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The Spirit of Russell's Philosophy (1921)[1]

It is not easy to talk about an individual's philosophy in a short essay, but it is even more difficult in the case of Russell. For Russell's school is empirical (*shiyan de* 實驗的), analytical (*fenxi de* 分析的) and specific (*xiding de* 細定的); he is against the pure, mixed and general schools. Thus, to understand Russell's knowledge, the most important thing is to patiently study the detailed answers to the detailed questions raised in his works and lectures. It is not like the philosophy of these schools of literature, where you can take one or two interesting phrases like "everything changes", "I think, therefore I am", "the universe is my idea" etc. as the essence of their philosophy. It's not some kind of "Russell crash course", where you can learn fast and go away.

Even though I speak in this way, I cannot promise that readers will learn anything about Russell's philosophy after reading this passage. That is not my intention. My intention is not to talk about the essence of Russell's philosophy, but about his spirit, so that an appropriate, scientific, careful and unbiased attitude can be formed in the mind of the reader, and an interest can be created

1 Zhao Yuanren 趙元任 (1921). "Luosu zhexue de jingshen" 羅素哲學的精神 (The Spirit of Russell's Philosophy). *Luosu yuekan* 羅素月刊, 1(1), 1-9.

in experiencing Russell's knowledge; so that after my lecture, readers will be impatient to read Russell's articles. Then I shall think that these words have not been written in vain.

Since Russell is both a mathematician and philosopher, and has contributed most profoundly to the science and mathematical logic, we can expect that his thoughts and arguments must be very "logical" (*lunli de* 論理的), articulated (*you jiegou de* 有結構的), reflective (*mingxing de* 明省的) and exceedingly sophisticated (*guibian de* 詭辯的). This last word is very important.

Since most students in my country, whether reading or writing, do not understand the sophisticated attitude of Western philosophers and end up losing their most important spirit, I ask the readers for permission to say a few more words:

Russell did not use the adjective "sophisticated" when talking about himself, but he would accept to be addressed in this way. In the early stages of a person's or country's thought, words are usually expressed without adding any additional range or description. But when thoughts become more complicated and debates more extensive and we want to express a meaning, we will immediately consider the relationship this idea has to other people's knowledge, and the similarities and differences it has to the opinions already expressed by others. Therefore, when this new idea is formulated, it must go through many conjunctions (*lianci* 連詞), quotations (such as "that" ...), relative clauses (*lianfu duju* 連附讀句) and so on. Only then can this sentence be perfectly said, seen and thus stand for itself. This style (*lunpai* 論派) is the same in all modern Western learning, especially Russell's, so I am afraid that what was expressed above is still not clear. Therefore, I will give you some more examples to explain it better.

Russell for example says: "Unless I am very much misled by my reasoning, I should entirely agree with the realities that the task of philosophy is not to prove that the world is as we wish it to be, as has always been the motive of the so-called tender-hearted philosophers, but to discover, from as neutral a point of view as we know how, what the world really is like."

I fear that many people will break his words into pieces and translate them in this way: "My theory has not misled me, realism is right. They say that philosophy should prove that the world is good. We all want the world to be good, and good-natured philosophers all have this goal. Philosophy should be neutral, and we should try our best to be neutral as well. Philosophy should discover what the world really is like. "

The comparison of this translation with the original text is like comparing a children's story about flowers with classical masterpieces, or even better, like comparing a heap of broken bricks with a palace.

Of course, Russell never said the above sentence, it's just similar to what he said. His usual speech was not necessarily so thorough, and his translation was not always as "a bamboo tube for steaming rice", as they would call it in the South, and as I wrote above. The inadequacies of this kind, however, are often seen in the translation, causing Russell to suffer losses on the one hand and scholars to lose the spirit of his ethical prudence on the other. That is why I deliberately describe it in too much detail so that if you study his work and you happen to see that he is using a childish vocabulary, you know that it is not his original tone.

Russell's philosophy focuses on methods, but it takes conclusions lightly. First of all, we will talk about the spirit of his philosophy, so methods are more important. I said above that his school is empirical, meaning that he believes that in order to judge right and wrong the truth must be based on direct experience and not on an aprioristic theory. Like the idealism of modern theory, Russell advocates that logic is the main part of philosophy, but the difference is that idealism believes that we can deduce what the world looks like from the method of logic, while Russell proposes to use logic as a means to emancipate one's freedom of thought. In this way, we can see things we have not thought about before, things that are likely to exist, or even things that are determined to be existent but are actually not. This is not the same as empirical facts, so this is the spirit of his experiment.

When Russell's experimentalism is applied to the problem of substance, it is based on his theory of so-called neutral monism (*zhongli yiyuanlun* 中立一元論). People claim that what is most real is either the mental or material. But mind and matter are both concepts constructed through the process of logic. Truly the most reliable, simple and real things are the events (*shiqing* 事情) that happen in the world at any given time. These can be experienced directly, which means that the ideology of seeing things as elements of the real world also comes from the spirit of empiricism. This ideology of seeing things as the elements comes very close to the radical empiricism (*genben jingyanlun* 根本經驗論) of James and the basic idea of the latest theories in physics, and this it is not just a strange opinion produced by Russell.

As I said above, Russell's method is analytical. His philosophy is therefore known as logical atomism (*lunli de yuanzilun* 論理的原子論). This analytical method is a tool of mathematics and experimental science. American realists

also strongly advocate the use of analytical methods in philosophy and have made numerous polemics against idealists and mystics in this regard. Now is not the time to discuss this topic in detail. However, Russell used the analytical method to obtain many precise scientific theories of construction, which can be seen as an advantage.

I also said above that Russell's school is specific. In other words, whatever problem he is working on, the conclusion he draws after extensive analysis and research must depend on the facts that have been linked to the origin of the problem. Just because the theory of guiding principles is done in a certain way, we cannot have everything judged in the same way.

For example, members of the old school of idealism like to say that people are idealistic or materialistic. Russell is not bound by these concepts. In fact, there seems to be a psychological implication in his engagement with the matter and his definition of the class of events (*shiqing de zuhe* 事情的組合). But when he studied desire, he regarded it as a rule of procedure for behaviour stimulated by the outside world, which is closer to materialistic theory. It turns out that Russell is not limited by old ideas, but that he is able to deal with specific questions and to carry out rather detailed research and solutions.

Since the spirit of Russell's philosophy is experimental, this means that the fewer entities (*xiangjian* 項件) used for theoretical purposes other than experimental matters the better. For example, the appearance, colour, sound and hardness of the table are things you can experience. The substance of the table is assumed, but if we put those things that are related to each other in a group, we call this class of events (*yizu shiqing* 一組事情) a table. In this way a material entity is left out. This principle of learning is called Occam's razor. Occam was a philosopher in the Middle Ages, and Russell takes his phrase "Entities are not to be multiplied without necessity" very seriously. Therefore, he cuts away everything theoretical but empirically not needed metaphysical redundancies, such as material consciousness.

When Occam's razor is used in a particular place, it becomes Russell's "principle of abstraction" (*chouxiang fa* 抽象法), better called the "principle which does away with abstraction" (*xiaochu chouxiang fa* 消除抽象法). For example, it is said that there are many pairs of things in the world, a pair of cubes, a pair of clay moulds, two people, two pieces of paper, and so on. Do these pairs have anything in common? In general, we say that everything on Earth can have this property called "2". Each of these pairs of things contains this property of "2", so that is what makes them similar. Russell's definition of the number is different. In fact, he says that we only see pairs of things, but

we have never seen anything abstract with the property of "2". So if Occam's razor can cut this off, Russell says it means that all these pairs of things are concrete. Now put all the pairs of things in the world in one group and call this big group "2". In this way, the abstract number becomes a concrete set.

As mentioned above, Russell's school of criticism emphasizes methods rather than conclusions. So when I talk about the spirit of Russell's philosophy, I mention his suggestions only in passing. He himself would have said that Occam's razor is the most important of his methods. There is no lack of such spirit in modern philosophy, but Russell is perhaps the only one who has so many valuable structures in philosophy, mathematics and psychology. If readers want to know what these valuable findings are, please read the text of the *Russell Monthly* journal.

(*Translated by Maja Kosec*)