

Russell and the Attainment of Happiness

Exploring some thought-provoking views of Bertrand Russell

Marvin Kohl

Let us begin with Russell's distinction between two sorts of happiness, plain and fancy. The first is open to any human being, the other is not. Plain happiness requires the having of a central purpose which guides one's life. It also requires that this purpose be end-specific, that it permit progressively increasing success, and that the individual find both joy and worth in this central task. In other words, plain happiness (perhaps best called "having a meaningful life") is, according to Russell, the result of having a certain kind of purposeful life. Fancy happiness, on the other hand, is a mixed mode caused by a more complex set of conditions and, as a rule, is defeated by the existence of contrary conditions. Russell does not explain the relationship between plain and fancy happiness, taking it for granted that the former is easily obtainable and an almost necessary condition for the latter. More often than not, he simply refers to "fancy happiness" as "happiness."

Aside from changes in the social system required to promote happiness or personal catastrophe, ordinary day-to-day unhappiness is largely caused by mistaken views of the world, mistaken ethics, and mistaken habits of life. On the other hand, ordinary men and women

can achieve happiness, with only a small amount of external prosperity, if they have good health, a cheerful disposition and a sound philosophy of life. . . .

Omitting saints, lunatics, and men of genius, ordinary people need, for their happiness, certain fairly simple conditions, which, with a little wisdom in economics and politics, could be fulfilled for almost everyone. I put first purely physical conditions—food and shelter and health. Only when these have been secured is it worthwhile to consider psychological requisites.

In *The Conquest of Happiness* Russell provides what is perhaps his most complete single description of the requisite general conditions.

Marvin Kohl is professor of philosophy at the State University of New York (SUNY) at Fredonia. This article is reprinted from the Russell Society News, May 1988. It appeared originally in the International Studies in Philosophy, Vol.16, #3 (1984), pp 14-24, with 3 pages of footnotes (available on request from Humanist in Canada).

Happiness . . . depends partly upon external circumstances and partly upon oneself. . . . Certain things are indispensable to the happiness of most men, but these are simple things: food and shelter, health, love, successful work and respect of one's own herd. To some people parenthood also is essential. Where these things are lacking, only the exceptional man can achieve happiness. . . .

In short, happiness depends on a combination of internal and external causes. It depends upon having *and* appreciating reasonably continuous success at satisfying one's basic needs and correlate interests.

Notice that Russell also maintains that what is at issue is not universal happiness but the happiness of most persons. Thus, he insists that he is not talking about the happiness of exceptional individuals but only about most ordinary men and women. "Our problem," he writes, "is to preserve instinctive happiness for the many, not only for a privileged few."

The Pessimist Charge

Three of the more interesting charges against Russell are: first, he assumes that because happiness seems desirable, it must also be obtainable; second, that since man's consciousness and fear of death are unavoidable for all who minimally think about life, that they are, in particular, the most serious threat to human happiness; third, that since Russell is an "apostate pessimist," he passes too lightly over the problem of pessimism. Let us consider these charges of Schiller, starting with the last point.

It is difficult to say whether or not "apostate pessimist" is an accurate label. I am inclined to believe it is not. If Schiller's criticism is based upon Russell's position in *A Free Man's Worship*, as I suspect it is, then he is in error because that work is not so much the expression of pessimism as it is the rejection of optimism. And it does not follow that the rejection of optimism entails pessimism. Apparently Schiller believes, as perhaps many do, that optimism and pessimism are logical complements. But this is not the case.

Pessimism, according to Russell, is the philosophy of life which holds that the world is essen-

tially evil and that, because of this, life is ultimately not worthwhile. Non-pessimism is roughly that class of beliefs which, for a variety of reasons, deny that the world is essentially evil. Thus, a non-pessimist may be an *optimist* or a *meliorist*. An optimist is someone who generally holds that the world is essentially good. A meliorist, on the other hand, is someone who maintains that neither the evil nor the goodness of the world appear to be ultimately determined and, most important, that man therefore has both the freedom and the power of aiding in the world's betterment. The meliorist generally holds that it is possible, if man chooses to make the effort, to make the world a better place to live. Given this frame of reference, Russell emerges as the great prophet of melioristic humanism and *A Free Man's Worship*, I suggest, is best intellectually interpreted as an attempt to determine the rational limits of that meliorism.

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Another possible source of confusion is the distinction between being intellectually and being temperamentally a pessimist. One can, I think, make a reasonable case for Russell being a temperamental pessimist during much of his early adulthood. His relative isolation from other children, his social isolation due to his mathematics study, his alleged unrequited love for Mrs. Whitehead, and his "natural" shyness—all may have contributed to his tendency to emphasize the negative, and to prehend the world with an attitude of relative despair. In this sense, there is some truth to Schiller's charge. However, it is important to realize that there is little evidence to show that this mode of emotional response was intellectually grounded or was the result of the kind of dispassionate rational scrutiny typical of Russell—and much evidence that it was not. Even though Russell may have been a temperamental pessimist during the early adult season of his life, he did not (even at that time) confuse that disposition (which resulted from poor education and a largely unhappy social environment) with the truth about the external world. I have already suggested that *A Free Man's Worship*, when scrutinized from an intellectual point of view, is definitely melioristic, or at least ends upon that note.

In the *Conquest of Happiness*, he stresses the point that "reason lays no embargo upon happiness" and that the pessimists 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." And in *The History of Western Philosophy*, he maintains that "from a scientific point of view, optimism and pessimism are alike objectionable" and that "belief in either pessimism or optimism is a matter of temperament, not of reason." Meliorism, on the other hand, is not predominantly a matter of temperament. It rests, or at least Russell's particular version appears to rest, on the following claims:

- (1) Judgments that there are certain states of affairs are judgments of fact.
- (2) Whether or not certain states of affairs—the inevitability of death, the shortness of certain lives, our relative lack of power over external nature, etc.—are evils is a matter of value judgment.
- (3) Even if we conclude on the basis of correct valuation that there is a long list of evils that are (almost as a rule) beyond our power, it does not follow that life is not worthwhile.
- (4) The reason is that we create our own values. And it is because we create our own values that, whatever plight the world may be in, we can decide, rationally decide, to accept what cannot be changed, change what we can and should, and enjoy both our limited powers and the sheer experience of being alive.

In a sense we have replied to the "terror of death" argument. According to Russell, "the wise man will be as happy as circumstances permit, and if he finds the contemplation of the universe painful beyond a point, he will contemplate something else instead." Similarly, the wise man is not motivated by irrational fears, and it is as irrational to fear death as it is to fear the realities of life. Fear is the great enemy. It "should be overcome not only in action, but in feeling; and not only in conscious feeling, but in the unconscious as well." It is possible "to educate ordinary men and women that they should be able to live without fear." And once fear is eliminated and rational courage is substituted, personal death will appear a trivial matter. "The secret of happiness is to face the fact that the world is horrible, horrible, horrible. . . . You must feel it deeply, and not brush it aside. . . . You must feel it right in here"—Russell said, hitting his breast—"and then you can start being happy again."

The basic question is whether Russell is right in holding that it is possible to educate ordinary men and women that they should be able to live without fear at least of death. Pessimists, like Tolstoy

and Schiller, seem to be claiming that it is impossible to do so, that death, so to speak, is a natural, if not ontological, terror. Common sense and the evidence indicates the contrary to be true. Attitudes toward dying and death are malleable. And while it is probably an exaggeration to say that we can come to view personal death as a trivial matter, Russell seems to be correct in holding that the terror of death and irrational fear can be eliminated.

Russell believes that a combination of meliorism and a long view of things provide a sufficient antidote to thwart the paralysis of utter despair. Man can be educated and is capable of growth. Man not only can improve his lot in life but, even after very bad times, he resumes his movement towards progress. Two of Russell's most revealing statements occur in the context of an evaluation of Spinoza's philosophy. I shall quote them at length.

The problem [of the wicked having power] for Spinoza is easier than it is for one who has no belief in the ultimate goodness of the universe. Spinoza thinks that if you see your misfortunes as they are in reality, as part of the concatenation of causes stretching from the beginning of time to the end, you will see that they are only misfortunes to you, not to the universe, to which they are merely passing discords heightening an ultimate harmony. I cannot accept this; I think that particular events are what they are and do not become different by absorption into a whole. Each act of cruelty is eternally a part of the universe; nothing that happens later can make that act good rather than bad, or can confer perfection on the whole of which it is a part.

Nevertheless, when it is your lot to have to endure something that is (or seems to you) worse than the ordinary lot of mankind, Spinoza's principle of thinking about the whole, or at any rate about larger matters than your own grief, is a useful one. There are even times when it is comforting to reflect that human life, with all that it contains of evil and suffering, is an infinitesimal part of the life of the universe. Such reflections may not suffice to constitute a religion, but in a painful world they are a help toward sanity and an antidote to the paralysis of utter despair.

In a similar vein, he writes:

If bad times lie ahead of us we should remember while they last the slow march of man, checkered in the past by devastation and retrogressions, but always resuming the movement towards progress. Spinoza, who was one of the wisest of men and who lived consistently in accordance with his own wisdom, advised men to view passing events "under the aspect of eternity." . . . The child lives in the minute, the boy in the

day, the instinctive man in the year. The man imbued with history lives in the epoch. Spinoza would have us live not in the minute, the day, the year or the epoch, but in eternity. Those who learn to do this will find that it takes away the frantic quality and misfortune and prevents the trend towards madness that comes with overwhelming disaster. Spinoza spent the last day of his life telling cheerful anecdotes to his host. He had written: "A free man thinks of death least of all things, and his wisdom is a meditation not of death but of life." And he carried out his precept when it came to his own death.

To sum up: Russell did not think death was an obstacle to happiness because, like the stoics, he saw little point in fearing what cannot be conquered. He was by nature and intellectual conviction opposed to fear. And he held a melioristic and

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long view of things, which allowed him to view passing events under the aspect of eternity and to view man, in general, as instinctively driven toward growth, always resuming the movement toward progress.

Exactly what is happiness?

Even the most casual reading of Russell reveals the importance of happiness. Not only does the intelligent and vigorous individual desire happiness but the protection and nurturing of this end is a major purpose, if not the most important purpose, of the major institutions in a properly run society. The basic aspects of social life—education, politics, the good life itself—require an intimate understanding of the nature of life satisfaction. The general aim of education is to provide a solid basis for happiness. "Happiness in childhood is absolutely necessary to the production of the best type of human being." The same is true of politics. "The most important purpose that political institutions can achieve is to keep alive in individuals creativeness, vigour, vitality, and the joy of life." Again Russell writes that "a wise humanity, in politics as elsewhere, comes only of remembering that even the largest groups are composed of individuals, that individuals can be happy or sad, and that every individual in the world who is suffering represents a failure of human wisdom and of common humanity." More important perhaps,

happiness contributes to goodness and not vice versa. The good life is a happy life. "I do not mean," he explains, "that if you are good you will be happy; I mean that if you are happy you will be good." Thus, unlike thinkers who hold that morality is a (or the) condition for happiness, Russell maintains that happiness, though not identical with morality, is as a rule a necessary condition.

The difficulty is that if happiness is a general ideal and necessary condition for morality, and if it is not some clear and distinct idea, then the situation is problematic. For it is one thing to offer the reader recipes for happiness, and to purport that all that is claimed for them is that they have increased one's own happiness. It is another to maintain that happiness is one of the major human ends as well as a necessary general condition for morality, and then proceed to offer seemingly different unclear recipes. Thus, we have the charge that Russell's characterization is too rich, too loose. And the more complex argument that because of this looseness, because the nature of the goal is unclear, happiness is generally less attainable.

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What I wish to suggest is that this characterization is deliberate in that Russell believed that the available evidence indicated that his conception of happiness allows for the maximum of growth and the achievement of happiness for the greatest number of persons. This point, I think, had best be elaborated.

One of the most striking features of Russell's account of happiness is his belief that the word "happiness" can be correctly used to denote almost any kind or level of satisfaction and that "the great practical importance of psychology will come in giving ordinary men and women a more just conception of what constitutes human happiness." For Russell, the central meta-question is: What is a more just way of conceiving of the kind of life satisfactions we wish to subsume under the name of happiness if we wish to minimize suffering and maximize the major modes of life satisfaction?

Russell's answer, in bold outline, is as follows: First, it must be a goal that enables men to fully taste what ordinary men might generally be expected to achieve in life—health, love, interesting work, perhaps parenthood. Second, the goal must be such as to provide for zest and the sense of accomplishment, two features that generally accompany earned success. This means that the

task must be neither too difficult nor too easy. The price of aiming too high, of having unrealistic expectations, is necessary defeat and pointless frustrations. The price of aiming too low is boredom and the emasculation of vigor and zest. Hence, a just conception of happiness requires that man aim high enough to allow for continual growth and the tasting of the fullness of life, yet low enough to avoid a general sense of futility.

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To be more specific: When happiness is properly understood and is the end that actually motivates men, men will desire the things heretofore mentioned. This does not imply a general standard for happiness. Nor does it imply a fixed standard.

All Utopias that have hitherto been constructed are intolerably dull. Any man with any force in him would rather live in this world with all its ghastly horrors, than in Plato's Republic or among Swift's Houyhnhnms. The men who make Utopias proceed upon a radically false assumption as to what constitutes a good life. They conceive that it is possible to imagine a certain state of society and a certain way of life which would be once and for all recognized as good, and should then continue for ever and ever. They do not realize that much of the greater part of a man's happiness depends upon activity, and only a very small remnant consist in passive enjoyment. Even the pleasures which do consist in enjoyment are only satisfactory, to most men, when they come in the intervals of activity. Social reformers, like inventors of Utopias, are apt to forget this very obvious fact of human nature. . . . Every vigorous man needs some kind of context, some sense of resistance overcome, in order to feel that he is exercising his faculties.

Not only does happiness require activity, not only is it probably an indispensable part of happiness to be without something one wants, but "happiness, if it is to have any depth and solidarity, demands a life built round some central purpose of a kind demanding continuous activity and permitting of progressively increasing success."

An important illustration of this point occurs in his discussion of having a so-called ideal income. Russell writes:

. . . it is not the amount of your income that

makes you happy, but its rate of increase. The man who enjoys life is the man who, with habits adjusted to one standard of life, finds himself continually in a position to adopt a slightly higher standard. That is why, on the whole, England was happy under Queen Elizabeth, and America is happy at the present time.

Again:

The important question, in regard to happiness . . . is not the absolute amount of one's income, but its augmentation or diminution.

Perhaps a very rapid increase, by altering one's habits and one's social milieu, may not be altogether a source of contentment, but a continual rise of (say) ten percent every year is likely to bring the nearest possible approach to perfect bliss. . . . Above all, he has the feeling of being a successful man, since circumstances adapt themselves to his wishes, he acquires an illusion of omnipotence, than which nothing is more delightful.

As the passages which I have just cited show, Russell's treatment of the question concerning the attainability of happiness is subtle and differs significantly from those who hold that happiness consists in having prospered. Russell concludes that felicity consists not in having prospered, but *in prospering*. That the best way to "attain" happiness is not to attempt to capture it, not to be completely successful, but to have a variety of ends, preferably ones rooted in instinct which permit progressively increasing success. Since continuous growth is an indispensable condition for happiness and since the happiness of each of us depends upon the well-being of the whole of mankind, a conception of happiness that protects against remediable suffering and allows for maximum continuous growth and the achievement of life satisfactions for the greatest number is the most just and nearly correct view. ■