

Zhichang

Records from Sessions of the English Section of Russell Study Society (1921)¹

1 A Brief Account of the Welcome Session

The society is divided into Chinese and English sections. In the third week following Russell's arrival in Beijing, the society organized a welcome reception for him in the headquarters of the Western Returned Students Association. Russell attended the welcome session in the company of Miss Black as well as Fu Tong and Zhao Yuanren. After a group photograph of the entire company was taken, a welcome address was read by a member of the society. The speech started with the following words:

Sir is referring to himself as a follower of the philosophy of neutral monism, who takes the middle road between idealism and materialism, expounding on the principles of philosophy by using the scientific method. This corresponds very much to the Chinese philosopher Confucius, who

1 Zhichang 質廠 (1921). "Luosu (Russell) xueshuo yanjiuhui yingwenbu jishi 羅素 (Russell) 學說研究會英文部紀實 (Records from the Sessions of the English Section of Russell Research Society)." *Gaizao* 改造, 3(6), 113-5.

famously said that: 'my *dao* 道 is woven together by one single principle' (*wu dao yi yi guan zhi* 吾道一以貫之). His way of distinguishing the true and false of matters started in the investigations of the underlying principles of things. Which is why he also said: 'Knowledge is attained by investigation of things (*gewu* 格物); after one has investigated their underlying principles one will attain knowledge.' This clearly shows that the integrating principle Confucius spoke about was the analysis of things. Now, since, to one's great surprise, Sir's theories are identical to the philosophy of Confucius, our county should treat Sir with the same sense of reverence as is paid to Confucius...

Russell responded in the following manner:

Speaking about monism: in the past there was an abundance of philosophers who advocated monism, yet the research methods they used were never consistent. When we discuss theory, the most important thing resides in what kind of research method we use and not in the conclusions. When I was still a lecturer of mathematics, I had a student who used the algebraic method to calculate the mathematical problems I was giving to him. Although the numbers he obtained were not incorrect his method of calculation was not fitting. In my opinion, to understand the ineffectiveness of his approach is the same as knowing that the most important part in an exposition of a theory does not lie in its results.

As regards the part on discerning right from wrong, this needs to be explained in two different parts. The morals which prevail in different societies originally do not have fixed norms. What in this place is considered to be right, is considered as wrong in another place. What in the present we believe to be right, in the past was considered as wrong. Which means that this does not fall into the scope of our scholarship. What ought to be studied instead is the right and wrong of what is true. The accuracy of the truth is induced from the facts which correspond to the various aspects of a certain matter. If something agrees with both scientific theory and facts it is thus referred to as true, otherwise we call it false.

Regarding the organization and research method of a study society, Russell further noted that:

Above anything else, the essence of a study society resides in the possibility to conduct straightforward conversations, the ability to take part in intense debates where everyone can argue from one's own standpoint. The spirit of a study society can be recognized only after the possibility to

do so. Yesterday four main problems featured within the scope of “The Analysis of Mind” were published in the *Peking University Daily*. This was not unnecessary at all. If anyone among you is able to write a solution to any one of these problems in English language, it can be handed over to me before the next session of the English section of the study society, so that it can be given further discussion in the framework of the debate on particular problems.

In turn, the assembly of members also fixed the exact time and venue at which the meetings of the society would be convened each week, after which they all departed. This was a brief account of the welcome session.

2 A Summary of The First Meeting

This time, 18 people attended the meeting. Among them, only four people have written an answer to the problems posed by Russell. The latter treated everyone with warmth and modesty, attending to the members with careful attention. First, with each member he studied the problem of his choice, trying to find a solution for each of them. Among them there was also a member who was unable to set a question. Russell encouraged him to try again and again, so that in the end he was finally able to complete the question. This was followed by a long session of questions and answers. Those who had not composed their responses first shook hands with Russell, while those who had already composed one sat down in a circle with Russell and carried on with the discussion. At first, I maintained that the main elements of an idea (*yishi* 意識) are composed out of content (*zhuxiang* 主象), object (*kexiang* 客象) and action (*zuoyong* 作用). Later, following a long conversation with Russell, I started to realize that an idea consists only of two elements, content and object.

3 A Summary of the Second Meeting

This time seven people attended the meeting. Two of them wrote their solutions to the problems posed by Russell. In the meeting we conducted a long analysis of the solutions. My solution also contained the sentence: “We cannot affirm the existence of everything which is not placed within space.” Russell responded: “Things like ‘imagination’ or ‘thought’ etc. occupy no space, yet the fact that every single person possesses these functions cannot but confirm their existence.” Upon which I responded: “Imagination and thought are functions of the human mind and do not qualify as independent. Hence,

it is possible to assert imagination and thought are the capacities of the human mind.” Russell answered: “This kind of standpoint is rather close to materialism, which defines the existence and nonexistence of a thing through whether it occupies a physical space or not. Since this is a major problem, I would invite you to elaborate on it in a longer text.”

At the same time, after we had reviewed the research methods, Mach’s work *The Analysis of Sensations* was assigned as the provisional scope of research: because this work equates the psychological with the physical. Russell also holds this book in high regard because it expounds on the true essence of sensation using exclusively the scientific method.

4 A Summary of the Third Session

Because this meeting took place in the middle of the summer term, only three people attended. I said: “The second and third sessions were not attended by many researchers, because the theories studied at the last two sessions belonged to the domain of psychology. While only those who study philosophy have a relatively deep interest in such topics, the philosophical department at Beida has very few students who are able to engage in direct discussions. Due to this reason many of them enrolled into the division for Chinese literature. Apart from that, the rest of those who are able to conduct a direct conversation about these matters do not have a deep interest in psychology. For this reason, in the future when you lecture about ‘The Analysis of Matter’ the number who will come to study problems will be much higher than it is now.” Russell responded: “My ability to study problems hinges entirely on my having the capacity of mind. If indeed, one possesses a sound knowledge of psychology, one can easily solve all sorts of scientific problems.” We continued by discussing the content of Mach’s *The Analysis of Sensations*. Then I carefully read my notes in order to check the depth of my understanding of the book. In our conversation, Russell was extremely amiable. Subsequently, we also discussed political themes. Then Russell invited Miss Black to come and lecture for a while.

(Translated by Jan Vrhovski)