

A RATIONALIST ETHIC FOR TODAY: POPPER'S THEORY OF RATIONALITY
COMBINED WITH RUSSELL'S MORAL PRACTICE

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The most important 20th century breakthrough in the theory of rationality was made by Karl Popper. He explained that we could gain knowledge without proving theories, that rationality was problem solving, that it required criticism, and was social. But, due to his belief that humans desire to live in closed societies, his ethics often fell back into puritanical exhortations to be rational. Bertrand Russell was the most important secular moral voice of the 20th century. He showed by example how reason could be used to solve practical problems. He traced action which led to suffering to intellectual mistakes. He explained, for example, how ignorance and prejudice led to problems in sexual relationships, how enlightened views could improve education, and how common intellectual mistakes caused unhappiness. In pointing out that preventing nuclear war had to have priority over all else, he exhibited his recognition that the most pressing moral problem was the choice of problems. But he had no theory of the rationality of his practice, which he called popular, because he insisted that rationality required justification.

In order to find an adequate ethical theory today, it is desirable to integrate Popper's fallibilist theory of rationality with Russell's approach to posing and solving individual problems. Russell's realization that the most important ethical problem is to identify the most important difficulties and to find their intellectual roots, may be combined with Popper's idea that rationality is problem-solving plus criticism in institutional contexts. The latter gives us a methodological theory we may use in going about the former. Moral improvement may be sought by increasing the degree of rationality which individuals exercise.