BLOGS

One Among Many

The self in social context

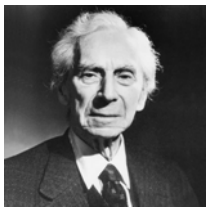
by Joachim I. Krueger, Ph.D.

Joachim Krueger is a social psychologist at Brown University who believes that rational thinking and socially responsible behavior are attainable goals. See full bio

Russell on happiness

Bertrand Russell's theory of happiness is quite modern, no?

Published on May 9, 2009



With the current interest in happiness studies, it is worthwhile taking a look back. Our concern with our own happiness, with how we can get it, how we can keep it, and how we can give it to and take it away from others, is nothing new. For millennia, philosophers have thought and argued about the nature of happiness. Research psychologists have only recently begun to address this topic, in part, in an attempt to make the discipline overall more "positive."

A couple of years ago, I stumbled on Bertrand Russell's "The conquest of happiness," published in 1930. Being a Russell fan, I looked forward to reading it, hoping that the old Brit had anticipated some of the things that make the science digest these days.

I was not disappointed. I now offer a brief summary of Russell's ideas relying mainly on quotes from his book (page numbers are in parentheses). See for yourself how you respond to his ideas. I hope you will find them inspiring, but perhaps you will find them trite, reactionary (e.g., note the gendered language of the day), or undone by modern empirical research.

Russell's key concept is zest. Zest is an "appetite for possible things, upon which all happiness, whether of men or animals, ultimately depends." (5) "What hunger is in relation to food, zest is in relation to life." (111) As hunger does not automatically lead to satiation, zest does not automatically lead to happiness. Nor can happiness come from gratification obtained without effort. "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. That is why I have called this book The conquest of happiness." (162-163) "The human animal, like others, is adapted to a certain amount of struggle for life [and] the mere absence of effort from his life removes an essential ingredient of happiness. [. . .] He forgets that to be without some of the things you want is an indispensable part of happiness." (15) The things we want need to be difficult, but not too difficult, to obtain. "Pleasures of achievement demand difficulties such that beforehand success seems doubtful although in the end it is usually achieved." (101)

Having zest is the natural human condition. It is destroyed by "mistaken views of the world, mistaken ethics, mistaken habits of life." (5) One enemy of zest is boredom. The desire for excitement runs deep, says Russell, and it should be honored. In ancestral society, men (and perhaps women), found excitement in hunting and courtship. Agriculture changed that. Farming is boring. Sitting in an office is boring. Living in the suburbs is boring. During "happy family time [. . .] paterfamilias went to sleep, his wife knitted, and the daughters wished they were dead or in Timbuktu." (36)

Anxiety—Russell calls it "fatigue"—is a kind of excitement that is incompatible with zest. Contemporary humans often feel overwhelmed and overworried. To stop worrying and start living, Russell advises that "when you have looked for some time steadily at the worst possibility and have said to yourself with real conviction, 'Well, after all, that would not matter so very much', you will find that your worry diminishes to a quite extraordinary extent." (50)

For those who find that even "the exercise of choice is in itself tiresome," (147) Russell has a remedy that anticipates the smart unconscious. "I have found, for example, that if I have to write upon some rather difficult topic the best plan is to think about it with very great intensity—the greatest intensity of which I am capable—for a few hours or days, and at the end of that time to give orders, so to speak, that the work is to proceed underground. After some months I return consciously to the topic and find that the work has been done." (49-50)

Subscribe to One Among Many
Subscribe via RSS

Recent Posts in One Among Many


Doing one's duty as a counterpoint to destructive obedience by Joachim I. Krueger, Ph.D.


Ignoring a third, dissenting, opinion can lead to bad decisions. by Joachim I. Krueger, Ph.D.


Women choose whom other women choose. by Joachim I. Krueger, Ph.D.


Confidence predicts success, unless you choose your own challenge. by Joachim I. Krueger, Ph.D.

Positive emotions underlie spirituality. by Joachim I. Krueger, Ph.D.

More of One Among Many blog

Most Popular Posts

Most Read Most Emailed

1 There Are No Bad Racks by Christopher Peterson, Ph.D.

2 
Online Mindfulness Meditation Therapy for PTSD, Boulder Colorado by Peter Strong, Ph.D.

3

Perhaps the greatest obstacle to happiness is "the disease of self-absorption." (173) Russell offers that his own conquest of happiness was due "very largely [. . .] to a diminishing preoccupation with myself." (6) A happy person knows that "one's ego is no very large part of the world." (48) "One of the great drawbacks to self-centered passions is that they afford so little variety in life. The man who loves only himself cannot, it is true, be accused of promiscuity in his affections, but he is bound in the end to suffer intolerable boredom from the invariable sameness of the object of his devotion." (172)

To the self-absorbed person, other people primarily serve as objects of comparison. "What people fear [. . .] is not that they will fail to get their breakfast next morning, but that they will fail to outshine their neighbors." (27) Russell warns that "the habit of thinking in terms of comparisons is a fatal one." (57) To overcome it, "teach yourself that life would still be worth living even if you were not, as of course you are, immeasurably superior to all your friends in virtue and intelligence." (173) "You can get away from envy by enjoying the pleasures that come your way, by doing the work that you have to do, and by avoiding comparisons with those whom you imagine, perhaps quite falsely, to be more fortunate than yourself." (58-59)

Likewise, Russell advises not to worry too much about what others think of you. On the one hand, he suspects that "if we were all given by magic the power to read each other's thoughts, I suppose the first effect would be that almost all friendships would be dissolved." (76) On the other hand, he doubts that "most people give enough thought to you to have any special desire to persecute you." (79) This is a nice example of regression to the mean: Chances are you overestimate the love of your friends and the disdain of your foes.

Once you start retreating from self-absorption, you need not entirely ignore what others think. "One should as a rule respect public opinion in so far as is necessary to avoid starvation and to keep out of prison, but anything that goes beyond this is voluntary submission to an unnecessary tyranny, and is likely to interfere with happiness in all kinds of ways." (92) Here Russell anticipates an underappreciated danger of conformity. A conformist society is not necessarily evil (though it may be vulnerable to evil influence), but it is certainly boring. "A society composed of men and women who do not bow too much to the conventions is a far more interesting society than one in which all behave alike." (93)

Russell knows that "a civilized society is impossible without a very considerable restraint upon spontaneous impulse." (120) Yet, societies that extract conformity by instilling a sense of sin create unhappiness on a large scale. "There is in the sense of sin something abject, something lacking in self-respect." (70) The emotion underlying the sense of sin is guilt, which, in turn, is driven by fear. "The man who entirely accepts the morality of the herd while acting against it suffers great unhappiness when losing caste." (64) In contrast, "the ideally virtuous man [. . .] permits the enjoyment of all good things whenever there is no evil consequence to outweigh the enjoyment." (66) Russell rejects categorical morality as "sickly nonsense" (70) because it entails the idea of sin. A rational person weighs the pros and cons of each decision. Unlike Moses and Kant, who proscribed lying categorically, Russell chooses to lie when it leads to more good than evil. He tells how he encountered a wounded fox and later lied to the hunters to save the animal. Once a rational choice is made, it is absurd to feel remorse.

Russell is a hedonist. To him, a theory of happiness that is mute on love and sex is unthinkable. "To be unable to inspire sex love is a grave misfortune to any man or woman, since it deprives him or her of the greatest joys that life has to offer." (126) If you love, love with abandon, for "of all forms of caution, caution in love is perhaps the most fatal to true happiness." (129) How do you find love? On this question, Russell wisely counsels to take the indirect approach. "Human nature is so constructed that it gives affection most readily to those who seem least to demand it." (122) And, "the man who receives affection is, broadly speaking, the man who gives it." (172)

Reference:

Russell, B. (1930). The conquest of happiness. London, England: Allen and Unwin.

I used a Routledge Classics paperback.

Related Articles

- Would you want to know?
- Who was that other guy who discovered evolution? A few extra things to remember and celebrate as Darwin turns 200
- Translational Research in Positive Psychology
- New Year's Resolution: Get Happy

Tags: bertrand russell, brief summary, conquest of happiness, empirical research, essential ingredient, fortunate circumstances, gratification, happiness studies, human animal, millennia, page numbers, parentheses, philosophers, rare cases, reactionary, research psychologists, ripe fruit, science digest, zest

I Resolve To Take Benjamin Franklin Seriously