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Six Degrees of Bertrand Russell

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Six Degrees of Bertrand Russell

Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, here is the chapter's first paragraph:

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.

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Comments

Timothy Madigan is also co-editor of this book.

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SIX DEGREES OF BERTRAND RUSSELL

Tim Madigan

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 two hundred years or so could be connected with BR in as few steps as possible. Why BR rather than, say, Ludwig Wittgenstein (who, after all, had a stated interest in games)? I have two reasons. First, Russell lived to the ripe old age of ninety-seven, and thus had the time to interact with a wider 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 else came to be celebrated later. As is often pointed out, Russell’s list of acquaintances stretched from Lenin (V.I.) to Lennon (John), from the Bloomsbury Group to the Doomsday Prophets, from William Gladstone to Harold Wilson. Russell’s grandfather, Lord John Russell, had as a young man visited Napoleon on the island of Elba and shaken his hand. When I shake the hand of Russell Emeritus Archivist Kenneth Blackwell, who knew and worked closely with BR, I often think that I am only six degrees of separation from shaking Napoleon’s hand as well. And as for Napoleon—well, who really knows where *that* hand had been?

Given this strong connection to history, it is not surprising that Russell himself wrote an essay entitled “How to Read and Understand His-

tory" (1957), first published in 1943. In his autobiography and other works such as *Portraits from Memory* (1956), Russell made it quite clear that his aristocratic and privileged background gave him access to many of the most important movers and shakers in twentieth century politics, literature, and academia, areas in which he himself excelled. He was aware that—unlike many of his fellow philosophers, who were known only to a small coterie of fellow deep thinkers—he was an historic figure, one who could interact on a personal level with cabinet ministers, Nobel Prize winners in all fields, press barons, movie stars, presidents, and premiers. During the Cuban Missile Crisis, for instance, many concerned individuals tried to reach Kennedy and Krushchev to give them advice, but Russell was one of the few outsiders whose letters actually got through, as he no doubt knew they would.

For all of his concern with history, both personal and impersonal, Russell did not really have a philosophy of history. He was scornful of writers such as Saint Augustine, G.W.F. Hegel, Karl Marx, and Oswald Spengler, who devised grandiose schemes that sought to explain all historical phenomena under the rubric of some grand plan, either celestial or bestial. He makes it clear in "How to Read and Understand History" that he does not consider himself to be a specialist. For him, reading history was a leisure activity, one which gave him pleasure. He therefore proposes a kind of utilitarian defense of reading history. In effect, he offers a how-to guide on getting people to delve into history and enjoy doing so. Much of the essay consists of friendly advice and comments about the nature of history sure to make professional historians grit their teeth. One wonders what Russell's own son Conrad (who became one of the best-known historians of the English Civil War) made of this essay.

Basically, Russell argues that one should make history as entertaining as possible. This is what he himself did with his *A History of Western Philosophy* (1945), which is subtitled, *And Its Connection with Political and Social Circumstances from the Earliest Times to the Present Day*. He places the various philosophers he discusses within their historical contexts, and cannot resist telling various anecdotes about them, the more scurrilous the better. While one may debate the accuracy of his presentations, one cannot deny that the book itself is incredibly entertaining, something one might not suspect given the topic.

In "How to Read and Understand History," Russell raises the question, can history be studied scientifically? In a nutshell, he answers "no." Too much depends on chance and the whims of individuals to make accurate

predictions, which any scientific theory should be able to do. "Some of those who write in the large are actuated by a desire to demonstrate some 'philosophy' of history," Russell writes. "They think they have discovered some formula according to which human events develop" (Russell 1957, 15; all subsequent references will be to this text). They think they know the end result long before it occurs. Of course, in his post-World War II writings, Russell himself often predicted the likely outcome of the human species—complete and utter annihilation. But he did not claim that this was a scientific prediction, as it was not inevitable, but only very likely given current circumstances. He was willing to grant that human attitudes could change, thereby changing the likely outcome, something that philosophers of history such as Hegel, Marx or Spengler would never admit.

Still, for all his criticisms, Russell was willing to grant that it is possible to look at history from a scientific standpoint, in the sense of examining trends, recurring events and human behavior. One can learn from history, but not by using simple formulae. Two services which the study of history can provide are:

1. Modest and humble generalizations, which can constitute steps toward a scientific approach;
2. The study of individuals, which offers a combination of drama and truth (something which Aristotle had advocated as well).

"Scientific history is a modern invention," Russell notes (18). And while it is certainly an area which interested him, Russell's primary concern in the essay remains the examination of the pleasures found in reading history. What can be gained, he asks, by reading historians of the past? Herodotus, "the Father of History," gives us amusing stories in which the respect for fact does not cause him to abstain from drama. Such mixtures of legends and truth would appall Russell when he is wearing his philosopher's cap, but when engaged in reading Herodotus and Thucydides he is much more charitable. The latter shares with Plutarch a concern for moral tales, but, unlike the severe Thucydides, Plutarch "is an easy-going gossipy writer, who cannot resist a good story, and except in a few instances is quite willing to relate and even exaggerate the weaknesses of his heroes" (21). No doubt it is this iconoclasm which appealed particularly to Russell, who throughout his life remained skeptical about the virtues of those in power. (As the grandson of a Prime Minister he knew better than most what goes on behind the closed doors of state.)

Finally, while Russell admits that Gibbon has grave defects as a writer ("Everyone, even barbarians, sound like Eighteenth Century Gentlemen"), one senses that he is Russell's personal favorite among the historians of old (21). Gibbon's "wit and irony—particularly when he uses them to condemn superstition—are inimitable" (21-2). Sound familiar? It is surprising that Russell doesn't also discuss Gibbon's friend and fellow historian David Hume, who was no slouch in the superstition-condemning field himself. Perhaps Hume's pro-Tory sympathies did not appeal to the much more Whiggish Russell.

In the remainder of the essay, Russell shows his hand by following in Gibbon's footsteps, presenting "the march of great events" as basically the history of the warfare between superstition (primarily religious superstition) and science. This view, while certainly agreeable to freethinkers, is itself a contentious one, and Russell's sweeping assertions are no more scientifically grounded than the very sort of sweeping assertions by Hegel, Marx or Spengler at which he sneers. Still, Russell is careful to add that all theories of history are misleading if accepted as dogma, but valuable if used as means of suggesting hypotheses (34).

It is clear from reading "How to Read and Understand History" that Russell had little sympathy for grand abstract theories of history. For him, the benefit of studying history is to get a sense of what makes human beings act the way that they do. For instance, reading about the meetings of eminent men, particularly those from different areas, can be both amusing and surprising. Who would have thought that the socialist and atheist inventor Robert Owen would have hit it off so well with the autocratic and ferocious Czar Nicholas I of Russia? Much knowledge can be gained from reading biographies and memoirs. "The professionals," Russell writes, "must not prevent us from realizing that history is full, fun, and that the most bizarre things really happen....Until one knows much intimate detail about a prominent man, it is impossible to judge whether he was really as great as he appeared or not" (22).

Russell, of course, wrote his memoirs as one way of describing the intimate details of his life. But surely he could not have imagined that so *much* of his long life— thanks in large part to the retrieval by the Russell archives of the myriad letters he exchanged with lovers and friends—would become available for perusal by scholars. Perhaps there's such a thing as knowing *too much* about the intimate details of a person's life.

That being said, there remains the question of Russell's own continuing historical importance. To what extent does he remain a significant influence on modern times? Almost two generations have passed since Russell's death, and the number of people who knew him by direct acquaintance is dwindling. I can remember a time when Russell was a symbol of the public-engaged intellectual, in the same way that Einstein was a symbol for scientific learning. But I'm not so sure this is still the case. Recently, for instance, I received a call from a woman who had seen a listing for the Bertrand Russell 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. But then I remembered the ending of Russell's essay, in which he talks about the importance of organizations, a department of history he claims is too little studied. "Some organizations," he writes, "succeed throughout a long period in fulfilling their original object; others soon fail" (49-50). Time will tell whether the Bertrand Russell Society will fulfill its original object of helping to keep alive the memory of this eminent person. And while I can't in good faith claim to be Bertrand Russell, I can honestly say I've shaken the hand of a man who shook his hand. One degree of separation!

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