UNIT 4: BERTRAND RUSSELL: "PROLOGUE" TO RUSSELL'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY

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4.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through the unit, you will be able to:

- gain a brief idea on the life and works of Bertrand Russell
- grasp the content and summary of the Prologue to Russell's autobiography
- highlight some of the major themes that are evident in the Prologue
- discuss the use of style and language
- appreciate the text of the Prologue in its totality

4.2 INTRODUCTION

Bertrand Russell (18th May, 1872 – 2nd February, 1970) was a British

philosopher, logician, an important social reformer and an essayist. He is best remembered for his contribution to mathematical logic, epistemology and analytic philosophy. Amongst other honours, he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1950. Let us gain a brief idea about the life and works of Russell.

4.3 BERTRAND RUSSELL: LIFE AND WORKS

Bertrand Arthur William Russell, third Earl Russell, was born on 18th of May, 1872 in Monmouthshire, England. His father was Viscount Amberley whose father Lord John Russell was the first Earl Russell. Bertrand Russell's mother was the daughter of the second Lord Stanley of Alderley and John Stuart Mill was his godfather. Russell lost both his parents when he was very young and he was brought up under the care of his grandmother, Lady Russell. Russell was initially educated at home and later in 1890 won a mathematical scholarship to Trinity College, Cambridge.

By 1893, he had shifted to Philosophy from Mathematics and in 1894 received first class honours. He published the first of his numerous books in 1896 and it was a work on *German Social Democracy*. Russell was a Fellow of Trinity College from 1895 to 1901 and held the post of lecturer in Philosophy there from 1910 to 1916 when he was dismissed from Trinity for his staunch pacifism and for writing a leaflet against the Word War I. He was jailed for six months and it was in prison that he wrote his *Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy* (1919) and began working on his later book *Analysis of Mind* (1921). Although occupied mainly with mathematics and logic in the early part of his life, Russell had a keen interest in politics and contested a by-election in 1907 unsuccessfully as the candidate of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies. He then stood as a Labour Candidate for Chelsea in the General Elections of 1922 and 1923 and lost both times.

In 1924, he travelled to the United States as the first of his many lecture tours and in 1927 with the help of his second wife, opened a school near Petersfield where he employed his theories of education. He dedicated the

most of the next decade to social and political journalism and held many professorships all over America and returned to England in 1944 and was re-elected as a Fellow at Trinity. Russell upheld Pacifism throughout his life but had renounced it at the event of the outbreak of the World War II. He was also a major figure in the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament.

Russell continued writing after the war on various topics and published many books including two collections of short stories. He succeeded his brother to the Earldom in 1931 and was awarded the Order of Merit in 1949. Russell's contributions to society, specifically in the fields of mathematics and philosophy, are immense and it would be easier to discuss them divided into sections.

Russell started his career as a Mathematician and later shifted to Philosophy primarily because of his desire to find a reason for believing in the truth of Mathematics. The fundamental idealist doctrine which believes that what is known is conditioned by the knowing of it made an impress on Russell as this denied any objective validity to mathematical properties. Russell thus sought to reduce mathematics to logic which involved "the analysis of the fundamental terms of mathematics in purely logical terms" and then to elaborate a logical system that would be "adequate to furnish the premises from which the propositions of mathematics could be deduced". This was carried out in his books *Principles of Mathematics* (1903) and *Principia Mathematica* (1910-13).



A.N. Whitehead: English mathematician and philosopher (February 1861 – December 1947)

Principia Mathematica marks an important event in the development of symbolic logic as it marked a breach with Aristotelian logic due the greater generality of Russell (and **Whitehead**)'s system and their endeavour to make it "rigorously formal". Other systems of logic that have developed since and that claim to be more rigorous still build upon Russell and Whitehead's work.

Russell wanted to incorporate his logic into his theory of knowledge and in *The Problems of Philosophy* (1912) he tried to distinguish what he called 'knowledge by description' and 'knowledge by acquaintance' taking as his basic propositions only those things with which we are directly "acquainted"

which meant that if one is acquainted with an object it followed that the object really existed and "had the properties that it was apprehended as having". On the other hand, the existence of objects and its properties that are only known through descriptions he regarded as problematic. Russell's other important works regarding this are *Our Knowledge of the External World* (1914) and his two essays in *Mysticism and Logic* (1918).

Russell continued his work after the First World War and under the influence of his student Wittgenstein, developed and put forward the basis of the doctrine of Logical **Atomism**. He further went on to develop this theory in his later works such as *Inquiry into Meaning and Truth* (1940) and his last important philosophical work *Human Knowledge: Its Scope and Limits* (1948). Russell's most famous book was *A History of Western Philosophy* (1945), a bestseller which provided financial security to Russell for the rest of his life.



Atomism: Philosophical belief originating in the 20thC that believed that the world consists of atoms or 'ultimate logical facts' that cannot be broken down any further.

Russell's work from a purely philosophical point of view reveals that his work in the domains of ethical and political philosophy does not compare to his work in logic and the theory of knowledge. He remained an advocate of liberty in the sphere of education and politics. Although, Russell often changed his philosophical views, his approach to philosophy remained consistent. His aim was always to find reasons for accepted beliefs in mathematics, science or plain common sense. Russell remained a prominent anti-war, anti-imperialist activist and campaigned against Hitler's regime and Stalin's totalitarianism and also attacked the United States' war in Vietnam and was a major figure in Nuclear Disarmament.



Empiricism: Empiricism is a theory that believes knowledge comes primarily from sensory experience.

Russell lived a long and fulfilling life dedicated to the pursuit of knowledge and service to humanity. He remained in the high tradition of British **Empiricism** and was its outstanding representative in the twentieth century. Due to the power of his elegance and literary style, Russell was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1950 "in recognition of his varied and significant writings in which he champions humanitarian ideals and freedom of thought." He died of influenza at the age of 97 in Caernarfonshire, England.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q1. What are the contributions for which Russell was best remembered?

Q2. What was the great loss that had occurred in Russell's life? Who had brought up Russell as a young boy?

Q3. Where was Russell educated?

Q4. Name the works that Russell wrote while he was imprisoned.

4.4 TEXT OF THE "PROLOGUE"

The following text is the Prologue written on 25th July, 1956 to the *Autobiography of Bertrand Russell.* Let us go through the text of the preface, before we supplement our reading with the provided explanation of the text.

Three passions, simple but overwhelmingly strong, have governed my life: the longing for love, the search for knowledge, and unbearable pity for the suffering of mankind. These passions, like great winds, have blown me hither and thither, in a wayward course, over a deep ocean of anguish, reaching to the very verge of despair.

I have sought love, first, because it brings ecstasy — ecstasy so great that I would often have sacrificed all the rest of life for a few hours of this joy. I have sought it, next, because it relieves loneliness — that terrible loneliness in which one shivering consciousness looks over the rim of the world into the cold unfathomable lifeless abyss. I have sought it, finally, because in the union of love I have seen, in a mystic miniature, the prefiguring vision of the heaven that saints and poets have imagined. This is what I sought, and though it might seem too good for human life, this is what — at last — I have found.

With equal passion I have sought knowledge. I have wished to understand the hearts of men. I have wished to know why the stars shine. And I have tried to apprehend the Pythagorean power by which number holds sway above the flux. A little of this, but not much, I have achieved.

Love and knowledge, so far as they were possible, led upward toward the heavens. But always pity brought me back to earth. Echoes of cries of pain reverberate in my heart.

Children in famine, victims tortured by oppressors, helpless old people a hated burden to their sons, and the whole world of loneliness, poverty, and pain make a mockery of what human life should be. I long to alleviate the evil, but I cannot, and I too suffer.

This has been my life. I have found it worth living, and would gladly live it again if the chance were offered me.

4.4.1 Explanation of the "Prologue"

Many critics and philosophers over the years have tried to sum up and encapsulate Russell's life and works. Philosophers from Harvard and Oxford W.V Quine and A.J Ayer are notable amongst them. However, it is widely accepted that the most succinct and memorable encapsulation of Russell's life and works came from Russell himself in the prologue to his autobiography. Let us then read through this Prologue in detail illuminating important points and discussing the major themes as we go along.

Russell had lived for and achieved the experience and the rewards of love, knowledge and care for others. These passions were complex and had led him to contrary directions in life but all the same he sought them and achieved them to a large extent. Love he sought for the ecstasy it brought to relieve the terrible loneliness of the human predicament and for the sense of mysticism the union in love brings which is the stuff of poetry. He was a mathematician and numbers he sought to understand in the grand Pythagorean manner. These pursuits may appear selfish and could perhaps serve the individual alone. But however, his unfailing pity for human suffering brought him down to earth and he became an activist for human weal as he was a militant pacifist in life.

Russell begins the Prologue by stating that "*Three passions, simple but overwhelmingly strong, have governed my life: the longing for love,*

the search for knowledge, and unbearable pity for the suffering of mankind". Russell in his own words thus proclaims these three passions as the driving forces that have defined his life. He calls them "simple" passions but says that it is but the intensity of these passions ("*overwhelmingly strong*") or the determination through which he has pursued these passions that has shaped his life.

He then proceeds to elucidate upon these passions and begins first with "love" saying that he sought love due to the "ecstasy" or happiness which it brings. Love as we know is a powerful tool capable of uniting the world and defining lives and Russell aptly recognises the importance of love and says that he sought love for the happiness which it brings and also because it relieves terrible feelings of loneliness that can turn into lifeless despair. Finally, he says that he has sought love because in the union of love he has seen a mystic vision or a prefiguring of what heaven must be like that have been dreamed of and imagined by poets and saints.

Russell then says that he has pursued knowledge with equal intensity and passion. He states that he has desired to understand the hearts of men and know why stars shine. As a mathematician, he has even sough to understand the world in numbers in a grand Pythagorean manner. He says that *"a little of this, but not much"* he has achieved in his life.

According to Russell, the pursuits of love and knowledge "*led upward toward the heavens"* meaning that these pursuits may well be seen as serving only the individual but his *"unbearable pity for the suffering of mankind"* always brought him "*back to earth*", i.e amongst the troubles of men in the world. Famine, poverty and general suffering and pain according to Russell "*make a mockery of what human life should be*" and he longs to alleviate these evils from the world and his inability to do so fill him with sadness and anguish and he too considers himself a part of suffering mankind.

Russell ends by saying that these passions and the experience of these pursuits have defined his life and he has found it worth living and *"would gladly live it again if the chance were offered me."*



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q5. How does Bertrand Russell begin his Prologue to the Autobiography?

Q6. What does Bertrand Russell desire to do with regard to human suffering?

4.5 MAJOR THEMES

The overarching theme is that of life and its worth and the imperatives of dedicating oneself to the well being of others while satisfying personal longings too.

The three passions which Russell talks about are the primary themes of the Prologue.

Love and its Importance in Human Life: The power and quality of love that has the ability to bring happiness, banish loneliness and unite people is evident as a major theme of the essay.

The Pursuit of Knowledge: The desire to know and understand the world to help alleviate the suffering of mankind and at the same time fulfilling personal aspirations to knowledge is another major theme.

Care and Pity for Human Suffering: The third theme of pity for suffering mankind is perhaps the most important as it prevents the other passions from degenerating into only personal assuaging of interests but keeps one firmly rooted on the ground amongst the suffering of the world.

4.6 STYLE AND LANGUAGE

As in his other writings, this prologue to Russell's autobiography titled *Autobiography of Bertrand Russell* is simple in its style but is at the same time loaded with concepts. His idiomatic English brought him nearer to the reading public despite the complex philosophical and scientific themes that he addressed. It is his style which was so idiomatic that whatever he said was

immediately received by the people and this may have facilitated his earning the Nobel Prize for literature.

There is an element of simple rhetoric in the passage. Right in the beginning, he uses qualifiers and parentheses in order to introduce his themes of a useful life governed by love, knowledge and pity and ably elucidates upon his themes throughout the prologue. The prowess of the writer is evident in the passage and this Prologue remains an important marker of Russell's literary abilities and style.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q7. Name the autobiography of Bertrand Russell.

Q8. Write a few lines on the style and technique employed by Russell in the "Prologue" to his Autobiography.



4.7 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we have read about Bertrand Russell's life and his contributions primarily to the world of philosophy, mathematics, history, literature and politics. Russell's "Prologue" to his autobiography has also been widely accepted as the best piece of text that sums up his life. Also, in this context, we have discussed the driving forces or passions that has come to shape his life and the dedication through which Russell continued serving in the interests of human suffering and the larger mankind.



4.8 FURTHER READING

1. Ayer, Alfred Julius. (1972). *Russell*. London : Fontana.

2. Grayling, A. C. (2002). *Russell: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford : Oxford University Press.

3. Lewis, John. (1968). *Bertrand Russell: Philosopher and Humanist*, London: Lawerence & Wishart.

4. Griffin, Nicholas. ed. (2003). *The Cambridge Companion to Bertrand Russell*. Cambridge University Press.

5. Slater, John. (1994). *Bertrand Russell*. Bristol: Thoemmes Press.



4.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q1: Bertrand Russell is best remembered for his contributions to mathematical logic, epistemology and analytic philosophy.

Ans to Q2: Russell lost both his parents when he was very young and he was brought up under the care of his grandmother, Lady Russell.

Ans to Q3: Russell was initially educated at home and later in 1890 won a mathematical scholarship to Trinity College, Cambridge.

Ans to Q4: Russell was jailed for six months and it was in prison that he wrote his *Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy* (1919) and began working on his later book *Analysis of Mind* (1921).

Ans to Q5: Russell begins the Prologue by stating that "Three passions, simple but overwhelmingly strong, have governed my life: the longing for love, the search for knowledge, and unbearable pity for the suffering of mankind". Russell in his own words thus proclaims these three passions as the driving forces that have defined his life. He calls them "simple" passions but says that it is but the intensity of these passions ("overwhelmingly strong") or the determination through which he has pursued these passions that has shaped his life.

Ans to Q6: Famine, poverty and general suffering and pain according to Russell "make a mockery of what human life should be" and he longs to alleviate these evils from the world and his inability to do so fill him with sadness and anguish and he too considers himself a part of suffering mankind.

Ans to Q7: *Autobiography of Bertrand Russell.*

Ans to Q8: There is an element of simple rhetoric in the passage. Right in the beginning, he uses qualifiers and parentheses in order to introduce his themes of a useful life governed by love, knowledge and pity and ably elucidates upon his themes throughout the prologue. The prowess of the writer is evident in the passage and this Prologue remains an important marker of Russell's literary abilities and style.



4.10 MODEL QUESTIONS

Q1. Write a short note on the life of Bertrand Russell

Q2. Discuss Bertrand Russell's lifetime contributions and achievements.

Q3. Explain the text of the "Prologue" to Russell's Autobiography.

Q4. Highlight the major themes evident in the text of the Prologue.

Q5. Discuss the style and language employed by Bertrand Russell.

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