on having a large purpose that one is true to. He said he thought it depended more on suffering and the power to endure it.' (264)

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"In this adventure I have learnt that I must be the giver. Bertie thinks he loves me, but what he really loves is a woman to listen to him and to rely on him; but he does not love enough to forget himself ever. I must love him and give to him, it is my work; and not expect anything back, for he cannot (288) deviate a hair's breadth from what he is, or from his self-absorption. I don't believe he is much aware of me, nor does he ever want to follow me in my thoughts and wanderings. He says he does, but I find I cannot talk to him." (289)

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It was as if he had finally accepted that all she could offer him were 'romantic and sentimental rather than passionate' feelings, 'troubadours and courtly love' rather than earthly passion. He had come to feel, he wrote on 23 July, that it was 'not the actual human beings you love, but the God in them':
"And when the God abandons them, if they care for your love, they feel lost . . . it is what prevents me from feeling yo9u a comrade -- I think of you as my Star, or as the moon sometimes descending from heaven to bring moments of unearthly unquiet joy to Endymion on the cold hill side." (306)

"He is intensely self-centered, poor mn, and says I was selfish because I did not sacrifice more to him. I feel his letter tonight was quite final, and that most probably I shall never see him again. Yes: I feel the poorer a great deal. But I don't think he loved me -- only desired me. Love could not die like that. Desire could." (312)

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For, with the infallible insight for which Russell revered him, Lawrence had put his finger on the central conflict in Russell's nature: the tension between his feeling of alienation from the rest of humanity and his espousal of a selfless identification with it; and the analogous tension between his fierce, dark hatreds and his ideal of a universal love. (410)

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As he put it to Lucy Donnelly, 'I want actually to *change* people's thoughts. Power over people's minds is the main personal desire of my life.' (456)

" . . . but of course none of them are comrades to one's inner life. They have *something* that is great & vitl & important . . . but not the thirst after perfection -- they see the way out of Hell but not the way into Heaven.' (459)

He also told Ottoline that a 'terrible longing' for her had been growing in him for a long time: 'it is not passion any more -- the war has all but killed that -- it is the hunger for companionship . . . What holds me to you for ever & ever is religion. Everybody else hurts me by lack of reverence.' (485)

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Konradin still loves him deeply, though one suspects that the 'sudden hostility' towards hiim tht Colette, at this stage in the story, puts into the mind of the T. S. Eliot character, Maynard, was something she herself had felt towards Russell:
"For an instant he saw him as many people saw him: a man exhausting other men by his intellect; exhausting women by his intensity; wearing out his friends, sucking them dry, passing from person to person, never giving any real happiness -- or finding any." (607)

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"Yes! Paternity is a great experience of which the least that can be said is that it is eminently worth having -- if only for the deepened sense of fellowship with all men it gives one. It is the only experience perhaps whose uniersality does not make it common but invests it with a sort of grandeur on that very account." (612)

Hugh Coverly says

Making Sense of Bertrand Russell's Complicated Life

I waited a long time to get a hold of this book, and it was definitely worth the wait. Ray Monk presents a detailed life of the great philosopher, including Bertrand Russell's considerable achievements and romantic entanglements. What makes Monk's biography a worthy, albeit time-consuming, read is the amount of material he draws from: Russell's writings and letters, and the letters and memoirs of those who knew him best, his wives and mistresses.

As an atheist I approached this book to better understand how and when Russell began to have doubts and lost his belief in God. Surprisingly, the beginnings of Russell's atheism began when he was a teenager. There is some discussion of Russell's beliefs, but it is not explored as fully as I would like. Russell's own writings could be confusing as he uses phrases like God, religion, heaven and hell, and related terms with his correspondents, and those unfamiliar with his form of atheism might not always realize the context in which he uses these terms.

Indeed, Russell abandoned religious faith just before he went up to Cambridge. To appease his formidable grandmother, whom he justifiable held to be a religious hypocrite, he did not voice his doubts publicly but committed them to his private journal. For the most part, Monk avoids a detailed discussion of Russell's (lack of) religious faith:

. . . For much of his life, Russell's longing for belief in a mysticism akin to Spinoza's 'intellectual love of God' fought a running battle with a corrosive scepticism that he could not never quite shake off, and in which he often took a certain delight.
(p. 69)

In his first writing on his religion Russell equates his God with Truth, "a stern and pitiless" deity, and the adherents of this "bleak religion" do not seek happiness but wisdom. "The key to wisdom," Monk notes, "is renunciation and fortitude in the face of disillusionment" (p. 160). It can be said that Russell did not hold any value in organized religion, however. Perhaps there will be a more detailed discussion of Russell's lack of religious faith in the Monk's second volume.

Monk undertakes great effort to present Russell's philosophical development without being overly technical; in fact, he takes what really requires specialist knowledge to understand fully and makes it almost intelligible. Ultimately, it is not Russell's deep ideas but his complicated personal life that overtakes the book. The many overlapping ideas that Russell explored in his professional life, many of which Monk demonstrates were demolished by Wittgenstein's devastating analysis, were mirrored by his overlapping romantic relationships.

Marcus Speh says

i read this book before and i'm reading it again. i don't want to rate it because i do loathe the message of the book as much as i admire the man russell. why am i reading it? because it is after all well written and the spirit of russell comes through anyway. worth getting if, after russell's autobiography, which is marvelous, you want to know more. but monk is a body-stripper, in my view.

Yannis Theocharis says

Ray Monk’s book is by far the best biography of Bertrand Russell out there. It is also a book that, if you are a great admirer of Russell’s (like I was, and still am), you need to read with your eyes open. What distinguishes this biography from others written about Russell is (except from its size) is (a) the fact that it is written by a philosopher (of mathematics and science), thus offering an insight on how Russell’s personal life influences his scientific thinking and philosophy, but also the reverse, and (b) the presentation of an image of a Russell that is very different from the Russell that probably lives in most people’s imagination; a wise old mathematical genius and pioneer of logic; an immaculate, infallible and morally superior human being who managed to see what is right and wrong in this world ahead of everyone else, and put it into words that captured a generation’s imagination about what a better tomorrow could look like.

Monk’s biography is unique because it doesn’t hide any of this – if anything it makes it all too clear. What it also does, however, is to display – mostly via Russell’s own words through his letters, how his long -- and mostly painful and full of drama -- life came to shape his character, his principles, his philosophy, his understanding of science, society, truth, religion, and logic in ways that are almost directly opposite not only to the philosophy he puts forward but to the advice he directly gives to humanity. Monk must have spent an immense amount of his life with Russell’s innumerable writings (personal or public) and, from his writing, it is evident that he came to know the man as intimately as someone would have if one had actually met him and spent time with him.

It seems to me that Monk entered the immensely difficult task of writing about Russell's life as a huge admirer of Russell and, in the process, after reading and understanding not only his scientific work, but also his choices in life, his perceptions about others, his ghosts and fears, and his perception about himself, came to slowly disapprove of the man (not to say hate). The change of attitude towards not only Russell the logician, but also Russell the social philosopher, is evident mainly on the second volume of the biography where the reader reads, astonishingly, "how bad Russell's writing was in the second part of his life". This generalised critique is, in my view, unfair. Monk spends a good part of his book diminishing the value not only of Russell's social philosophy but also of Russell's (scientific, political and social) achievements during the second part of his life mostly on the basis that his arguments – especially when it comes to politics and international issues – were too simplistic. This criticism has much truth in it but then again sometimes neither reality, nor solutions to complex problems need to be too complicated and Russell was a master of conveying difficult ideas in simple and understandable ways.

There is surely much to be said about the poverty of some of Russell's social philosophy but Russell certainly does not deserve the pure contempt that comes out in much of the book. Looking at the totality of Russell's life achievements one simply can't demand or be strict with parts of his life or decisions that did not live up to Godly standards. He was a man, after, all; not only imperfect but with major faults, dark sides, and capable of thinking and doing ugly things as much as any of us is. Moreover, I have to say the constant comparison with Wittgenstein (whose company Monk would, evidently, have enjoyed much more – as far as I can tell from reading his biography of Wittgenstein at this moment) and the reiteration about how much superior the second one was to the first, becomes tiring.

I could probably keep writing for hours but it is too late. In all, despite offering an image of Russell that will make some of us who learned to love the man through his writings think hard about the extent to which his philosophy should, after all, affect crucial decisions in our life, Monk's biography is our best opportunity to learn the life and deeds of one of the most thrilling human beings that stepped foot on this planet. One whose overwhelming genius, capricious and emotionally unstable character, vanity, personal tragedy but also happiness, ambition to change the world, global influence, and contribution to humanity through science and philosophy epitomises not only the maximum utilisation, but also the exhaustion of human faculties.
