

## Is There a Logic for Ethics?

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It is well known that Bertrand Russell regards ethical and religious notions and motives as on the whole a hindrance to the progress of both science and philosophy. Not so well known—not even by Russell himself—is the fact that he also pointed the way to a scientific ethics.

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Now Russell apparently regards "scientific ethics" as a contradiction in terms, for the essence of the scientific attitude and the *sine qua non* of scientific progress lies in thinking of the universe in ethically neutral terms. "The kernel of the scientific outlook is," says Russell, "the refusal to regard our own desires, tastes, and interests as affording a key to the understanding of the world."<sup>1</sup> The scientist sees the world objectively, "without preconceptions, without bias, without any wish except to see it as it is." In contrast, the essence of the ethical outlook is the attempt "to legislate for the universe" on the basis of the subjective emotional life of men, for the view of the moral philosopher is colored by desires and interests, hopes and fears, loves and hates. Consequently, moral philosophy must necessarily be unscientific.

Not only must the contamination of ethics be removed from the special sciences, it must be removed from philosophy as well, if philosophy is to be scientific. But what is meant by "scientific philosophy"? In an early essay, "On Scientific Method in Philosophy," Russell states that there are two characteristics that distinguish the propositions of philosophy from those of ethics, metaphysics, and the special sciences.

First, "a philosophical proposition must be general."<sup>2</sup> It must not deal specifically with one thing, or with a group of things. On the contrary,

a philosophical proposition must be applicable to everything that exists or may exist . . . and . . . [it] must be concerned with such properties of all things as do not depend upon the accidental nature of the things that there happen to be.<sup>3</sup>

Second, a philosophical proposition "must be *a priori*. [It] must be such as can be neither proved nor disproved by empirical evidence."<sup>4</sup> Philosophy "must make only such assertions as would be equally true however the actual world were constituted."<sup>5</sup> In short, scientific philosophy consists of those general, *a priori* propositions which may be asserted of every individual thing.

Hence, according to Russell, "*philosophy is the science of the possible*," or in other words, the science of the general, and is therefore indistinguishable from logic.<sup>6</sup> As logic

it is concerned with the analysis and enumeration of logical forms, . . . [and] provides an inventory of possibilities, a repertory of abstractly tenable hypotheses<sup>7</sup>

To sum up, philosophy is concerned with general, *a priori* propositions and with the logical forms of propositions and their referents. It is not concerned with the goodness and badness of things, for the difference between good things and bad things is, according to Russell, a difference in the particular characteristics of specific things, a difference in closely analogous attitudes