

EMERGENCE, NATURE AND DECAY OF RUSSELL'S PLATONISM

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The fame of Bertrand Russell (1872-1970) is partly due to his discovery of the paradox named after him in 1901. No one who, like me, feels some kind of Platonic love of logic and mathematics, can be wholly indifferent to it. The challenge has been and still is, to lay bare its root and to find as natural a solution as possible.

It is true that Russell never disqualified the rather complicated way out he proposed together with Whitehead in *Principia Mathematica* (1910-1913), namely the *Ramified Theory of Types*. But, as appears from his book *My Philosophical Development* (1959), that solution could not completely satisfy him, at least not emotionally. In the short, but remarkable chapter *The Retreat from Pythagoras* (which of course is also meant to be a retreat from Plato), the 87 years old Russell says:

Mathematics has ceased to seem to me non-human in its subject-matter. I have come to believe, though very reluctantly, that it consists of tautologies. I fear that, to a mind of sufficient intellectual power, the whole of mathematics would appear trivial, as trivial as the statement that a four-footed animal is an animal. (...) The solution of the contradictions mentioned in an earlier chapter [i.e. the different version of the paradox, H.B.] seemed to be only possible by adopting theories which might be true but were not beautiful. I felt about the contradictions much as an earnest Catholic must feel about wicked Popes.

A *historical* approach to the paradox may – that is the main point I hope to make clear – be valuable to a *systematic* discussion about its nature. Consequently, my lecture will consist of two parts.

Firstly I'll discuss the two main turning points in Russell's philosophical development: a) the great revolutionary change from neo-Hegelean holistic idealism to unrestricted Platonic realism and pluralism, which took place about 1899, and b) the discovery in 1901, of the contradiction on occasion of an attempt to refute what at first seemed to be a minor point in Cantor's mathematical theory of the infinite. I hope to show the 'internal relationship' between these two landmarks. These demarcate two sides of one and the same thing, namely the beginning and the end of the short-lived, but very influential "intellectual honeymoon" of Russell's unrestricted Platonism.

Secondly, on the basis of this historical analysis, I'll put forward some suggestions concerning the root and possible solution of Russell's paradox.