

ON RUSSELL'S ARGUMENT CONCERNING PHILOSOPHIC CONTEMPLATION

S. K. Wertz

Introduction

Within his classic discussion of the value of philosophy in *The Problems of Philosophy*,¹ Bertrand Russell presents the following argument against those philosophies that assimilate the universe to humankind:

Knowledge is a form of union of Self and not-Self; like all union, it is impaired by dominion, and therefore by any attempt to force the universe into conformity with what we find in ourselves. . . . This view [i.e., the conclusion] . . . is untrue [and] it has the effect of robbing philosophic contemplation of all that gives it value, since it fetters contemplation to Self. The true philosophic contemplation, on the contrary, finds its satisfaction in every enlargement of the not-Self, in everything that magnifies the objects contemplated, and thereby the subject contemplating. (159-60)

An ingenious argument: it is clearly directed against any of the varieties of idealism, and at the same time it is supportive of realism; but, there is more to it than this debate. Is this a sound argument? There may be several reasons why it is not, but one I have discerned in particular is worth noting because of its technical associations with which Russell was undoubtedly familiar. (Even if he wasn't, which is highly unlikely, my point still stands, especially for whoever would be inclined to use this deductive argument against idealism.) Other questions asked of the argument are: What is its context, and what does that reveal? Where did the argument come from? This is not a likely topic for Russell, so it has some

historic interest.

Analysis of the Argument

The flaw in Russell's argument lies in his understanding of "union." He asserts that knowledge is a form of *union* of Self and not-Self, and *like all union, it is impaired by dominion*. Russell's conclusion—namely, any attempt to force the universe into conformity with what we find in ourselves is futile—does not follow for the following considerations. One implication of Russell's assertion is that unions are not supposed to be so impaired—and that "impairment" is a deficiency. In ordinary English, "impair" means to make things worse or weaker, or even to damage, and not just to reduce. Negative value judgments are obviously associated with the term and they are implied in Russell's argument. But not all union is *impaired* by dominion. Where did Russell get the idea that it was? It was not entirely from mathematics. Given any two sets, *A* and *B*, a third set may be formed from the combination of their members. The union of the two sets {1, 3, 4, 5} and {2, 4, 6} is {1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6}; that is,

$$\{1, 3, 4, 5\} \cup \{2, 4, 6\} = \{1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6\}.$$

This is probably what Russell had in mind. But it is only one possible union from the sets. A union set could be the elements from either set besides the members from both sets. As Edna E. Kramer says: "No particular pattern is required in forming the union of two sets."²

A standard, set-theoretic definition is as follows. The *union* of the two sets, *A* and *B*, is the set of all elements that are in the set *A*, or in the set *B*, or in both sets *A* and *B*; or, formally,

Definition. $A \cup B = \{x \mid x \in A \vee x \in B\}.$

This definition usually follows a discussion of equal sets, since a union of two sets may be an identical set.³ But this is not

always the case: if we unite two sets into one, we may fail to obtain a set of the original collection. Kramer illustrates with two examples: "combining two sets of china will yield an enlarged set but not necessarily a set identical with one in the original collection, and a similar statement applies to the fusion of two classes in a school" (I, 156). The union set may also diminish, as in my numerical example—there is one four instead of two. So, mathematically, union may be "impaired by dominion." There are two valid instances in which the union set will be dominated by either the constituents of *A* or the constituents of *B*. Consequently, Russell's definition of "knowledge" has three set-theoretic interpretations: (1) where the members are all the elements from any given two sets (this is Russell's reading); (2) where the members are from the Self alone (the position Russell is arguing against); and, (3) where the members are from the not-Self (another position Russell is in favor of, one which he thinks dissolves into the first interpretation).

The upshot of this brief discussion is that Russell's argument does not exclude an idealistic reading of "union"; and, hence, his argument against philosophic contemplation of the Self is not decisive because of the second interpretation. If the third interpretation of "union" is permissible, then the second one should be also. Our set-theoretic definition demonstrates this reciprocal, disjunctive situation. My analogy with set theory poses a genuine problem for Russell's argument, since he accepted mathematics as a paradigm for human knowledge. In other words, if there are acceptable readings or interpretations of "union," they would surely come from mathematics. Such a reading from set theory is compatible with idealism; hence, Russell's argument doesn't establish its intended refutation.

Why would Russell have not thought of the mathematical senses of "union"? One plausible answer is that he was preoccupied with Hegel in the previous chapter (XIV) and Hegel's definition of "absolute knowledge" as the union of subject and object. In one of the several descriptions of absolute knowledge, Hegel says:

