

The Conquest of Happiness

"Happiness is not, except in very rare cases, something that drops into the mouth, like a ripe fruit, by the mere operation of fortunate circumstances."

"To like many people spontaneously and without effort is perhaps the greatest of all sources of personal happiness."

In a nutshell

Happiness comes from throwing ourselves into life, which generally lessens the preoccupation with the self - a primary cause of unhappiness.

In a similar vein

Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* (p 22)

Ludwig Wittgenstein *Philosophical Investigations* (p 300)

Bertrand Russell

Bertrand Russell was one of the most lauded philosophers and mathematicians of the modern era. He wrote the monumental *Principia Mathematica* (with Alfred North Whitehead), many significant scholarly articles and books on logic, and bestsellers such as *A History of Western Philosophy*. At Cambridge he was the mentor of Wittgenstein, and was a public intellectual who energetically supported causes including communism (before he met Lenin and Trotsky) and nuclear disarmament.

Russell succeeded to an earldom in his sixties, married four times, and was a noted atheist. Living to the age of 98, he had ample time to test the validity of his philosophical and political ideas and apply them to his own life.

This is the significance of *The Conquest of Happiness*. There has been a rash of books on happiness in the last few years, many of them based on empirical research. Russell had none of this data, yet his philosophy carries the ring of truth. He led an extremely full, productive, and largely happy life himself, and perhaps this fact is the best advertisement for the book.

How to grow happier

At the beginning of *The Conquest of Happiness*, Russell admits that he was not a happy child. His favorite hymn was "Weary of earth and laden with my sin." In adolescence, he writes, "I hated life and was continually on the verge of suicide, from which, however, I was restrained by the desire to know more mathematics."

However, with each passing year his happiness increased, both from doing more of the things he enjoyed and eliminating wishes that were unattainable. But the main cause of his happiness, he says, was "a diminishing preoccupation with myself":

"Interest in oneself ... leads to no activity of a progressive kind. It may lead to the keeping of a diary, to getting psycho-analysed, or perhaps to becoming a monk. But the monk will not be happy until the routine of the monastery has made him forget his own soul."

Happiness is held back by introspection, which rests on the belief that we are separate from others. It is gained by identifying ourselves with causes, passions

and interests, and by making the welfare of others more important than our own. Russell learned this not through philosophy, but through experience.

His life was in part a reaction to Victorian morality and the idea of sin. Like Freud, he believed that repression of sex and love is much more damaging to the person than the act itself. Repression of natural feelings creates a discord between the unconscious and conscious minds, which manifests in various unhealthy ways. A sense of sin makes us feel inferior and alone and so deprives us of happiness; haunted and hampered by inner conflicts, we will not be able to achieve any external purpose. Of course, unhappiness can also arise when people fail to regulate their conduct because there is no rational ethic on which to base their behavior. The solution, Russell felt, lay in adopting a "modern outlook" in which superstitions have no place, and in which we act only when we know that our actions will cause no harm to others.

The mistake of unhappiness

Unhappiness is a condition not based only on things that happen to you. It is, rather, the result of mistakes in thinking and outlook, Russell says:

"[M]istaken views of the world, mistaken ethics, mistaken habits of life, leading to destruction of that natural zest and appetite for possible things upon which all happiness, whether of men or animals, ultimately depends."

The psychological causes of unhappiness are many and varied, but a common reason seems to be the deprivation of some normal satisfaction while young. Since that satisfaction is valued above all else, emphasis is directed to achieving that one thing, and other activities are sidelined.

Some people feel that the state of the world gives them no reason to be happy. However, Russell notes, "The truth is that they are unhappy for some reason of which they are not aware, and this unhappiness leads them to dwell upon the less agreeable characteristics of the world in which they live."

The balanced life

There is no struggle for life for most people – it is more a struggle for success. A businessman will call it a struggle for life in order to give dignity to something essentially trivial, Russell observes:

"What people fear when they engage in the struggle is not that they will fail to get their breakfast next morning, but that they will fail to outshine their neighbours."

For the achievement of happiness, a sense of perspective and a balanced life are everything. Not only does the pursuit of money alone not bring happiness; it results in boredom. We must have intellectual interests if we are to grow and fulfill our potential.

Even more than actual success, Russell says, effort is an essential ingredient of happiness; a person who is able to gratify all whims without effort comes to see that attainment of desires does not make them happy. "To be without some of the things you want," he concludes, "is an indispensable part of happiness."

On boredom

The desire for excitement and adventure is innate in human beings, Russell notes, particularly in males. In the hunting stage of civilization this was gratified naturally, but with the advent of agriculture boredom set in. The machine age has lessened that lassitude somewhat, but not the fear of being bored. "Boredom is therefore a vital problem for the moralist, since at least half the sins of mankind are caused by the fear of it." Russell's bold contention is that most wars, pogroms, and persecutions are a result of the desire to flee from tedium. "A certain power of enduring boredom is therefore essential to a happy life," he argues. Childhood pleasures should include activities that require effort and inventiveness, and therefore passive enjoyments like going to the theater or films should be limited. It is useful to cultivate "fruitful monotony" in a child rather than giving them constant exposure to new stimuli.

Among adults, pleasures such as gambling that are removed from nature result in no lasting joy, whereas those that bring a person into contact with the earth are profoundly satisfying. Urban populations suffer ennui only because they are separated from nature.

Other insights

- ❖ It is difficult for us to accept that others do not share the high opinion we have of ourselves, says Russell. We know that others have faults, but expect them to think that we have none. Overestimating our merits, love of power, and vanity lead to unhappiness.
- ❖ The feeling of love is what gives us happiness, rather than the object of that feeling. Love is "in itself a source of delight" and, what is more, it "enhances all the best pleasures, such as music, and sunrise in mountains, and the sea under the full moon."
- ❖ Our happiness comes primarily from those close to us: "Very few people can be happy unless on the whole their way of life and their outlook on the world is approved by those with whom they have social relations, and more especially by those with whom they live."

- ❖ The conceited are unpleasantly surprised by failure, while those who are modest are pleasantly surprised by success. Therefore, it is best to have low expectations.
- ❖ Disenchantment is a malady, and even if it is caused by particular circumstances, it is wise to overcome it as soon as possible. The more things a person is interested in, the greater their chances of happiness.
- ❖ Those who forgo parenthood relinquish a great happiness, and are likely to feel dissatisfaction without knowing why. Our offspring bring continuity and togetherness, which make you "feel you are part of the stream of life flowing on from the first germ" and continuing into an unknown future. Russell had several children.
- ❖ Another essential for happiness, continuity of purpose, stems from work: "Without self-respect genuine happiness is scarcely possible. And the man who is ashamed of his work can hardly achieve self-respect."
- ❖ All areas of a person's life, whether it is work, marriage, or raising children, require outward effort, and it is the effort itself that brings about happiness.

Final comments

Russell's prescription for happiness involves a number of elements, important among which is what he calls a "golden mean" between effort and resignation. Seeking perfection in everything inevitably causes unhappiness, whereas (to use his quaint example) the wise person will overlook the dust the maid has not dusted, or the fact that the cook has not cooked dinner properly, until such time as he is free to deal with it unemotionally. If we resign ourselves to many things, we can focus on what matters and where we can really make a difference. Indeed, the person who is able to cope with multifarious causes of unhappiness will be the one who remains happy.

Russell concludes (somewhat obviously) that happiness depends "partly upon external circumstances and partly upon oneself." It is derived from food, shelter, love, work, family, and a hundred other things. Given that the sources of happiness are all around us, he observes, only someone who is psychologically maladjusted will fail to become happy.

Going a little deeper, he notes that unhappiness is the result of a lack of integration between the conscious and the unconscious mind, or between the self and society: "The happy man is the man who does not suffer from either of these failures of unity, whose personality is neither divided against itself nor pitted against the world."

Above all, happiness can be gleaned from directing our interests *outward*, being less self-centered and avoiding envy, self-pity, fear, self-admiration, and

a sense of sin. Looking at these passions consciously, studying why they are present, and then facing them will help in overcoming them.

Though in terms of academic philosophy *The Conquest of Happiness* is not one of Russell's major works, it is a bridge between Russell the philosopher and Russell the man, and for that reason it is fascinating. He subscribed to "neutral monism," the metaphysical notion that everything in the universe is of the same "stuff," whether it is matter or consciousness. We are therefore less separate from other people than we think, and a belief that we are a truly separate entity is a mistake that will cause unhappiness, because all disturbing thoughts arise from a feeling of unwanted separation and a focus on the self as something real. When this illusion of separation is seen for what it is, it is difficult not to be joyful.

Bertrand Russell

Russell was born in 1872 in Trellech, Wales, into an influential, liberal, and aristocratic family. His parents were Viscount Amberley and Katherine, daughter of the 2nd Baron Stanley of Alderley. At only 3 he was left an orphan and was taught by governesses and tutors.

In 1890 he went into residence at Trinity College, University of Cambridge, and his brilliance was soon noticed. While still in his teens he published a book on German social democracy, and during his time at Trinity he discovered "Russell's paradox," which challenged the foundations of mathematical set theory.

In 1903 he published his first important book on mathematical logic, *The Principles of Mathematics*, and in 1905 wrote the essay *On Denoting*. The first of three volumes of *Principia Mathematica*, coauthored with Alfred North Whitehead, was published in 1910. The work made Russell famous in the fields of logic and mathematics.

Russell was noted for his many antiwar and antinuclear protests, which led to time in jail and dismissals from both Trinity College and City College, New York. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1950.

He gave away much of his inherited wealth, but in 1931 he acceded to, and kept, his earldom, though he claimed that its only benefit was getting seats in restaurants. He died in 1970.