Bertrand Russell on Critical Thinking

William Hare
Mount St. Vincent University
William.hare@msvu.ca

ABSTRACT: The ideal of critical thinking is a central one in Russell's philosophy, though this is not yet generally recognized in the literature on critical thinking. For Russell, the ideal is embedded in the fabric of philosophy, science, liberalism and rationality, and this paper reconstructs Russell's account, which is scattered throughout numerous papers and books. It appears that he has developed a rich conception, involving a complex set of skills, dispositions and attitudes, which together delineate a virtue which has both intellectual and moral aspects. It is a view which is rooted in Russell's epistemological conviction that knowledge is difficult but not impossible to attain, and in his ethical conviction that freedom and independence in inquiry are vital. Russell's account anticipates many of the insights to be found in the recent critical thinking literature, and his views on critical thinking are of enormous importance in understanding the nature of educational aims. Moreover, it is argued that Russell manages to avoid many of the objections which have been raised against recent accounts. With respect to impartiality, thinking for oneself, the importance of feelings and relational skills, the connection with action, and the problem of generalizability, Russell shows a deep understanding of problems and issues which have been at the forefront of recent debate.

The ideal of critical thinking is a central one in Russell's philosophy, though this is not yet generally recognized. Russell's name seldom appears in the immense literature on critical thinking which has emerged in philosophy of education over the past twenty years. Few commentators have noticed the importance of Russell's work in connection with any theory of education which includes a critical component. Chomsky, for example, reminds us of Russell's humanistic conception of education, which views the student as an independent person whose development is threatened by indoctrination. Woodhouse, also appealing to the concept of growth, points out Russell's concern to protect the child's freedom to exercise individual judgment on intellectual and moral questions. Stander discusses Russell's claim that schooling all too often encourages the herd mentality, with its fanaticism and bigotry, failing to develop what Russell calls a "critical habit of mind". (1) The threat of indoctrination, the importance of individual judgment, and the prevalence of fanatical opinions all point up the need for what nowadays is called critical thinking; and Russell's work is valuable to anyone who wants to understand what this kind of thinking entails and why it matters in education.

More needs to be said, however, to establish the significance of Russell's conception of critical thinking, which anticipates many of the insights in contemporary discussions and avoids many of the pitfalls which recent writers identify. Some factors, perhaps, obscure a ready appreciation of Russell's contribution. His comments on critical thinking are scattered throughout numerous writings, never systematized into a comprehensive account; (2) nor did Russell tend to use the now dominant terminology of "critical thinking". This phrase only began to come into fashion in the 1940s and 1950s, and earlier philosophers

spoke more naturally of reflective thinking, straight thinking, clear thinking, or scientific thinking, often of thinking *simpliciter*. There are useful distinctions to be drawn among these, but it is often clear from the context that, despite terminological differences, the issue concerns what is now called critical thinking. Russell uses a wide variety of terms including, occasionally, references to a critical habit of mind, the critical attitude, critical judgment, solvent criticism, critical scrutiny, critical examination, and critical undogmatic receptiveness. The ideal of critical thinking is, for Russell, embedded in the fabric of philosophy, science, rationality, liberalism and education, and his views emerge as he discusses these and other themes. (3)

Russell's conception of critical thinking involves reference to a wide range of skills, dispositions and attitudes which together characterize a virtue which has both intellectual and moral aspects, and which serves to prevent the emergence of numerous vices, including dogmatism and prejudice. Believing that one central purpose of education is to prepare students to be able to form "a reasonable judgment on controversial questions in regard to which they are likely to have to act", Russell maintains that in addition to having "access to impartial supplies of knowledge," education needs to offer "training in judicial habits of thought." (4) Beyond access to such knowledge, students need to develop certain *skills* if the knowledge acquired is not to produce individuals who passively accept the teacher's wisdom or the creed which is dominant in their own society. Sometimes, Russell simply uses the notion of intelligence, by contrast with information alone, to indicate the whole set of critical abilities he has in mind.

Such critical skills, grounded in knowledge, include: (i) *the ability to form an opinion for oneself*, (5) which involves, for example, being able to recognize what is intended to mislead, being capable of listening to eloquence without being carried away, and becoming adept at asking and determining if there is any reason to think that our beliefs are true; (ii) *the ability to find an impartial solution*, (6) which involves learning to recognize and control our own biases, coming to view our own beliefs with the same detachment with which we view the beliefs of others, judging issues on their merits, trying to ascertain the relevant facts, and the power of weighing arguments; (iii) *the ability to identify and question assumptions*, (7) which involves learning not to be credulous, applying what Russell calls constructive doubt in order to test unexamined beliefs, and resisting the notion that some authority, a great philosopher perhaps, has captured the whole truth. Russell reminds us that "our most unquestioned convictions *may* be as mistaken as those of Galileo's opponents." (8) In short, his account of critical skills covers a great deal of the ground set out in detailed, systematic fashion in more recent discussions. (9)

There are numerous insights in Russell's account which should have a familiar ring to those acquainted with the recent critical thinking literature. First, Russell's language, especially his emphasis on *judgment*, suggests the point that critical skills cannot be reduced to a mere formula to be routinely applied. Critical judgment means that one has to *weigh* evidence and arguments, approximate truth must be *estimated*, with the result that skill demands wisdom. Second, critical thinking requires being critical *about our own attempts at criticism*. Russell observes, for example, that refutations are rarely final; they are usually a prelude to further refinements. (10) He also notes, anticipating a recent

objection that critical thinking texts restrict criticism to "approved" topics, that punishment awaits those who wander into unconventional fields of criticism. (11) For Russell, critical thinking must include critical reflection on what passes for critical thinking. Third, critical thinking is not essentially a negative enterprise, witness Russell's emphasis on *constructive* doubt, and his warning against practices which lead to children becoming *destructively* critical. (12) Russell maintains that the kind of criticism aimed at is not that which seeks to reject, but that which considers apparent knowledge on its merits, retaining whatever survives critical scrutiny.

There is a pervasive emphasis in Russell's writings, as in much recent commentary, on the *reasons and evidence* which support, or undermine, a particular belief. Critical scrutiny of these is needed to determine the degree of confidence we should place in our beliefs. He emphasizes the need to teach the skill of marshalling evidence if a critical habit of mind is to be fostered, and suggests that one of the most important, yet neglected, aspects of education is learning how to reach true conclusions on insufficient data. (13) This emphasis on reasons, however, does not lead Russell to presuppose the existence of an infallible faculty of rationality. Complete rationality, he observes, is an unattainable ideal; rationality is a matter of degree. (14) Far from having an uncritical belief in rationality, he was even prepared to say, somewhat facetiously, that philosophy was an unusually ingenious attempt to think fallaciously!

The mere possession of critical skills is insufficient to make one a critical thinker. Russell calls attention to various *dispositions* which mean that the relevant skills are actually exercised. Typically, he uses the notion of *habit* (sometimes the notion of *practice*) to suggest the translation of skills into actual behaviour. Russell describes education as the formation, by means of instruction, of certain mental habits [and a certain outlook on life and the world]. (15) He mentions, in particular: (i) *the habit of impartial inquiry*, (16) which is necessary if one-sided opinions are not to be taken at face value, and if people are to arrive at conclusions which do not depend solely on the time and place of their education; (ii) *the habit of weighing evidence*, (17) coupled with the practice of not giving full assent to propositions which there is no reason to believe true; (iii) *the habit of attempting to see things truly*, (18) which contrasts with the practice of merely collecting whatever reinforces existing prejudice; and (iv) *the habit of living from one's own centre*, (19) which Russell describes as a kind of self-direction, a certain independence in the will. Such habits, of course, have to be exercised intelligently. Russell recognizes clearly, indeed it is a large part of the problem which critical thinking must address, that one becomes a victim of habit if the habitual beliefs of one's own age constitute a prison of prejudice. Hence the need for a *critical* habit of mind.

Because they are not simply automatic responses in which one has been drilled, such intellectual habits in effect reflect a person's willingness, what Russell typically calls one's *readiness*, to act and respond in various ways. His examples include: (i) *a readiness to admit new evidence against previous beliefs*, (20) which involves an open-minded acceptance (avoiding credulity) of whatever a critical examination has revealed; (ii) *a readiness to discard hypotheses which have proved inadequate*, (21) where the test is whether or not one is prepared in fact to abandon beliefs which once seemed promising;

and (iii) *a readiness to adapt oneself to the facts of the world*, (22) which Russell distinguishes from merely going along with whatever happens to be in the ascendant, which might be evil. To be ready to act, or react, in these ways suggests both an awareness that the habits in question are appropriate and a principled commitment to their exercise. They have in common the virtue Russell called *truthfulness*, which entails the wish to find out, and trying to be right in matters of belief. (23)

In Russell's conception, beyond the skills and dispositions outlined above, a certain set of *attitudes* characterizes the outlook of a critical person. By the critical attitude, Russell means a temper of mind central to which is a certain stance with respect to knowledge and opinion which involves: (i) *a realization of human fallibility*, a sense of the uncertainty of many things commonly regarded as indubitable, bringing with it humility; (24) (ii) *an open-minded outlook* with respect to our beliefs, an "inward readiness" to give weight to the other side, where every question is regarded as open and where it is recognized that what passes for knowledge is sure to require correction; (25) (iii) *a refusal to think that our own desires and wishes provide a key to understanding the world*, recognizing that what we should like has no bearing whatever on what is; (26) (iv) *being tentative*, (27) without falling into a lazy scepticism (or dogmatic doubt), but holding one's beliefs with the degree of conviction warranted by the evidence. Russell defends an outlook midway between complete scepticism and complete dogmatism in which one has a strong desire to know combined with great caution in believing that one knows. Hence his notion of critical undogmatic receptiveness which rejects certainty (the *demand* for which Russell calls an intellectual vice (28)) and ensures that open-mindedness does not become mindless.

Russell describes critical undogmatic receptiveness as the true attitude of science, and often speaks of the scientific outlook, the scientific spirit, the scientific temper, a scientific habit of mind and so on, but Russell does not believe that critical thinking is only, or invariably, displayed in science. It is clear that Russell is suggesting a certain *ideal* to which science can only aspire but which, in his view, science exemplifies to a greater extent than philosophy, at least philosophy as practiced in the early twentieth century. Russell uses a number of other phrases to capture the ideal of critical thinking, including the philosophic spirit and a philosophical habit of mind, the liberal outlook (or even the liberal creed), and the rational temper. All of these ideas are closely intertwined. He remarks, for example, that the scientific outlook is the intellectual counterpart of what is, in the practical sphere, the outlook of liberalism. The critical outlook, for Russell, reflects an epistemological and ethical perspective which emphasizes: (i) *how* beliefs are held i.e. not dogmatically, (ii) the doubtfulness of all beliefs, (iii) the belief that knowledge is difficult but not impossible, (iv) freedom of opinion, (v) truthfulness, and (vi) tolerance.

Russell's account of critical thinking is itself a critical one. It is not rendered naive by postmodern doubts about enlightenment notions, doubts which Russell would regard as dogmatic. With respect to both skills and dispositions, for example, Russell does stress impartiality, but he is acutely aware of, and emphasizes, the problems which readily frustrate the realization of this ideal. No one can view the world with complete impartiality, Russell notes, but a continual approach is possible. He speaks of controlling our biases, but at the same time is quick to observe that "one's bias may be too profound to be conscious."

(29) He concedes that even scientific articles (for example, about the effects of alcohol) will generally betray the writer's bias. He notes that it is *very easy* to become infected by prejudice and speaks of having to *struggle* against it. Russell admits that his account of the critical attitude may seem nothing more than a trite truism, but keeping it in mind, and adhering to it, especially as far as our own biases are concerned, is not at all easy. As with his conviction about the attainability of knowledge, and unlike many contemporary sceptics, Russell defends the ideal of impartiality and offers practical advice to anyone who takes this elusive ideal seriously. We can try to hear all sides and discuss our views with people who have different biases, making sure to face *real* opponents; we can stretch our minds by trying to appreciate alternative pictures of the world presented in philosophy, anthropology and history; we can learn to recognize our own biases by, for example, noting when contrary opinions make us angry. And so on.

Russell attaches considerable importance to forming one's own opinions, and this might seem to betray an unwarranted confidence in an individual's ability to avoid dependence on expert knowledge, an issue which recent discussions concerning trust in knowledge have brought to the fore. Russell's concern is that "with modern methods of education and propaganda it has become possible to indoctrinate a whole population with a philosophy which there is no rational ground to suppose true," (30) hence his emphasis on thinking for oneself. He is not, however, blind to the value of expert knowledge. He maintains that expert opinion, when unanimous, must be accepted by non-experts as *more likely* to be right than the opposite opinion. One of his famous principles is that "when the experts are agreed, the opposite opinion cannot be regarded as certain." It cannot be regarded as *certain*, but it *may* prove to be correct since the experts, despite their agreement, may be mistaken. Hence, we need to maintain our critical guard and an open-minded outlook. Russell observes that an economist should form an independent judgment on currency questions, but an ordinary mortal had better follow authority. There remains some scope, however, for one's own critical judgment even with respect to expert, or supposed expert, pronouncements. Learning not to be taken in by eloquence is part of learning to recognize who speaks with real authority. Russell also believes that non-specialists can learn to distinguish the genuine expert from cocksure prophets and dishonest charlatans, and in the case of doubt a critical person can and should suspend judgment.

It is sometimes objected against influential accounts of critical thinking that there is little or no mention of the feelings and relational skills which go beyond opening the mind to include opening one's heart to the world and to other people. This feminist critique does not, I believe, apply to Russell; indeed, he anticipates this very criticism of critical thinking: "Schools . . . will turn out pupils whose minds are closed against reason and whose hearts have been taught to be deaf to humane feeling." (31) Elsewhere, speaking of an education designed to undermine dogmatism, Russell says plainly: "What is needed is not merely intellectual. A widening of sympathy is at least as important." (32) Again, far from the hostility and aggressiveness which is sometimes associated with critical thinking, and thought to make it gender biased, Russell advises that "in studying a philosopher, the right attitude is neither reverence nor contempt, but first a kind of hypothetical sympathy. . .." (33) Russell here anticipates what is called "the believing game" (by contrast with "the doubting

game"), where one tries to discover, as Russell puts it, what it *feels like to believe in* the ideas in question before one attempts to overturn them.

Furthermore, Russell is not open to the objection, also raised against recent accounts of critical thinking, that the paradigm encourages one to lose touch with one's own personal voice, detaching and objectifying that voice in a misguided quest for Truth and Certainty. Russell himself disparages the tendency to use "truth" with a big T in the grand sense. People persecute each other because they believe they know the "Truth". (34) Although Russell thinks that there is a danger in passionate belief (in general he holds that the passionateness of a belief is inversely proportional to the evidence in its favour!), he does not advocate an attitude of complete detachment because he believes that detachment will lead to inaction. (35) The kind of detachment he favours is from those emotions (hatred, envy, anger and so on) which interfere with intellectual honesty and which prevent the emergence of kindly feeling. (36) The person who has no feelings, he says, does nothing and achieves nothing. Here again, Russell anticipates the recent objection that critical thinking may lead to people becoming spectators rather than participants. The philosopher is not a merely sceptical spectator of human activities. (37) We need, Russell says, to learn to live without certainty, yet without being paralyzed by hesitation. He advocates living from one's own centre, but warns against subjective *certainty*. Many have gone to war with the certainty that they would survive, Russell observes, but death paid no heed to their certainty.

Finally, it is worth noting that Russell avoids the "philosopher's fallacy" of exaggerating the role of philosophy and logic in the development of critical thinking to the neglect of subject knowledge. Certainly Russell thinks that philosophy has much to contribute, especially to learning the value of suspended judgment — no doubt because philosophy is so full of controversy and uncertainty. Moreover, Russell is not nearly as dismissive of informal logic as some recent critics; clear logical thinking has a definite part to play. (38) It is useful, Russell thinks, to study informal fallacies and to have good names for them, such as the "pigs-might-fly" fallacy. (39) In giving an example of this fallacy from physics, Russell seems to agree with those who hold that such principles of reasoning are subject-neutral and generalizable. Having said this, however, it is important to recall that Russell does *not* equate critical thinking with logical proficiency. Logic and mathematics are the alphabet of the book of nature, not the book itself. Russell also makes it clear in many places that it is one thing to know, for example, the principle that belief should be proportioned to the evidence, and quite another to know what the actual evidence is. Russell, as we have seen, stresses access to impartial sources of knowledge; without such access, our critical abilities cannot function. He is not, therefore, to be convicted of a simplistic view about the generalizability of critical thinking.

Notes

(1) Noam Chomsky, "Toward a humanistic conception of education", in Walter Feinberg and Henry Rosemont, Jr. (eds.), *Work, Technology and Education* Urbana: University of

Illinois Press, 1975: 204-20; Howard Woodhouse, "The concept of growth in Bertrand Russell's educational thought", *Journal of Educational Thought* 17, 1, 1983: 12-22; Philip Stander, "Bertrand Russell on the aims of education", *Educational Forum* 38, 4, 1974: 445-56.

(2) Relevant papers include: "The place of science in a liberal education" (1913), "Free thought and official propaganda" (1922), "The value of free thought" (1944), "Education for democracy" (1939), "The functions of a teacher (1940), "How to become a philosopher" (1942), "Philosophy for laymen" (1946), and "Freedom and the philosopher" (1951). Relevant books include: *The Problems of Philosophy* (1912), *Principles of Social Reconstruction* (1916), *On Education* (1926), *Sceptical Essays* (1928), *Education and the Social Order* (1932), *Unpopular Essays* (1950), and *Why I Am Not A Christian* (1957).

(3) Russell remarks that philosophy is merely the attempt to answer ultimate questions critically. See Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy* London: Oxford University Press, 1973: 1. And he observes that critical undogmatic receptiveness is the true attitude of science. See "Free thought and official propaganda", in *Sceptical Essays* London: Unwin, 1985: 117.

(4) Russell, "John Stuart Mill", in *Portraits From Memory* London: Allen and Unwin, 1956: 131.

(5) Russell, "Education for democracy", *Addresses and Proceedings of the National Education Association* 77, July 2-6, 1939: 530. See also "Philosophy for laymen", in *Unpopular Essays* London: George Allen and Unwin, 1950: 47.

(6) Russell, "A plea for clear thinking", in *Portraits From Memory* op. cit.: 174. See also "Free thought and official propaganda", in *Sceptical Essays* op. cit.: 116.

(7) Russell, *Philosophy* New York: W. W. Norton, 1927: 299. See also *Principles of Social Reconstruction* London: Unwin, 1971: 108.

(8) Russell, "Philosophy", in John G. Slater (ed.), *The Collected Papers of Bertrand Russell* Vol. 11, London: Routledge, 1997: 223. (Incomplete paper, probably written in 1945. Emphasis in original.)

(9) See, for example, Robert H. Ennis, "A taxonomy of critical thinking dispositions and abilities", in Joan Boykoff Baron and Robert J. Sternberg (eds.), *Teaching Thinking Skills: Theory and Practice* New York: W. H. Freeman, 1987: 9-26.

(10) Russell, *History of Western Philosophy* London: George Allen and Unwin, 1961: 69. Another clear example is Russell's remark that "the liberal philosopher will wish all beliefs to be open to discussion, including the belief that all beliefs should be open to discussion." See "Freedom and the philosopher", in *Collected Papers* Vol. 11, op. cit.: 418-21.

(11) Russell, "Freedom and the colleges", in *Why I Am Not A Christian* New York: Simon and Schuster, 1965: 181.

(12) Russell, *Principles of Social Reconstruction* London: Unwin, 1971: 107-8.

(13) Russell, *Education and the Social Order* London: Unwin, 1977:141.

(14) Russell, "Can men be rational?" in *Sceptical Essays* op. cit.: 41.

(15) Russell, "The place of science in a liberal education" in *Mysticism and Logic* Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1953: 41. I shall take up the idea of "a certain outlook" subsequently.

(16) Russell, "The functions of a teacher" in *Unpopular Essays* op. cit.: 151.

(17) Russell, "Free thought and official propaganda" in *Sceptical Essays* op. cit.: 126.

(18) Russell, "Human character and social institutions" in Richard A. Rempel et al. (eds.), *The Collected Papers of Bertrand Russell* Vol. 14, London: Routledge, 1995: 419-25.

(19) Russell, "Human character and social institutions", ibid.: 421.

(20) Russell, "Freedom versus authority in education" in *Sceptical Essays* op. cit.: 149.

(21) Russell, "Free thought and official propaganda" in *Sceptical Essays* op. cit.: 116

(22) Russell, "Hopes: realized and disappointed" in *Portraits From Memory* op. cit.: 47.

(23) Russell, "The value of free thought" in *Understanding History* New York: Philosophical Library, 1957: 73.

(24) Russell, "A philosophy for our time" in *Portraits From Memory* op. cit.: 167. For the comment on humility, see Russell, *Our Knowledge of the External World* New York: Mentor, 1960: 186. Russell also notes the theory-laden character of observation. See his comment in *Philosophy* op. cit.: 170.

(25) Russell, *On Education* London: Unwin, 1960: 43, 134. And Russell, "Free thought and official propaganda" in *Sceptical Essays* op. cit.: 116.

(26) Russell, "The place of science in a liberal education", in *Mysticism and Logic* op. cit.: 46. And "What I believe" in *Why I Am Not A Christian* op. cit.: 54.

(27) Russell, "Free thought and official propaganda" in *Sceptical Essays* op. cit.: 116.

(28) Russell, "Philosophy for laymen" in *Unpopular Essays* op. cit.: 42.

(29) Russell, "My own philosophy" in *Collected Papers* Vol. 11, op. cit.: 69.

(30) Russell, "Philosophy", in *Collected Papers* Vol. 11, op. cit.: 233. (An incomplete paper circa 1945, perhaps building on the similarly titled paper cited in fn. 8 above.)

(31) Russell, "The duty of a philosopher in this age" in *Collected Papers* Vol. 11, op. cit.: 462.

(32) Russell, "The spirit of inquiry'' in *Collected Papers* Vol. 11, op. cit.: 435. (Previously unpublished answers to a questionnaire, written in 1953.)

(33) Russell, *History of Western Philosophy* op. cit.: 58. This point is acknowledged by Blythe McVicker Clinchy, "On critical thinking and connected knowing", in Kerry S. Walters (ed.), *Re-Thinking Reason* New York: SUNY, 1994: 33-42.

(34) Russell, *Philosophy* op. cit.: 254. And "Philosophy in the twentieth century'' in *Sceptical Essays* op. cit.: 49.

(35) Russell, "The spirit of inquiry" in *Collected Papers* Vol. 11, op. cit: 433.

(36) Russell, "Rewards of philosophy" in *Collected Papers* Vol.11, op. cit.: 276.

(37) Russell, "Le philosophe en temp de crise" in *Collected Papers* Vol. 11, op. cit.: 415.

(38) Russell, "A plea for clear thinking" in *Portraits From Memory* op. cit.: 175.

(39) Russell, review of Rupert Crawshay-Williams, *The Comforts of Unreason* in *Collected Papers* Vol. 11, op. cit.: 323-7.

(40) See my "Content and criticism: the aims of schooling" *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 29, 1, 1995: 47-60.

{This article is by William Hare. It appears in the *Journal of Thought* 36,1,2001:7-16, and was first published in the *Proceedings of the Twentieth World Congress of Philosophy* (The Paideia Project On-line), 1999.}