



Russell

Bertrand Russell's Best

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PREFACE BY BERTRAND RUSSELL TO BERTRAND RUSSELL'S BEST

It is pleasant news that Professor Egner is publishing a revision of the book *Bertrand Russell's Best*. The skill and the impartiality with which he made his selections, producing, thereby a volume which one may hope can be read without pain and without excessive mental exertion, seem to me admirable. I should like to reiterate, however, what I said in The Preface to the volume edited by Professor Robert E. Egner and Mr Lester E. Denonn called *The Basic Writings of Bertrand Russell*. I said there: 'I should not wish to be thought in earnest only when I am solemn.'

The longer I have lived, the more I have come to suspect solemnity and to see in it – not always, but frequently – a cloak for a humbug. What is most lacking in the modern world is genial, good-natured tolerance; and what is most hostile to this is a harsh and dogmatic morality which condemns the majority of the human race as reprobates. Against solemnity, the best weapon is wit. Most other weapons produce only another dogmatic, sectarian solemnity. I have tried to avoid this danger, though I must confess that I have not always been successful in this endeavour.

PREFACE BY THE EDITOR

Bertrand Russell wrote a special Preface to the first impression of this new and completely revised edition just a few weeks before he died in his 98th year. In the Preface he said: 'It is pleasant news that Professor Egner is publishing a revision of the book *Bertrand Russell's Best*'; and, so it is pleasant news for me, that this book has now been published in paperback. It is a unique tribute to Lord Russell that his own books – well over seventy of them spanning over seven decades – have not only sold millions of copies and been translated into every language of civilized societies, but that Lord Russell's works reached and influenced more people than any other philosopher in modern Times. The views of most philosophers go *unread* by the general public, but the philosophy of Bertrand Russell was *read* and *quoted* more often since Western civilization began in Greece.

As I was close to completing this book I asked Lord Russell if I should make any reference to this volume being a *definitive* selection of his *Best Wit, Wisdom, and Satire*, and he said: 'I rather shrink from the word *definitive* chiefly on the grounds that I am not yet dead'. He was then 97 years old. Lord Russell's scope of human life and the quest for certainty was astounding. But, for him, the word, *certainty*, was a bad one because, as he said: '*Nothing deserves certainty*'. This book takes sharp fun on those ideas and institutions once thought to be *Certain*.

Prof. Robert E. Egner

INTRODUCTION

Bertrand Russell needs no special introduction to the general reader; his pen was active for almost a century and his more than one hundred books and countless articles travelled a range of thought as wide as the scope of man's quest of knowledge. Lord Russell's position on the great variety of social problems he wrote about was always scientific in the sense that he did not claim pontifical certainty on the views expressed.

Is there a central key to an understanding of the social philosophy of Lord Russell? Is there a certain point at which the general reader, who is not accustomed to philosophical jargon, should begin if he is to read with comprehension and insight? In terms of lucidity, style, and content, the many books and articles from which the material for the present volume was taken amply testify that Lord Russell had no peer among twentieth-century writers. What makes the selections in this book unique, however, is the incisive wit that Lord Russell brought to bear upon such varied subjects as religion, education, ethics, politics, psychology, and sex.

Seldom in history has any major philosopher been able to simultaneously display intellectual brilliance and humour. Voltaire was the last great wit in philosophical circles, but he was not a mathematician nor a philosopher of any great importance. Although Lord Russell was the victim of extraordinary bigotry during his life, the attacks did not in any way cause him to recant his open views. In this century few thinkers have been more flagrantly misrepresented than Lord Russell. Masses of people have been influenced to envisage

him as a mere idol-smasher and the patron philosopher of immorality. It is a false portrait drawn from those twin sins, fear and hate. The fact that he consistently pleaded for benevolence in all spheres of human activity escaped many of his critics. He maintained throughout his life that what the world needed was an old-fashioned thing, an attitude of love or compassion for humanity. Unfortunately his critics passed over his statements to this effect in unrespectful silence.

Lord Russell paid the price for his championship of free thought and inquiry into sexual morality in 1940 in New York when he was declared in court as officially 'unfit' to teach philosophy and logic at the famed City College of New York. The court was implored 'to protect our youth from the baneful influence of him, of the poisoned pen – an ape of genius, the devil's minister of men'. His works were described as sexual filth, but as Lord Russell said, only *one per cent* of his writings were ever concerned with sex in the first place, and he was unfamiliar with filth obtained from scientific inquiry, in the second place. John Dewey seemed to crystallise the views of the intellectual community when he said, 'As Americans we can only blush with shame for this scar on our repute and fair play.' In 1950 a Swedish committee, whose standards are somewhat higher than filth, awarded Lord Russell the Nobel Prize for Literature.

As these pages will show, Lord Russell was mainly concerned with showing how dogmatic authority in its innumerable forms has been, and still remains, one of the great obstacles to human advancement, in terms of an increase in scientific knowledge on the one hand and a decrease in human misery on the other. These selections are funny, but the message beneath the humour is deadly serious. If the reader finds nothing more than surface fun, he is careless and superficial, seeing only the farcical elements before his eyes, and neglecting relations and perspective. One may hold a penny so that it hides the sun.

One might say that there were three Bertrand Russells. They were: (1) the experimental investigator, (2) the social critic, and (3) the Voltairian satirist. Sometimes Lord Russell kept these three selves in unison. But, more often than not, he allowed the satirist time to tune his strings in a triumphant chord of protest against stupidity no matter in which sphere it appeared.

It was in his role as experimental investigator that he made his monumental contribution to mathematical philosophy which gained for him an international reputation as one of the great mathematicians of the twentieth century. The social and political problems of World War I, however, turned his attention from philosophy and science to social phenomena, and much of his later writing deals exclusively with social and political problems. He used a swift and sharp wit to express and expose the evil passions in human minds – suspicion, fear, lust for power, hatred, and intolerance – which stand in the way of a more

benevolent world. He was an inspired thinker who had just the right measure of wit to spice his wisdom. Lord Russell, however, possessed one cardinal virtue which was rare among social critics: his criticism was always constructive despite, what appeared to some, a destructive tone. He did not wantonly destroy an edifice, nor did he dismantle an institution without showing how to build a Better One. Above all, the reader will find Lord Russell scientific, yet humane, hopeful, and thoroughly honest. Lord Russell was, in short, the greatest combiner of *common sense* and *uncommon sense*, the undisputed heir of a tradition in British philosophy that extends from Francis Bacon. Among the many honours that Lord Russell received in addition to the Nobel Prize are the much esteemed Order of Merit, bestowed upon him by King George VI in 1949, and the Sonning Prize for his contribution to European culture by the University of Copenhagen in 1960.

This book is an anthology of witticisms on a variety of topics: psychology, politics, education, religion, ethics, and sex. The selections are taken from a large number of Lord Russell's books and articles. The choice of selections is the editor's, and he is responsible for the abridgement of exposition and argument. No attempt was made to include every witticism available; in his opinion, this is *Bertrand Russell's Best*.

Shortly after this book was first published in 1958, the editor soon discovered that most people, including some eminent book reviewers, were under the impression that Lord Russell was not quite serious when he engaged in satire. The editor was often reminded that: 'surely Lord Russell cannot be serious', to which it seemed useless to argue. But this popular belief is wholly false. As he himself reminded us in the preface to this volume – which was selected from his own writings from almost three-quarters of a century: 'I should not wish to be thought in earnest only when I am solemn.' He is anything but solemn in the pages of this book.

He never flinched from any issue that was unpopular. In 1950, he purposely titled one of his books *Unpopular Essays*. Perhaps he will be remembered best as the philosopher who watched, waited, guided, and understood. No one can ask any more of any philosopher. This book represents just one side of a multi-gifted mind, a man gifted with the ability to make people laugh – at themselves. This book is devoted entirely to the things which make him *Unpopular*.

On February 2, 1970, the intellectual world lost one of its most distinguished members when Lord Russell died peacefully in his ninety-eighth year. It is interesting to note that no philosopher of major significance ever lived as long as Lord Russell since the record of western philosophy began with Thales in 600 BC. But it was not to the intellectual world alone that he gave his legacy. Perhaps Lord Russell's greatest gift to mankind was his unfaltering courage and the

fearless stand he took in his campaign to preserve humanity. In a way he summed up all his beliefs when he said: 'Remember your humanity and forget the rest.'

MEANING OF SYMBOLS

Since Lord Russell's books have been published in various editions the editor decided not to include the specific page number for the extracts in this book. However, in each case the reference source will appear at the end of each extract.

BOOKS

AI	<i>Authority and the Individual</i>	1949
ABR	<i>Volume I. Autobiography of Bertrand Russell</i>	1967
ABR	<i>Volume II. Autobiography of Bertrand Russell</i>	1968
ABR	<i>Volume III. Autobiography of Bertrand Russell</i>	1969
BRSM	<i>Bertrand Russell Speaks his Mind</i>	1960
BWBR	<i>The Basic Writings of Bertrand Russell</i>	1961
CH	<i>The Conquest of Happiness</i>	1930
CSNW	<i>Common Sense and Nuclear Warfare</i>	1959
DBR	<i>Dear Bertrand Russell</i>	1969
DMMM	<i>Dictionary of Mind, Matter and Morals</i>	1952
EEEC	<i>Education, Especially In Early Childhood</i>	1926
ESO	<i>Education and the Social Order</i>	1932
FF	<i>Fact and Fiction</i>	1961
FTOP	<i>Free Thought and Official Propaganda</i>	1934

HKSL	<i>Human Knowledge, Its Scope and Limits</i>	1948
HMF	<i>Has Man a Future?</i>	1961
HSEP	<i>Human Society In Ethics and Politics</i>	1954
HWP	<i>A History of Western Philosophy</i>	1945
IPIOE	<i>In praise of Idleness and other Essays</i>	1935
ISS	<i>The Impact of Science on Society</i>	1953
IMT	<i>An Inquiry into Meaning and Truth</i>	1940
MM	<i>Marriage and Morals</i>	1929
MPD	<i>My Philosophical Development</i>	1959
NEP	<i>Nightmares of Eminent Persons</i>	1955
NHCW	<i>New Hopes for a Changing World</i>	1951
OP	<i>An Outline of Philosophy</i>	1927
PFM	<i>Portraits From Memory</i>	1956
PIC	<i>Prospects of Industrial Civilisation</i>	1924
P:ANSA	<i>Power: A New Social Analysis</i>	1938
PSR	<i>Principles of Social Reconstruction</i>	1916
RS	<i>Religion and Science</i>	1935
SE	<i>Sceptical Essays</i>	1926
SS	<i>Satan In the Suburbs</i>	1953
TPTB	<i>The Practice and Theory of Bolshevism</i>	1920
TSO	<i>The Scientific Outlook</i>	1931
UE	<i>Unpopular Essays</i>	1950
UV	<i>Unarmed Victory</i>	1963
WAW	<i>The Wit and Wisdom of Bertrand Russell</i>	1951
WNC	<i>Why I Am Not a Christian</i>	1957
WW	<i>Wisdom of the West</i>	1959

ARTICLES

BD	<i>Boredom or Doom in a Scientific World</i>	1948
PCI	<i>Political and Cultural Influence of the U.S.A.</i>	1949
SSS	<i>The Science to Save Us from Science</i>	1950
TFDH	<i>To Face Danger Without Hysteria</i>	1951
WA	<i>What is an Agnostic?</i>	1953
WRU	<i>Why Radicals are Unpopular</i>	1936

SPEECHES

NPAS	<i>Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech</i>	1950
WNC	<i>Why I Am Not a Christian</i>	1927