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Russell Now!

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Russell Now!

Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, here are the editorial's first two paragraphs:

One of the most quoted phrases in current popular culture is “six degrees of separation.” It expresses the idea that, on average, any human being is connected with any other human being by at most six acquaintances. While there is much debate as to whether this is literally true, it is an interesting thought-experiment, as well as the basis for many fun parlor games. One of these is entitled ‘Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon’, in which film fans try to connect the aforementioned actor with any other movie star with as few links as possible.

I have been thinking of launching a similar parlor game called ‘Six Degrees of Bertrand Russell’, in which any figure from the past 200 years or so could be connected with Russell in as few steps as possible. Why Russell rather than, say, Ludwig Wittgenstein (who after all had a stated interest in games)? For two reasons: first, Russell lived to the ripe old age of ninety-seven, and thus had the time to interact with a wide variety of people; and second, he was for most of that long life a celebrity, who rubbed elbows with all manner of individuals, many of whom were either celebrities themselves at the time or came to be celebrated later. Russell’s list of acquaintances stretched from Lenin (V.I.) to Lennon (John), from the Bloomsbury Set of the 1920s to the Domsday Prophets of the 1960s, from William Gladstone to Harold Wilson.

Disciplines

Philosophy

Comments

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https://philosophynow.org/issues/120/Russell_Now.

Tim Madigan was the Special Guest Editor for this issue.



Editorial

Russell Now!

One of the most quoted phrases in current popular culture is “six degrees of separation.” It expresses the idea that, on average, any human being is connected with any other human being by at most six acquaintances. While there is much debate as to whether this is literally true, it is an interesting thought-experiment, as well as the basis for many fun parlor games. One of these is entitled ‘Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon’, in which film fans try to connect the aforementioned actor with any other movie star with as few links as possible.

I have been thinking of launching a similar parlor game called ‘Six Degrees of Bertrand Russell’, in which any figure from the past 200 years or so could be connected with Russell in as few steps as possible. Why Russell rather than, say, Ludwig Wittgenstein (who after all had a stated interest in games)? For two reasons: first, Russell lived to the ripe old age of ninety-seven, and thus had the time to interact with a wide variety of people; and second, he was for most of that long life a celebrity, who rubbed elbows with all manner of individuals, many of whom were either celebrities themselves at the time or came to be celebrated later. Russell’s list of acquaintances stretched from Lenin (V.I.) to Lennon (John), from the Bloomsbury Set of the 1920s to the Doomsday Prophets of the 1960s, from William Gladstone to Harold Wilson.

Russell’s contributions to technical philosophy are inestimable. He played a pivotal role in changing the very nature of Anglo-American philosophy. But he also was a major figure in popularizing philosophy. For instance, the 1957 collection by Russell entitled *Why I Am Not a Christian and Other Essays on Religion and Related Matters*, which gathered together his many musings on the topic of religion, continues to this day to have a major effect on many people. Russell had a rare gift for taking abstruse, highly complicated philosophical issues and turning them into clear arguments that any intelligent reader could follow, regardless of his or her background. This was no doubt why his 1945 book *A History of Western Philosophy* became a bestseller. Its breezy style infuriated those who felt that philosophy should only be for the technically inclined, but it proved nonetheless that there is a hunger for philosophical knowledge among hoi polloi, a hunger that the analytical school did little to appease.

Besides his contributions to religious polemics, Russell made many other important contributions to popular philosophy. In the 1967 *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Paul Edwards takes an editor’s prerogative by devoting twenty four pages to the entry on Russell. Considering the fact that Plato only gets twenty pages, this is perhaps a bit extreme, but it does show the importance which Edwards placed upon

Russell’s entire philosophical oeuvre, including the popular writings. Edwards admits that “What is generally considered Russell’s most important work in philosophy was done between 1900 and the outbreak of the First World War”, yet he is by no means dismissive of the content of such later volumes as *Marriage and Morals*, *On Education*, and *The Conquest of Happiness*. He writes:

“It is safe to say that not since Voltaire has there been a philosopher with such an enormous audience. Russell also shares with Voltaire a glittering and graceful prose style and a delicious sense of humor.”

One must remember that for much of the second half of his life Russell made his living as a writer. He did not have the luxury, for most of this time, of drawing upon an academic salary to pay for his and his family’s upkeep. His wonderful ability to write memorable copy on a deadline is not something one should easily dismiss. Especially in the 1950s and 1960s, through his social activism, frequent media appearances and nonstop issuance of manifestoes, he made philosophy exciting and relevant to a new generation. Russell became the stereotypical image of a philosopher in the minds of many non-academics, much as Einstein became the stereotypical image of a scientist. Both showed that one could be a deep thinker and still be passionately involved in life’s struggles (and even have an active sex life, too).

The following articles by members of the Bertrand Russell Society aim to show why, almost fifty years after his death, he remains both an important figure in the history of philosophy and a role model for those who – in the spirit of *Philosophy Now* – want to make philosophical inquiry accessible to all.

To what extent does Russell continue to have a significant influence on modern times? A generation has passed since Russell’s death, and the number of people who knew him by direct acquaintance is dwindling. Recently, in my capacity as President of the Bertrand Russell Society, I received a call from a woman who had seen a listing for the Society in which my phone number was given. “Are you Bertrand Russell?” she asked me. I was rather taken aback (albeit flattered) that someone could even ask such a question. While I can’t in good faith claim to be Bertrand Russell, I can honestly say I’ve shaken the hand of people who shook his hand. Two degrees of separation!

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Tim Madigan is the President of the Bertrand Russell Society and has been known to shave those who do not shave themselves, including himself. For information on the Bertrand Russell Society please see bertrandrussell.org