

Introduction to Bertrand Russell, THE CONQUEST OF HAPPINESS
(reissue from Liveright, 2013)

What do you think a philosopher is? There are two quite different stereotypes in the popular imagination: the ivory tower theoretician who frets over abstract questions so removed from everyday concerns that their answers could matter only to other philosophers, such as “Do numbers exist, and if so, what are they?” or “Is time an illusion?”; or on the other hand the thoughtful counselor whose wise advice is sought on the most pressing of human issues: “How should I live?” and “Why is it important to be good?” The first kind of philosopher resides in a philosophy department at a university and talks only to other philosophers. The second can be found in a public park, engaging a throng of lay people in a discussion that will change their lives. Socrates, who died in Athens in 399 BC, is the major source of both stereotypes: he was condemned by the authorities to drink the fatal cup of hemlock for being too dangerous a philosopher of the second sort, but he also inaugurated the style of questioning that fills academic philosophy departments with “professional philosophers” of the first type, conceptual technicians whose disputes are largely inaccessible to anybody outside the field.

Bertrand Russell, who died in Wales in 1970 at the age of 97, is the best example ever of a philosopher who not only lived up to both stereotypes but enlarged the difference between them. His technical work in logic created the field of *mathematical logic* (laying the foundations on which Alan Turing and others created the computer) and posed the central issues that have preoccupied *analytic philosophers* in universities ever since. His three-volume work with Alfred North Whitehead, *Principia Mathematica*, consists of hundreds of pages of formal proofs designed to establish all of mathematics on a firm logical foundation, and is one of the most unreadable great books ever written. But he was also a passionate anti-war activist in the public square, who went to prison during World War I for his pacifism, was deeply critical of communism (since a meeting with Lenin in 1920, when he visited Russia to investigate the revolution), supported the war against Hitler, an evil greater than war itself, but later was an ardent anti-nuclear polemicist and outspoken critic of the Vietnam War. His appointment to a professorship at City College of New York was reversed by the college administration, which declared him “morally unfit” because of his boldly expressed views on sexual morality. He never was ordered to drink the hemlock, but he seems to have done whatever he could to provoke that wish in authorities wherever he confronted them.

Russell published more than one book a year for over seventy years, often publishing as many as three or four in a single year. *The Conquest of Happiness*, appearing in 1930, falls roughly in the middle—it’s hard to count—and is a good example of his “popular” writing, less extreme than some of his other polemics. (In 1950 he anthologized some of his most controversial short pieces in a volume entitled *Unpopular Essays*, a witty acknowledgment of his eagerness to provoke.)

The Conquest of Happiness is a fascinating time capsule, a mixture including perennial observations that speak as clearly to us today as they did to its initial readers, and antiquated issues and attitudes that by today's standards are offensive when they are not amusing. A good way to read this book is to consider it a temporal telescope that allows us to see how far we've come. Russell himself deserves some of the credit for moving our moral imagination out of obsolete orthodoxies into better territory, but here we see a journey in progress, still oblivious to biases that cramp his vision. Perhaps the moral to draw from this confrontation is that we should probably expect our grandchildren to be as uncomfortable with some of our attitudes as we are with some of Russell's.

Russell was born into the British aristocracy, with an inherited title (The Right Honorable Earl Russell), and considerable wealth. His circumstances were always comfortable but he never basked in luxury, choosing instead to use his inherited resources to support a life of intense activity on all fronts, in logic, philosophy, and public morality, and vigorously investigating controversial topics from the rise of Bolshevism in Russia to criticism of the Warren Commission Report on the assassination of John F. Kennedy. Still, his position in the aristocracy shines through, as when he supposes the typical man "arrives home, tired, just in time to dress for dinner," or, in his chapter on envy, he lets this drop:

Take, for example, maid servants: I member when one of our maids, who was a married woman, became pregnant, and we said that she was not to be expected to lift heavy weights, the instant result was that none of the others would lift heavy weights, and any work of that sort that needed doing we had to do ourselves.

His position on women shows serious stains of sexism by today's standard—though he was in his day a champion of women's rights—and unlike many other books of the era, there are only faint hints of racism in his choice of words, as when he repeats the legend of the "Chinaman" saying "Me no drinkee for drinkee, me drinkee for drunkee," or describes a "carload of colored people" as the only folks in a traffic jam who are actually enjoying themselves, as he recommends.

One of the most striking patterns in the book is Russell's willingness to extrapolate from his own highly unusual life experience to generalizations about life in general. One of the advantages of an aristocracy, he notes (and what are the others, one wonders?) is that "since status depended upon birth behavior was allowed to be erratic." [108] Ah, thank goodness for all the non-conformist earls and duchesses whose eccentric enthusiasms have so wonderfully expanded our horizons! In addition to Lord Russell how many can we count? Aside from Lord Byron's brilliant daughter Ada, Countess Lovelace, who was the first to articulate the concept of a computer program in her work with Charles Babbage, and a few landed aristocrats who investigated novel methods of farming, the field is rather deserted.

These historical curiosities are sprinkled engagingly among the reflections of timeless wisdom that make up most of the book, a prototype of the flood of self-help books that have more recently been published, few of them as well worth reading today as Russell's little book.