Russell and the Happy Life

Marvin Kohl

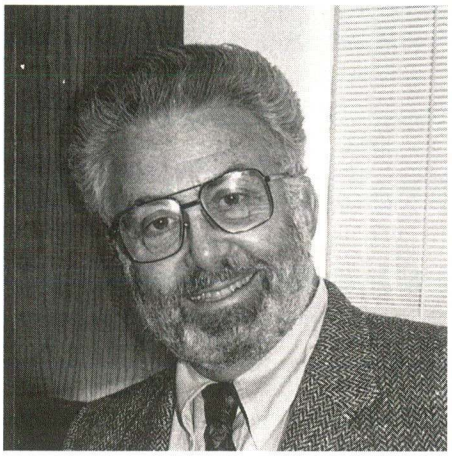
Bertrand Russell's writings about happiness touch upon almost every aspect of social and political philosophy. Here I shall be content to outline the more important features of his theory.

1. The ability to successfully complete a journey generally requires knowing where one is going. The same is true of happiness. Russell believes "that in the advanced industrialized nations a better ideal of private happiness is probably the thing that is most wanted. More important even than political and economic reconstruction is the realization of the things that really make for human happiness."[1]

2. He rejects mentalist views that maintain that happiness solely or most fundamentally consists in having the right frame of mind. Psychological factors are important but they do not come first. "I put first," writes Russell, "purely physical conditions—food and shelter and health. Only when these have been secured is it worth while to consider psychological requisites."[2]

3. Some philosophers have argued that there is such a thing as perfect happiness that it consists in the satisfaction of all desires, and that it is attainable only in the world to come. Russell rejects these claims. As an agnostic, he does not believe in the existence of divine providence, heaven, or God. As a meliorist, he believes that it is often possible to improve one's life and make it considerably better. The goal is to have a happier life, and not to strive in vain for a kind of perfectionism.

4. Happiness depends on a combination of external and internal causes. It depends upon having and appreciating reasonable success at satisfying basic needs and important desires. Expressed differently: wise people come to enjoy life



when they understand that to be without some of the things they want is an indispensable part of happiness,[3] when they discover what they *most* want out of life,[4] and when, by aiming low, they achieve reasonable success.[5]

5. Fear is a great obstacle to the good life. "All fear is bad, and ought to be overcome not by fairy tales, but by courage and rational reflection."[6] For fear begets not only stupidity but malevolence.

> If I were to be executed and were allowed twenty minutes in which to make a farewell address, what should I say? It would be brief and simple, and I think I should concentrate upon one issue, namely, the importance of eliminating fear. I do not imagine that mankind can be made perfect; whatever may be done some defects will survive, but a great many of the defects which adults suffer are due to preventable mistakes in their education, and the most important of these mistakes is the inculcation of fear.[7]

6. Benevolence[8] is the feeling that we care for the good of others and are disposed to act in order to protect and enhance their welfare. Benevolence is a disposition to help others and helping others is what a benevolent person would have to do if he or she had the needed knowledge, power, and good fortune. At the very least it requires that we rejoice if others flourish and become distressed if we witness their suffering. Benevolence, Russell tells us, is in a sense more fundamental than knowledge, "since it will lead intelligent people to seek knowledge. In order to find out how to benefit those whom they love."[9] And benevolent people, when reasonably informed, produce more happiness than people motivated by other attitudes.

If we are to significantly improve our lot, we must learn to expand the range of these feelings. We must learn to embrace more of humanity with feelings of empathy and compassion. Thus Russell writes that

> the first step in wisdom, as well as in morality, is to open the windows as wide as possible. Most people find little difficulty in including their children within the compass of their desires. In slightly lesser degree they include their friends, and in time of danger their country. . . But it is not enough to enlarge our sympathies to our own country. If the world is ever to have peace [and happiness] it will be necessary to learn to embrace the whole human race in the same kind of sympathy which we now feel toward our compatriots. . . . [This] is possible for every one of us. Every one of us can enlarge his mind, release his imagination, and spread his affection and benevolence. And it is those who do this whom ultimately mankind reveres. The East reveres Buddha, the West reveres Christ. Both taught love as the secret of wisdom.[10]

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Notes

1. Bertrand Russell, *How to Be Free and Happy* (New York: The Rand School of Social Science. 1924), p. 38.

2. Bertrand Russell, "What Is Happiness?," *What Is Happiness?* edited by Martin Armstrong et al. (New York: H. C. Kinsey, 1939), p. 59.

3. Bertrand Russell, *The Conquest of Happiness* (New York: Garden City, 1930), p. 29.

4. Ibid., p. 17.

5. For a fuller discussion of these aspects of Russell's theory, see: Marvin Kohl, "Bertrand Russell and the Attainability of Happiness," International Studies in Philosophy 16:3 (1984), pp. 109–111 and "Russell's Happiness Paradox." *Russell* 7:1 (1987), pp. 86–88.

6. Bertrand Russell, *What I Believe* (New York: Dutton, 1925), p. 13.

7. Bertrand Russell, "On the Evils Due to Fear," in Bertrand Russell et al., *If I Could Preach Just Once* (New York and London: Harper, 1929), p. 219.

8. For an analysis of the nature and implications of this concept, see: Marvin Kohl, "Bertrand Russell's Characterization of Benevolent Love," *Russell* 12:2 (1992–93), pp. 116-134.

9. *What I Believe,* op. cit., 21.

10. Bertrand Russell, "If We Are to Survive This Dark Time—" *The Basic Writings of Bertrand Russell,* ed. by Robert E. Egner and Lester E. Dennon, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1961), pp. 684, 686–687. Reprinted from *The New York Magazine,* September 3, 1950. •