

Bertrand Russell and God: A Memoir

Confronted with the Almighty, he would ask,
"Sir, why did you not give me better evidence?"

by Leo Rosten

Whenever I run across Bertrand Russell's name, I remember several afternoons I spent with him in London, many years ago, in his home on Queen's Road.

He was very thin, frail, and skin-creased, shorter than I had assumed, with a head much too large for his body, a bright-eyed elf with an aureole of white hair and a thread of a mouth that twisted—sardonic or amused, petulant or defiant—with every turn of his mood.

A pipe was never out of his hands. Whenever I asked him a question, he would fuss and fiddle with that pipe, tamping it down or reaming it, blowing into its stem to clean the passage, filling it, lighting it slowly, tapping it out, or refilling it—and then his answer would emerge, pellucid in phrasing and breath-taking in precision. Never before had I heard such a flow of epigrams or such tantalizing fugues of intelligence and irony. He used his pipe as a prop—to give him time to think, formulating his response, editing it, polishing it, rehearsing it, I suspect, before he presented it to me. The result was intoxicating.

He was rather cool in manner, I should say—perhaps because he was suspicious of my purpose: I had written to say I hoped to persuade him to write an article on agnosticism (for *Look* magazine). Almost his first words were: "I doubt that your editor will publish—in America—what I should want to say."

(One must remember how shabbily Russell had been treated by the city of New York, judged "unfit" to teach at City College and fired, despite his contract, because of his "lecherous, lustful, erotomaniac, aphrodisiac . . . writings," the complaint read.)

He asked, "What sort of article have you in mind?"

"A question-answer format. . . ."

"And who," he murmured, "will put the questions?"

"I."

Pause. Puff. Smoke. "Do give me some examples."

"Are you an agnostic or an atheist?" I began.

"Agnostic, of course. . . . Atheists are like Christians: That is, both dogmatically maintain that we can know whether or not there is a God. The Christian holds that God does exist; the atheist holds that God does not. But the agnostic knows that we simply do not possess sufficient grounds either to affirm or deny the existence of a supreme being. . . . So I believe that although the existence of God is not impossible, it is improbable. Quite improbable."

"Then how do you explain the beauty and harmony of nature?" I ventured.

He cocked his head to one side like a mischievous sparrow: "I fail to see much beauty or harmony in a tapeworm. . . . Animals throughout the kingdom of 'beautiful' nature kill and prey upon each other quite without mercy. The stars in the 'harmonious' heavens explode from time to time and destroy everything in their vicinity. Beauty is entirely subjective. It can exist only in the eye—and the mind—of an observer. . . . Try another question."

"Well, do you ever—however vaguely or infrequently—fear God or God's judgment?"

Russell shrugged. "If there is, in fact, a Supreme Deity, which I doubt, I think it most unlikely that he—" a pause, an ironic grimace—"would possess so un-

easy a vanity as to be offended by my views about his existence." He fixed me with a skeptical stare. "Now then, will your magazine print such scandalous comments for the God-fearing American public?" His lips corkscrewed both dubiously and disdain.

"I can assure you that we will."

"Perhaps you had better ask more questions."

"Do you deny that man has a soul?"

A moue traversed his lips. "What do you mean by 'soul'? One can't give a precise answer to an imprecise question."

"I suspect, sir, that you know what men mean when they talk about the soul."

"Mmh." He shrugged. "I suppose that 'soul' is meant to designate some non-material essence, temporarily associated with man's corporeal existence—an essence, in the case of those who believe in immortality, that presumably leaves man's body to continue its existence, in one form or another, throughout all of the future. . . . I do not believe any of this, of course." He blinked. "But that should in no way lead you to think I am a materialist. I am just as doubtful about the reality of the body. . . ."

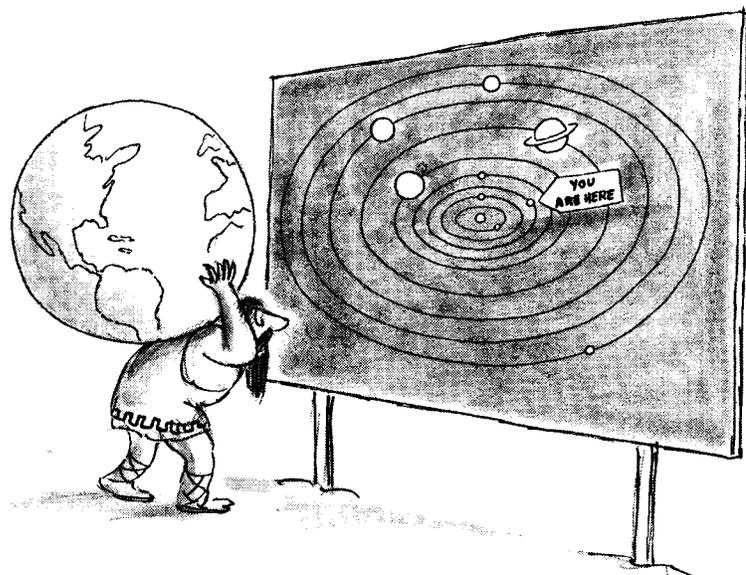
"Then do you in any way distinguish between mind and matter?"

"That," he sighed, "takes us into rather difficult problems in metaphysics. For my part, 'mind' and 'matter' are merely symbols, conveniences used in philosophical discourse."

"Don't you think that matter exists?"

"There are powerful reasons for holding that neither mind nor matter 'exist.'"

(Continued on next page.)



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"That, I suppose, would lead you to deny that there is a hereafter."

A cloud of smoke appeared from his pipe. "I have failed to find any persuasive evidence, even—[dryly]—in the most earnest allegations of spiritualists, transmigrationists, or psychical researchers, that would lead me to take seriously the assumption that we, or vaporous parts of us, survive death. But I remain open to conviction; if respectable data ever come along, I should examine them with great care." The tone suggested that Russell was confident such data were not likely to consume much of his time in the years ahead. "You know, agnosticism totally baffles many people. . . . When I was sent to prison as a pacifist, during the First World War, the warder, after asking the conventional questions—name, birthdate, place of residence—asked what was my religion. 'I am an agnostic,' I said. The poor man—a very decent sort—looked bewildered. 'A what?' he asked. 'Agnostic,' I repeated. He said, 'Would you be so good as to spell that out, sir?' So I spelled out 'a-g-n,' and so on. When the warder read the strange word he had written, he looked up cheerfully and said, 'Well, there certainly are a great many religious sects—but I am sure they all worship the same God!' " Russell smiled; he would not elevate his amusement with a laugh.

"What about so-called miracles?" I asked. "Miraculous cures, for example?"

Russell waved a hand in benign dismissal of divine therapy. "My dear boy, faith certainly does heal—some people. But that scarcely proves anything 'miraculous.' Even at Lourdes, some diseases and afflictions and physical disabilities have never been cured. . . . Those pious people who do experience a mystifying cure at Lourdes would probably have been cured in another place, or by some physician, if they retained the same confidence in the powers of medicine."

"What about the miracles in the Bible?"

An expression of pain (or dismay) preceded the answer: "Even learned churchmen, if enlightened, think of the Bible as do I: not as holy revelation, but as a compilation of early history, folktales, myths—not much different from, say, the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey*. . . . I dare say that Homer makes as strong a case for the gods of Greece as Moses made for the God of Israel."

After his young wife brought us tea, I asked, "What is the meaning of life to an agnostic?"

"What is the meaning of 'the meaning of life?'" he retorted. "I do not believe that life has meaning; it just happens. Individual men and women have their own goals and purposes; and nothing in agnosticism need cause them to surrender those goals or alter those purposes."

"Are many agnostics Communists? They both oppose religion. . . ."

"Not at all. Communism simply opposes religions other than itself. Marxism is a set of virulent and intolerant dogmas. Agnostics must therefore oppose it with all their energy."

I asked, "Let us suppose, sir, that after you have left this sorry vale, you actually found yourself in heaven, standing before the Throne. There, in all his glory, sat the Lord—not Lord Russell, sir: God." Russell winced. "What would you think?"

"I would think I was dreaming."

"But suppose you realized you were not? Suppose that there, before your very eyes, beyond a shadow of a doubt, was God. What would you say?"

The pixie wrinkled his nose. "I probably would ask, 'Sir, why did you not give me better evidence?'"

. . . .

There is a noteworthy end to my story. After *Look* printed the article, the *New York Daily News* ran a blistering editorial to the effect that Bertrand Russell's shocking ruminations proved that there must be a merciful God: How else could one explain "the continued existence" of so unpleasant, wicked, and muddle-headed a philosopher?

I sent Russell the editorial. His reply (which I publish by permission of his estate) is vintage irony:

Dear Mr. Rosten:

Thank you for sending me the extract from the N.Y. "Daily News."

I think the evidence for the existence of God supplied by my continued existence is strengthened by the continued existence of the N.Y. "Daily News." It and I can agree in wishing that His mercy were less infinite.

Yours sincerely,
Bertrand Russell

To my surprise, the *His* was capitalized. All else illustrates Russell's unique combination of reasoning and mockery.

I sometimes think the great agnostic could have invented the epigram whose author no one knows: "Let us thank God that there is no God." □

Editor's Note: Leo Rosten's newest book, Dear Herm, will be published soon by McGraw-Hill.

Dugan

As the season of St. Patrick approaches, it seems appropriate to salute a poet named Dugan. Not that Alan Dugan is particularly Irish; he's Brooklyn born and lives in New York. He appeared on the poetry scene with a bang in 1961 when his starkly titled *Poems* was (1) in the Yale Series of Younger Poets, (2) a winner of a National Book Award, and (3) a Pulitzer Prize. Since then he's gone on to publish *Poems 2*, *Poems 3*, a *Selected Poems*, and in late March *Poems 4* (Atlantic-Little Brown). Speaking of Irish, his is a combination of gloom and wit. Here's one he titles "Untitled Poem."

Two shots down and I'm exalted,
so I have the choice: do I give out
the passion of the day to whiskey, arts
and crafts,
and lose tomorrow's to the shakes and
nausea,
or do I be a joiner with the bourgeoisie
and cool it, feed, do labor, and make sleep?
Ah how I envy my iron-gut youth
when I could drink and talk all night
and get to work next morning, work the
day,
and come home to a woman saying honey.

The Age of the Interview

We are living in the Age of the Interview. Everywhere—the press, magazines, radio, television—talk, talk, talk. One of the canniest interviewers is Studs Terkel, the Chicago TV chap. A few years ago he did *Hard Times*, interviews about the Depression, and now he's prying into a subject that touches everybody, *Working*, subtitled *People Talk About What They Do All Day and What They Think of While They Do It* (Pantheon, March 28). This will be a best-seller and deserves to be. Over a hundred men and women gabble on about their occupations: farmers, steelworkers, waitresses, stockbrokers, advertising types—you name it. Most don't like their work, are bored, stuck, underpaid. The few who love what they're doing stand out: a piano tuner, a bookbinder, a stonemason. A few celebrities are thrown in: Pauline Kael, Bud Freeman, Rip Torn. Here's an installment dealer:

I've had a duodenal ulcer. But it didn't come from this business. I had it when I was a furniture salesman. It was schlock furniture. A bait and switch type. Advertise something at a ridiculously low rate and then expect the salesman to switch the cus-

tommer to something else. It's worked on the TO system, turnover. The first man who greets the customer warms him up a little. And then is commanded to turn him over to a man who's introduced as the manager of the store—which makes a tremendous impression. The greatest amount of things sold in this country right now is bait and switch. Schlock.

Literary Historian

Herbert A. Kenny is a sometime poet, a moretime literary editor (*The Boston Globe*), and, now it turns out, a fine literary historian. On March 17 (when else?) Taplinger Publishing Company will bring out *Literary Dublin: A History*. When he says literary Dublin he really means literary Ireland, since the book covers all the major and many of the minor writers from that font of genius—"the Dublin dimension works like a whirlpool sucking the outlanders into its vortex." Many, many examples of the famous Irish wit. Here, on Yeats:

Yeats suffered from Dublin wits. By the yahoos of the streets he was frequently called "Willie the Spooks," because of his interest in the occult; or "The Gland Old Man," because of the rejuvenation surgery he sought. James Joyce said of him that he spoke more like a man of letters than a poet, a jibe that hurt. Professor Dowden of Trinity gave an even meaner cut. Yeats, he said, "was a man born to write the life of Southey." George Moore said of him that he looked "like an umbrella left behind at a picnic."

Lapin Lore

It seems that each year something a bit loony turns up in publishing. Lately, anthropomorphism has been creeping in; there was that famous sea gull, and the March madness this year is an upcoming long fiction about bunny rabbits, *Water-ship Down*, by an Englishman, Richard Adams (Macmillan). Avon has bought paperback rights for \$800,000, and the English have showered it with literary awards, comparing the author with Kenneth Grahame and Tolkien. The setting is a down in Berkshire, in case the title puzzles. I looked through a set of galleys but simply couldn't get with it. I mean, the boss rabbit is a male named Hazel, and others are called Bigwig, Pipkin, and Bluebell. And the little buggers have their own language: A motor vehicle is *ahrududu*, and rabbit droppings are *hraka*. But I was never given to Tolkiening, either. Allegory allergy.

Great Caricaturist

The only lightness that ever shows up in the stately *New York Review of Books* is the illustrations by that contemporary genius David Levine and those by the nineteenth-century master Grandville. In his short life (1803-47) he produced thousands of wildly imaginative caricatures and illustrations for such classics as *Gulliver* and *Aesop*. I own four of his books, and they cost me an arm and a leg; they're rare. Now Dover Publications, bless them, is coming up in March with a fully annotated selection of 266 clearly reproduced plates called *Bizzareries and Fantasies of Grandville*, with introduction and commentary by Stanley Applebaum, paperbound, for only four dollars. A situation in which you simply can't go wrong. □

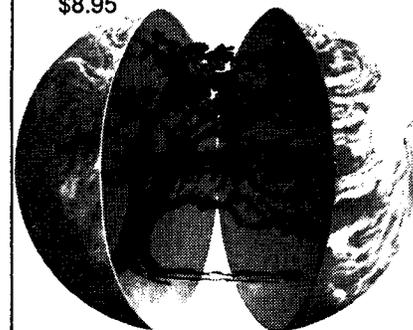
Answer to *Literary Crypt* (see page 22): We can only pay our debt to the past by putting the future in debt to ourselves.

John Buchan

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