

## RATIONALISM AS A CREED

### Human Society in Ethics and Politics

By Bertrand Russell. Pp. 240. (London: George Allen and Unwin, Ltd., 1954.) 15s. net.

WE are told on the dust jacket of this book that, as Bertrand Russell fully subscribes to Hume's view that "Reason is and ought only to be the slave of the passions", it is unfair to criticize him, as many have done, on the ground that he over-estimates the part which reason is capable of playing in human affairs. The present book certainly affords evidence on which the first part of this statement can be based; but we are left in doubt after we have read it whether Russell has worked out for himself a new view of the relation between reason and emotion, or whether he is merely a somewhat repentant rationalist undergoing an attack of second thoughts.

The starting-point of his ethical argument is the assumption that it "differs from scientific argument in being addressed to the emotions" and that the basis of ethics is "emotion and feeling". But this is the last concession that Russell makes to his critics, for he seems to be unable to explain how it is that man is guided by his feelings to distinguish the good from the bad, and assume an obligation to do right rather than wrong. One might suppose from what he says in his more cynical or depressed moments that man's instincts lead him to a course of action in the opposite direction. "There is no limit", he says, "to the horrors that can be inflicted by a combination of scientific intelligence with the malevolence of Satan. . . . Human imagination long ago pictured Hell, but it is only through recent skill that men have been able to give reality to what they imagined. . . ."

It is true that Bertrand Russell concludes that "the bright vault of Heaven" and the "dark pit of Hell" are equally "natural" to the human mind. But he has little to say on the question why it may be hoped that man will seek one and avoid the other. Religious instruction is rejected by him as it fosters "dogmatic beliefs", in the decay of which he can see "nothing but good". "What the world needs", he says, "is not dogma, but an attitude of scientific enquiry, combined with a belief that the torture of millions is not desirable, whether inflicted by Stalin or by a Deity imagined in the likeness of the believer".

To find a source for true belief of this kind, Russell is thrown back on reason once more, despite all his protestations that it is "not a cause of action, but a regulator". The only thing he can find to "redeem mankind" is "co-operation", the first step towards which "lies in the hearts of individuals". It is usual to wish oneself well, but "wishing well to oneself", he argues, "is sure to be futile unless it is combined with wishing well to others", and it is therefore evident to him that this should be made the basis of practical politics. The unhappy truth is, however, that arguments of this kind have not appealed to many of the more destructive politicians of our times, and it is this central problem which Russell has left unsolved.

However, he goes on to claim, it will pay us to be good, in the long run. "It is obvious to every person capable of free scientific enquiry that the doctrines of Lysenko are less likely to increase the wheat supply of Russia than those of orthodox geneticists are to increase the supply of the West. I think it is also very doubtful whether nuclear research can long continue to flourish in such an atmosphere as Stalin

produced in Russia." Or, as Gibbon put it, the "gradual advance (of barbarians) in the science of war would always be accompanied, as we may learn from the example of Russia, with a proportionate improvement in the arts of peace and civil policy, and they themselves must deserve a place among the polished nations whom they subdue". Thus do the minds of great rationalists think alike.

It is not, however, on grounds of logical inconsistency that Bertrand Russell's work is most open to criticism. The plain fact is that the rationalism on which it rests does not attract the minds of more than a handful of the young men and women in our universities to-day, who are faced with the responsibility of deciding the critical issues of their lives in the years that lie immediately ahead. Rationalism is a dead creed for them, despite current attempts to accept emotion as well as reason as a significant influence in our lives. It has not yet been replaced in the Western world by anything that stands the tests of criticism and experience, and the younger generation of thinkers must be regarded as facing the intimidating task of discovering a new philosophy and a new faith, or rediscovering an old one.

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## NUCLEAR SCIENCE IN PHYSICS, CHEMISTRY AND BIOLOGY

### Annual Review of Nuclear Science

Edited by James G. Beckerley. Vol. 3, 1953. Pp. x+412. (Stanford, Calif.: Annual Reviews, Inc., in co-operation with the National Research Council of the National Academy of Sciences, 1953.) 7 dollars.

THIS third volume of "Annual Reviews of Nuclear Science" is the first one for which the editors and the editorial committee of the Annual Reviews, Inc., Stanford, California, are fully responsible. Its policy is evident by the wide field of subjects covered, ranging from reactions of  $\pi$ -mesons with nucleons to vertebrate radiobiology, histopathology and carcinogenesis. Of 392 pages, about 190 are devoted to physics, 80 to chemistry and 120 to biological subjects. The laudable aim as expressed by the editors is to give the 'nuclear scientist' a chance to keep up with the whole field provided he knows the 'fundamentals'. But how does the harassed physicist find time and energy to read it all when the flood of information in his own specialized field is getting larger and less manageable every day? In addition, there are more reviews being published by the American Physical Society, the Physical Society (of Great Britain), "Progress in Nuclear Physics", etc.; these are summaries which the physicist can scarcely neglect and which he may even purchase. He falls into the serious danger of having no time to think for the reading. Does he choose the "Annual Reviews of Nuclear Science" series as an additional source of information if he has to pay 7 dollars? It all depends on the quality: one well-balanced, crystal-clear survey written with didactical virtuosity will go far to convince the hesitant buyer to part with the cash. If, however, he comes across a contribution consisting only of a formidable string of succeeding abstracts of papers, he will put his money back into his pocket. It follows that the author has to have plenty of leisure to read the original publications, to digest it all—a notoriously slow process—and then to set down in good English the rectified distillate of