Full transcript of video interview with Bertrand Russell (PDF)

Below is the full transcript of a 29-minute video interview (courtesy Manufacturing Intellect) with Bertrand Russell. 'Bertrand Arthur William Russell (BR, 1872–1970) was a British philosopher, logician, essayist and social critic best known for his work in mathematical logic and analytic philosophy’ (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy) and recipient of the 1950 Nobel Prize for Literature. The interview was recorded for the ‘NBC television series Wisdom, which broadcast half-hour interviews with prominent and respected people such as Pablo Picasso, David Ben Gurion, Eleanor Roosevelt, and Margaret Mead.’ (Digital Collections at the University of Maryland). The interview was broadcast on his 80th birthday, which was May 18, 1952 (A bibliography of Bertrand Russell). The interviewer was Romney Wheeler (RW), the NBC’s London bureau news chief at the time. The discussions are wide ranging with topics ranging from history and philosophy to politics and the human predicament. One of his best known books is Human knowledge: its scope and limits, which has been in my cupboard since my late teens, and in which Russell questions the reliability of our assumptions on knowledge. I developed a great liking for the philosophical work of Alfred North Whitehead (1861-1947) during my, literally, down-to-earth work as an agricultural advisor in north-western Zambia in the early 1980s. Both, Russell and Whitehead were both eminent mathematicians and philosophers. Their mathematics brought them very close together (Principia Mathematica), but their philosophies separated them very widely again (see here), something I have always found rather regrettable. I added some endnotes in which I explain what struck me in the interview in relations to my exploration of systems thinking.

This transcript is stored at https://csl4d.wordpress.com/, which is the blog about social systems thinking by Sjon van ‘t Hof, who is also the transcriber, and who is currently (September 2018) working on a second, more theoretical book about Churchman’s systems approach, which is scheduled for 2019. In my preparations I make extensive use of concept mapping, which I consider an essential tool in conceptual analysis. This in turn is part of analytic philosophy, of which Russell is one of the founders. I particularly like his emphasis on clarity to avoid unconscious or half-conscious prejudice, bias and self-interest. (Transcript overleaf).
Transcript of interview with Russell

0m0s [on-screen introductory tekst: A conversation with Bertrand Russell (1952)]

0m4s BR: How do you do?
0m5s RW: How do you do, Lord Russell?
0m8s BR: Won't you sit down? Now what are we going to talk about?
0m15s RW: Well, Lord Russell, as you approach your 80th birthday I think we'd like you to tell us what you think you have learned and what you think you will never learn in your career as a philosopher?
0m26s BR: Well there are some things that I don’t think I shall ever learn and indeed I hope I shall never learn. I don’t wish to learn to change my hopes for the world. I'm prepared to change my beliefs about the state of the world, about what happens, but not about what I hope. About that I hope to remain constant. I think we might call the subject of our talk '80 years of changing beliefs and unchanging hopes.' It's very difficult for anybody born since 1914 to realize how profoundly different the world is now from what it was when I was a child. The change has been almost unbelievable. I try as best I can, in spite of my years, to get used to living in a world of atom bombs, a world where ancient empires vanish like morning mists, where we have to accustom ourselves to Asiatic self-assertion, to the communist menace. Well, this is altogether so different from what it was when I was young that it's an extraordinarily difficult thing for an old man to live in such a world. I was born in 1872, my parents died when I was still an infant, and so I was brought up by my grandparents.

2m10s RW: Can you tell us something about your grandfather?
2m12s BR: Yes, I can tell you something about my grandfather. He was born in [1792, during] the early years of the French Revolution. He was a member of parliament when Napoleon was still on the throne [1813]. In common with all the Whig followers of Fox he thought English hostility to Napoleon was excessive and he visited Napoleon in Elba. It was he who introduced the Reform Bill in 1832, which started England on the road towards democracy. He was Prime Minister during the Mexican War [1846-1848], during the revolutions of 1848. I remember him quite well, but you see, he belonged to an age that now seems rather removed. And the world when I was young was a solid world, where there were all kinds of things that have now disappeared, that were thought to be going to last forever. It didn't dawn on people that they would cease. English people certainly regarded English naval supremacy as a sort of law of nature. 'Britannia ruled the waves.' It didn't occur to us that that might stop.

3m40s RW: Even with Bismarck?
3m42s BR: Bismarck was regarded as a rascal and we thought of him as a sort of uneducated farmer. But it was assumed that the influence of Goethe and Schiller would gradually bring Germany back to a more civilized point of view and, moreover, we thought of Germany as only a land power. Germany had at that time no Navy. In fact, we weren't at all afraid of Germany. In fact, liberal opinion was more favourable to Germany than to France at that time. Bismarck himself compared Germany and England to an elephant and a whale. Each formidable in its own element but no danger to each other. And that was how we felt. So we were not afraid of Bismarck at all. It was thought that there was going to be ordered progress throughout the world. Gradually every country was going to take to parliaments. There was going to be a bicameral legislature and two parties and it was all going to be exactly like England everywhere, all over the world. My grandmother used to laugh, because one time she said to the Russian ambassador: "Perhaps someday you will have a parliament in Russia." And he said: "God forbid, my dear lady Russell." Except for the first word, the Russian ambassador to the present day might give the same answer. But that was the assumption, it was all going to be orderly, all quite nice. The atmosphere apart from politics, it was one of Puritan piety, very great piety, very great austerity. We always had family prayers at 8:00 and before family prayers I had to do half an hour's practice at the piano which I hated. Although there were eight servants in the house the food was always of the utmost simplicity and even of what that was if
there was anything at all nice I wasn't allowed to have it, because it wasn't good for children to eat nice things. For instance, there would be rice pudding and apple tart. Don't upset [?] the apple tart and I had the rice pudding. There was extreme austerity in all those ways. Again, mother until she was over 70, would never sit in an armchair until after dinner, never. It's always come out that sort of austere living by well-to-do people, which in those days was fairly common.

6m22s RW: When did you get to Cambridge?

6m25s BR: Oh, I got to Cambridge when I was 18 and that, of course, was a new world to me. I for the first time met people who, when I said anything that I really thought, didn't think it absurd. I had learnt at home to say almost nothing about what I really thought. My people had a horror of philosophy which interested me. And they would say every time philosophy was mentioned: "Philosophy is summed up completely in these two questions: What is better? Never mind. What is mind? No matter." And at about the sixtieth repetition of this remark I ceased to be amused by it. When I got to Cambridge it was a great comfort to me to find people who didn't regard philosophy as absurd, so that I was very, very happy when I first got to Cambridge. I quickly got to know a great many people who became my lifelong friends. Most of them I'm sorry to say are dead now, but those who are still alive are still my friends.

7m38s RW: You started with mathematics, didn't you? And then moved to philosophy?

7m42s BR: [That is serious.] I did three years of mathematics and one year of philosophy at Cambridge. I had done only mathematics before going to Cambridge.

7m54s RW: What caused your interest in philosophy?

8m00s BR: Well, two things, two very different things caused my interest in philosophy. On the one hand, I wanted to understand the principles of mathematics. I observed that all the proofs of mathematical propositions that were taught me were obviously fallacious. They didn't really prove what they said they'd do. And I wanted to know whether there is any truth in the world that is known. And I thought if there is any, it is probably in mathematics. But it's not in mathematics as I was taught it, so I tried to find out some truth there. The other thing that made me interested in philosophy was the hope that I might find some basis for religious belief.

8m50s RW: And did you find it?

8m52s BR: No, in the mathematical part of my hopes I was fairly satisfied, but in the other part no, not at all. For a time I found a certain satisfaction in the Platonic eternal world of ideas, which has a sort of religious flavour and gave me a certain satisfaction. But then I came to the conclusion that that was nonsense and I was left without any satisfaction of it astro my desires, and remained so. So as far as that goes philosophy proved worse [...] to me, but not on the side of technical basis of mathematics.

9m35s RW: Wasn't it about here that you entered into what you called a life of disagreement?

9m40s BR: Yes, I disagreed first with my people, both about mathematics and about philosophy. They cared only about virtue. They thought virtue was the only thing of importance in the world. Mathematics therefore was unimportant, because it has no ethical content. And philosophy was positively pernicious because it undermined virtue. So that on that point I had strong disagreement with my people. But as regards that, of course, that disagreement, as far as my personal life was concerned, was resolved by my living among a academic people who didn't take that view. So that I got a game into it circle the people with whom I was quite at home. But that was brought to an end by the first war, where I took a pacifist line. I was against the first war. I was not against the second. Some people think that this is an inconsistency, but it isn't. I never during the first war said that I was against all war. I said I was against that war and I still hold that view. I think the first war was a mistake and I think England's participation in it was a mistake. I think if that hadn't happened you would not have had the communists, you would not have had the Nazis, you would have not had the Second World War, you would not had the threat of a third. The world would have been a very much better place I think. Germany in the time of the Kaiser was not uncivilized. There was a certain amount of suppression of opinion but less than there now is everywhere, except in England and
Scandinavia. So it really wasn't very bad. For propaganda purposes the Kaiser's government was only [...] but it was only talk. It wasn't really true.

11m43s RW: your opinions today in regard to Russia are not altogether friendly. Did you always feel that way about the Bolsheviks?

11m51s BR: Yes, and that caused another violent disagreement. During my pacifism during the first war I became estranged from what you might call conventional people. And then I went to Russia in 1920, and found that I abominated the Soviet government, I thought they were dreadful people, dreadful people already and becoming more so. It was sure to go on becoming more so. And so then I had to break with all the people who had endured my pacifism. We were like trash [...] so that I was left in a very great isolation at that time. However, I escaped some of the pain of it by going to China. I spent a very happy year. I liked the Chinese very much. And there I found people I could agree with, that I could like.

12m55s RW: Any conclusions about China?

13m00s BR: Oh I don't know about conclusions. I don't think I came to any particular conclusions. I continue to think as I had thought before that democracy is the best form of government where it'll work. It didn't work very well in China, it wasn't working at all. And one could see that it wouldn't work there. They hadn't the political experience. But I thought it would work there in time and I'd say it would have done if circumstances had been a little more propitious.

13m37s RW: On your return the focus of your interests changed, didn't it?

13m42s BR: Yes, going to the birth of my two elder children I became very much interested in education and at first especially in education in the very early years. I didn't like the old fashioned schools for a number of reasons. I didn't altogether like the progressive schools. They were in some respects, I thought, much better than the older ones. But there were some things about progressive schools, at least about most progressive schools, that I didn't feel were right. I thought they didn't pay enough attention to instruction. It seems to me that in a technically complex world you can't pay any important part unless you have a very considerable amount of actual knowledge and I don't think that most children will acquire much knowledge unless there is a certain amount of discipline in school. I think the real discipline required for acquiring knowledge ought to be insisted upon and isn't sufficiently insisted upon in a good many modern schools that I know.

14m58s RW: Did you change any of your opinions in that regard.

15m02s BR: Well, I suppose to some degree. I tried running a school of my own, because I wasn't satisfied with other schools. I wasn't the talent to be an administrator and I wasn't satisfied with the school that I tried to run. Fortunately just about that time certain modern school that I was interested in became, I thought, quite good enough and I was satisfied with that. I have I suppose changed my opinions not only about education but about a good many things. As a result of seeing the kind of various things people do, I think that freedom is not the panacea for all things. I think there are a good many matters in which freedom should be restrained. Some of them things in which it's not sufficiently restrained at present. In the relationship between nations there ought to be less freedom than there is, I think. And to some degree this applies in modern education, too, I think. Some progressive schools certainly have more freedom than you want to have. There are some freedoms that I think will be desirable in education. Now, in the old fashioned school, if a child uses a swear word it's thought worse than if he commits an unkind action and that seems to be absurd. Clearly the unkind action matters more and in that sort of way I don't like the old-fashioned way. I also think children should be free to explore the facts of life to a degree that they are not brought up in the old-fashioned way. I think there should be free speech. There are a number of things that I like very much about modern education. But both in education and in other matters I think freedom must have very definite limitations. Where you come to things that are definitely harmful to other people or things that prevent you yourself from being useful, such as lack and knowledge. Sure there are those respects in which I suppose I should lay less stress on freedom than in former times.

17m29s RW: Do you still believe in the importance of abstract philosophy?
BR: Well, now that's a very difficult question. I have myself a passion for clarity and exactness and sharp outlines. For some reason that I've never understood this makes people think that I have no passions, that I am a cold fish. I don't know why but it does cause people to think that, I don't think that's altogether just, but that's neither here nor there. But I do like clarity and exact thinking and I believe that very important to mankind because when you allow yourself to think inexact, your prejudices, your bias, your self-interest, comes in in ways you don't notice and you do bad things without I've knowing that you're doing them. Self-deception is very easy. So that I do think clear thinking immensely important, but I don't think philosophy in the old-fashioned sense is quite the thing the world needs nowadays. The needs of the world are different from there.

RW: Well, what do you feel today's needs are?

BR: Well, of course needs depend on what a person's capacities are. But if I went now this moment a young man whether in England or in America I should not take to philosophy. I think there were other things better to take to. If I had the necessary capacity I think I would be a physicist. If my capacities didn't run in that direction I should think that history, psychology, mass psychology especially, theory of politics things of that sort are much better worth working it than pure philosophy. And it's that sort of thing that I should now take to if I were now young.

RW: Lord Russell, what do you think the world needs to reach a happier state?

BR: Well I think there are three things that are needed if the world is to adapt itself to the Industrial Revolution. The troubles we are suffering now are essentially troubles due to adapting ourselves to a new phase of human life, namely the industrial phase. And I think three things are necessary if people are to live happily in the industrial phase. One of these is world government, the second is an approximate economic equality between different parts of the world, and the third is a nearly stationary population. And I'd say a little about each of those. As to world government the world government should be of course the federal government leaving a very great deal of freedom to the individual national governments and only those things controlled by the world governments, which are absolutely necessary for the avoidance of war. The most important and most difficult of these is Armed Forces. All the important weapons of war will have to be in the hands of the international government, and to it alone. When that happens war will become practically impossible and if war is impossible, mankind could go ahead. If war is not impossible every advance in scientific technique means an advance in mass murder and is therefore undesirable but if [...] were peacefully achieved it would be just the opposite. That's the first point. Now I come under the question of approximate economic equality. As things stand present, Western Europe and still more the United States of America have a high standard of life on the whole a great majority of mankind live fairly comfortably from a material point of view Asia on the other hand lives in very, very great poverty so does most of Africa. And the moment people are sufficiently educated to be aware of these facts the inevitable result is a great development of envy in the poorer parts of the world. That envy is a cause of unrest and inevitably makes world peace precarious. There's only one way of dealing with it which is to produce approximate economic equality, which is a long story, but it can be done. The third point about population is very vital indeed. the food supply of the world tends at present to diminish through the denudation of the soil. It tends of course also to increase through various technical advances, but those two [...] balance. So that on the whole food produce of the world is not increased appreciably. Now that means that unless everybody is to be very poor especially if you have economic equality unless everybody is to be very poor there must be not more people to be fed, not many more, than there are now and therefore you've got to get approximate ecology of population and approximately stationary population. Otherwise those parts of the world where the population increases fast, we want to go to war with those where it increases slowly.

RW: That brings us precisely to the problem of Asia and what part Asia will play in the immediate future.

BR: Well, Asia first of all has risen to the point of education, some Asians have, where it is not prepared any longer to be subservient to the white man. It hasn't noticed the Russians are white. If it had it would take a different line, but it seems to think that Russians are yellow or black
or some other colour. And I think our propaganda ought to be mainly devoted saying only Russians also are white. I believe that would be the effective propaganda to use in Asia. but I passed that point by. Asia clearly is going to claim equality with the white men. and it's perfectly futile absolutely futile, for the white man resists that game. It will infallibly win. infallibly. And we ought therefore to concede it graciously at once before we are driven to it you can see two pretty colleges to Asia but if Asia is not to overwhelm the rest of the world with a vast land population and poverty Asia must live up to its responsibilities and must learn the sort of things we have learned in the West, which is how to maintain a roughly stationary population. And if they can't learn that. which I fully believe they can learn and learn quickly much more quickly than most people think, and if they can't learn it they will not have won their claim to equality.

25m38s RW: Lord Russell, speaking as of today can you see the influence of any one philosopher more than any other one.

25m46s Well, I suppose in recent years the most important influence has been Marx if you can dignify him with the name of philosopher. I should hardly like to dignify him so myself, but I suppose he must count in the list and he certainly has had more influence than anybody else.

26m06s RW: For those of us who reject Marx, can you offer any positive philosophy to help us toward a more hopeful future.

26m13s BR: Oh, well, as to that. You see, I think one of the troubles of the world has been the habit of dogmatically believing something or other. And I think all these matters are full of doubt and the rational man will not be too sure that he's right. I think we ought always to entertain our opinions with some measure of doubt. I shouldn't wish people dogmatically to believe any philosophy not even mine, not even mine. No, I think we should accept our philosophies with a measure of doubt. What I do think is this that if a philosophy is to bring happiness it should be inspired by kindly feeling. Now Marx is not inspired by kindly feeling. Marx pretended that he wanted the happiness of the proletariat, but he really wanted to is the unhappiness of the bourgeois. And it was because of that negative element, because of that hate element that his philosophy produced disaster. A philosophy that wishes to do good must be one inspired by kindly feeling and not by unkindly feeling.

27m31s RW: Summing up, Lord Russell. Do you feel that there is hope for the world today?

27m35s BR: Well I do I feel it very strongly but how far that is really a rational conviction how far is temperamental I can't say. But I do must strongly feel that there is hope There may be very dreadful times ahead of us I dare say there are but I still believe I believe most firmly that through whatever pain and suffering mankind will emerge from these dreadful things and will emerge into some world that will be happier than any world that existed in the past I'm firmly persuaded to them what I do know is how long it will take.

28m44s (Camera shows Russell's 'New Hopes for a Changing World', which was published in 1951. Online [here](https://journals.openedition.org/rfcb/308)).

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1 In Whitehead’s process philosophy the platonic world of ideas plays an important role. In fact, it was given theological significance as it evolved into a new idea of God as in process philosophy. Sympathetic agnostic versions of it have been described by Robert Mesle (see also Worldcat).

2 Russell classified the First World War as a war of prestige. See Esteves 2015 at https://journals.openedition.org/rfcb/308. It is important to note that he wasn’t a principled pacifist, but a consequentialist one.

3 It would seem that Russell had picked up some ideas on progressive education from the likes of John Dewey. He was at the same time convinced of the need for disciplined instruction. I suppose most reasonable people would be in favour of a reasonable balance between the two. Much will depend on the general capacity of the teaching staff, which probably in practice will favour a leaning towards disciplined instruction more than would ideally be the case.

4 This passage is probably the main reason why I made this transcript. People and the world in general need clear (critical) thinking in order not to be deceived by their own prejudices, biases and self-interest. This is as clear a reference to Churchman’s principles of deception-perception and critical thinking’s cognitive foundation as one could wish.
Here Russell is ruminating about practical alternatives to classical philosophy. It is important to remind us that the interview dates back to 1952. From my point of view as a systems ‘afficionado’ (to avoid the words ‘thinker’, ‘approacher’ or ‘philosopher’) Russell’s phrasing suggests a potential interest in systems thinking. Only, it hardly existed at the time. To the extent that it existed it must have seemed tainted to him by e.g. Jan C. Smuts ‘Holism’ (1926). He probably would have liked the down-to-earth systems approach of Ackoff, which only took shape in the decade after Russell’s death in 1970.