

## **Nobel Prize in Literature 1950**



### **Earl (Bertrand Arthur William) Russell**

**The Nobel Prize in Literature 1950 was awarded to Bertrand Russell *"in recognition of his varied and significant writings in which he champions humanitarian ideals and freedom of thought"*.**

The great work on Western philosophy which Bertrand Russell brought out in 1946, that is, at the age of seventy-four, contains numerous characteristic reflections giving us an idea of how he himself might like us to regard his long and arduous life. In one place, speaking of the pre-Socratic philosophers, he says, «In studying a philosopher, the right attitude is neither reverence nor contempt, but first a kind of hypothetical sympathy, until it is possible to know what it feels like to believe in his theories, and only then a revival of the critical attitude, which should resemble, as far as possible, the state of mind of a person abandoning opinions which he has hitherto held.»

And in another place in the same work he writes, «It is not good either to forget the questions that philosophy asks, or to persuade ourselves that we have found indubitable answers to them. To teach how to live without certainty, and yet without being paralyzed

by hesitation, is perhaps the chief thing that philosophy, in our age, can still do for those who study it.»

With his superior intellect, Russell has, throughout half a century, been at the centre of public debate, watchful and always ready for battle, as active as ever to this very day, having behind him a life of writing of most imposing scope. His works in the sciences concerned with human knowledge and mathematical logic are epoch-making and have been compared to Newton's fundamental results in mechanics. Yet it is not these achievements in special branches of science that the Nobel Prize is primarily meant to recognize. What is important, from our point of view, is that Russell has so extensively addressed his books to a public of laymen, and, in doing so, has been so eminently successful in keeping alive the interest in general philosophy.

His whole life's work is a stimulating defence of the reality of common sense. As a philosopher he pursues the line from the classical English empiricism, from Locke and Hume. His attitude toward the idealistic dogmas is a most independent one and quite frequently one of opposition. The great philosophical systems evolved on the Continent he regards, so to speak, from the chilly, windswept, and distinctive perspective of the English Channel. With his keen and sound good sense, his clear style, and his wit in the midst of seriousness, he has in his work evinced those characteristics which are found among only the elite of authors. Time does not permit even the briefest survey of his works in this area, which are fascinating also from a purely literary point of view. It may suffice to mention such books as the *History of Western Philosophy* (1946), *Human Knowledge* (1948), *Sceptical Essays* (1948), and the sketch «My Mental Development» (in *The Philosophy of Bertrand Russell*, 1951); but to these should be added a great number of equally important books on practically all the problems which the present development of society involves.

Russell's views and opinions have been influenced by varied factors and cannot easily be summarized. His famous family typifies the Whig tradition in English politics. His grandfather was the Victorian statesman, John Russell. Familiar from an early age with the ideas of Liberalism, he was soon confronted by the problems of rising socialism and since

then he has, as an independent critic, weighed the advantages and disadvantages of this form of society. He has consistently and earnestly warned us of the dangers of the new bureaucracy. He has defended the right of the individual against collectivism, and he views industrial civilization as a growing threat to humanity's chances of simple happiness and joy in living. After his visit to the Soviet Union in 1920 he strongly and resolutely opposed himself to Communism. On the other hand, during a subsequent journey in China, he was very much attracted by the calm and peaceable frame of mind of China's cultivated classes and recommended it as an example to a West ravaged by wild aggression.

Much in Russell's writings excites protest. Unlike many other philosophers, he regards this as one of the natural and urgent tasks of an author. Of course, his rationalism does not solve all troublesome problems and cannot be used as a panacea, even if the philosopher willingly writes out the prescription. Unfortunately, there are - and obviously always will be - obscure forces which evade intellectual analysis and refuse to submit to control. Thus, even if Russell's work has, from a purely practical point of view, met with but little success in an age which has seen two world wars - even if it may look as if, in the main, his ideas have been bitterly repudiated - we must nevertheless admire the unwavering valour of this rebellious teller of the truth and the sort of dry, fiery strength and gay buoyancy with which he presents his convictions, which are never dictated by opportunism but are often directly unpopular. To read the philosopher Russell often gives very much the same pleasure as to listen to the outspoken hero in a Shaw comedy, when in loud and cheerful tones he throws out his bold retorts and keen arguments.

In conclusion, Russell's philosophy may be said in the best sense to fulfil just those desires and intentions that Alfred Nobel had in mind when he instituted his Prizes. There are quite striking similarities between their outlooks on life. Both of them are at the same time sceptics and utopians, both take a gloomy view of the contemporary world, yet both hold fast to a belief in the possibility of achieving logical standards for human behaviour. The Swedish Academy believes that it acts in the spirit of Nobel's intention when, on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the Foundation, it wishes to honour Bertrand Russell

as one of our time's brilliant spokesmen of rationality and humanity, as a fearless champion of free speech and free thought in the West.

My lord - Exactly two hundred years ago Jean Jacques Rousseau was awarded the prize offered by the Academy of Dijon for his famous answer to the question of «whether the arts and sciences have contributed to improve morals.» Rousseau answered «No», and this answer - which may not have been a very serious one - in any case had most serious consequences. The Academy of Dijon had no revolutionary aims. This is true also of the Swedish Academy, which has now chosen to reward you for your philosophical works just because they are undoubtedly of service to moral civilization and, in addition, most eminently answer to the spirit of Nobel's intentions. We honour you as a brilliant champion of humanity and free thought, and it is a pleasure for us to see you here on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the Nobel Foundation. With these words I request you to receive from the hands of His Majesty the King the Nobel Prize in Literature for 1950.

***For more details please visit:***

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