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The Philosophy of Mr. B*rtr*nd R*ss*ll: With an Appendix of Leading Passages from Certain Other Works

Philip E. B. Jourdain

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There is a great deal to be said for any philosophy that can stand a joke. Philosophies are usually too dignified for that; and for dignity Mr. B*rtr*nd R*ss*ll has little reverence (see Chap. XX, "On Dignity"). It is a method of hiding hollow ignorance under a pasteboard covering of pomposity. Laughter would shake down the house of cards.

Now what has given rise to much solemn humbug in philosophy is the vye of system-making. This vice the great contemporary of Mr. B*rtr*and R*ss*ll—Mr. Bertrand Russell—has avoided by a frank and frequent disavowal of any of his views as soon as later consideration has rendered them untenable without philosophic contortions. But such a characteristic is a little disconcerting to those of his admirers whose loyalty exceeds their powers of criticism. Thus one of them, referring to The Problems of Philosophy when it first appeared, wrote: "I feel in Mr. Russell's book the interest that a curate would feel in the publications of an archbishop who made important modifications in Christian doctrine every year."....

....The plan of the book, however, lends itself admirably to the development of criticism. For Mr. B*rtr*nd R*ss*ll, whose papers are here collected, was killed by anti-suffragists in 1911; his philosophy therefore, though perhaps influencing Mr. Russell's, shows certain points of difference. One such arises, strange to say, from Mr. R*ss*H's superior logical rigor. It is remarked, for example, by the editor that Mr. R*ss*ll would hardly have committed the error of obtaining a conclusion by means of one of those very vicious-circle fallacies he did so much to elucidate. Whereas Mr. Russell concluded a review of Bergson's Laughter with the reflection that "it would seem to be impossible to find any such formula as M. Bergson seeks. Every formula treats what is living as if it were mechanical, and is therefore by his own rule a fitting object of laughter" (p. 87).

But if Mr. Russell is beaten with whips, scorpions are the portion of the eminent Cambridge mathematician (p. 63), certain theologians (p. 58), the psychological logicians (p. 88), and the pragmatists (p. 32). Subtle fun is poked at Herbert Spencer (p. 70) ; and there is a deliciously satirical chapter on "The Mortality of Socrates," where Eternal Life is discussed in illustration of the fact that "one of the greatest merits of modern logic is that it has allowed us to give precision to such problems while definitely abandoning any pretensions of solving them."

No amount of quotation (finite by reason of editorial control) could exhaust the transfinite number of good things in this amusing volume. For the proof that this is not mere hyperbole I must refer the reader to the chapter on "The Hierarchy of Jokes." And when one comes delightedly across such gems of delicate irony as the logical analysis of Mr. Chesterton's method of disguising platitudes as paradoxes (p. 41) one can only hope that Mr. Jourdain will discover among the papers of the late Mr. R*ss*ll more, and still more, pin-prickings of popular bombastics.

—*The Monist*, Vol. 29

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