

RUSSELL *VERSUS* THE HAPPINESS INDUSTRY

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Tim Phillips. *Bertrand Russell's The Conquest of Happiness; a Modern-Day Interpretation of a Self-Help Classic*. Oxford: Infinite Ideas, 2010. Pp. 118. 978-1-906821-27-2 (pb). US\$11.95. German translation as *Bertrand Russells Eroberung des Glücks* in a "Business Classics" series (GABAL Verlag, 2012).

The popular writing Bertrand Russell undertook to make money has long roused the indignation of those interested in his more technical specialized work, and his 1930 *The Conquest of Happiness* ranks among the more extreme examples of this pot-boiling genre. Ludwig Wittgenstein denounced Russell's *Conquest of Happiness* as a "vomitive." And the best ways of understanding Russell's own assessments of his book are unclear, owing to the various sentiments his biographers report. According to Ronald Clark, he said: "... *The Conquest of Happiness* ... I am not very proud of";¹ whereas Caroline Moorehead reports "he was later to say that, of all his books, he felt this had done the most good".²

In his autobiography, Russell allows us how he wrote *The Conquest of Happiness* at a stage in his life "when I needed much self-command and much that I had learned by painful experience if I was to maintain any endurable level of happiness." The emotional challenges to which he was subjected at the time he wrote the book "introduced an intolerable tension into every moment of daily life."

Beacon Hill School, which Russell had started with his second wife, Dora, in 1927, was in such dire straits financially by 1930 that Russell was compelled to resort to much popular writing and lecturing in order to remain solvent. In 1930, Dora gave birth to a daughter fathered by the American journalist Griffin Barry. This marked the beginning of the end to Russell's marriage to Dora. Add to the foregoing Russell's strained relations with Wittgenstein, when the

¹ *The Life of Bertrand Russell*, p. 448.

² *Bertrand Russell*, p. 383.

former was asked to be one of the examiners for Wittgenstein's PHD at Cambridge. Although the PHD was awarded and Wittgenstein secured a grant to conduct research at Trinity College, Cambridge for five years, Russell and Wittgenstein's interaction at the time resulted in an end to their friendship.

In general, however much control Russell may have had over matters at earlier points in his life, 1930 was a time he was largely at the mercy of unstable circumstances. The repose and leisure on which he had depended for his philosophical activity were not then available to him. Personal problems came to the fore and he was more prone to depression than usual. About *The Conquest of Happiness*, written primarily with the American market in mind, he remarked to the publisher Stanley Unwin: "I think they [Americans] mostly share Al Capone's ideas of happiness, which are in a somewhat different vein from mine." The book became a bestseller in America.

Tim Phillips writes on business, technology, social change and innovation, and he has published more than a dozen expositions of other famous authors' works. His book *Bertrand Russell's The Conquest of Happiness* is a faithful tour through this Russell classic. Phillips provides a readable account of the original's lucid points. The treatment is certainly not pretentious or obfuscatory, as it abounds with examples of Russell's points from contemporary pop culture. It features corroborating quotations from other authors and is salted with some results of modern surveys.

Bertrand Russell's The Conquest of Happiness has good reminders of the differences between the nature of Russell's times and lifestyle and that of our own, the most notable being the absence during Russell's day of a *happiness industry*. Nowadays, we are bombarded with "self-help" books "encouraging us to obsess about ourselves or manipulate others" (p. 9). Moreover, when Russell wrote *The Conquest of Happiness*, "the idea of an antidepressant pill was as likely as someone walking on the moon and the idea that people could 'suffer from stress' was thirty years into the future. For all but a few people, unhappiness wasn't a medical condition" (*ibid.*). In the meantime alas, depression, fatigue, stress and the like have become medical conditions, accompanied by a pharmaceutical industry all too eager to ensnare self-perceived victims with panoplies of pills it touts as remedies for the latest, most fashionable disorders. Unsurprisingly, our society does not seem to be any the better for it, which is exactly what Russell would have expected.

In contrast to contemporary self-help books and condescending TV shows, Russell believed in treating his readers like adults and expected his readers to treat themselves like adults as well. For him, unhappiness was a "challenge to be overcome" and a challenge for which each individual's own self is the most qualified candidate for consultation. Phillips argues convincingly that "Russell would have had no concept of, and no time for, a culture which encouraged

us to be helpless in the face of nervous fatigue.... [F]or most of us, the solution is in our hands—or in our minds” (p. 43).

To cope with stress, Russell thought it was crucial to be capable of serene reflection (a point where modern psychologists would argue on his behalf). Phillips proposes constructive manners in which we can apply Russell’s advice to our own times. For example, he points out that, rather than settle for a life of constant distractions and vacuous entertainments, the formulation of purpose for our own lives is ultimately in our own best interest. As bland and innocuous as such a guideline may seem, we might not be able to appreciate its more drastic implications until we realize the strictures it imposes on us. Russell would certainly frown upon automatically tweeting an activity in which we are engaged or venting an opinion simply because we are currently harbouring it: “What we often think of as wasted time today would, in Russell’s ideal world, be quite the opposite: time for reflection” (p. 41).³

I detected only one difference in Phillips and Russell’s views. This pertains to Russell’s advice on the proper management of grief. Russell says:

Few men except bachelors have never quarrelled with their wives.... At such times, when in spite of the anxiety there is nothing to be done at the moment, one man will play chess, another will read detective stories, a third will become absorbed in popular astronomy, a fourth will console himself by reading about the excavations at Ur of the Chaldees. (CH, p. 228)

Phillips observes:

This, in philosophy land, is how they roll.

For Russell, this is right and proper. These four [men Russell mentioned earlier] are acting wisely, he says, because if you sit and worry about a problem when you can do nothing about it, you cannot solve the problem when you can do something about it. For example, when your partner has finished smashing crockery downstairs because you’re in the spare room staring into a telescope again ... [ellipsis in original]

This line of reasoning, to our eyes, has several flaws—the most important being that you may not be required to solve a problem for your partner as much as

³ Phillips succeeds in straightforwardly discerning and appreciating Russell’s concept of *idleness*. Phillips appreciates how time that is *economically* “non-productive” can still be time spent valuably and not necessarily *inactively*. For Russell, idleness is “work or activity which is not part of your regular professional job” (*How to Be Free and Happy*, p. 18). That is, for Russell, *idleness* is an unassuming, even self-effacing, way of designating work or activity that is fulfilling but not necessarily *practical*. This understanding contrasts with Stephen Mumford’s, e.g., which would rather have us see Russell’s concept of idleness as mired in complications (see “Russell’s Defence of Idleness”).

to demonstrate selfless affection by giving your other half some loving attention. This might be a large part of the solution, especially if you have a habit of reading detective stories during moments of crisis.

On the other hand, there's a germ of truth in there....

But beware. His prescription risks that in the search for happiness we don't just avoid sentimentality, but we avoid the natural process of grief altogether—which is denying our nature, not confronting it. (Pp. 106–7)

The position of many people is that Russell's elegance speaks for itself. Phillips skillfully elucidates the most noteworthy differences between Russell's era and our own with a view to helping us apply Russell's insights to contemporary times, and it is in this that the primary value of his book consists.

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