

BERTRAND RUSSELL ON FEAR: A PROLEGOMENA*

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ABSTRACT. Russell maintains that all fear, whether it be unconscious, conscious, or attitudinal, is bad and ought to be eliminated. At best these claims are hyperbole; at worse, false. They also involve an exacting notion of human nature, bringing to mind John Maynard Keynes' charge in *Two Memoirs* that "there was no solid diagnosis of human nature" underlying Russell's theory, and that Russell "sustained simultaneously a pair of opinions ludicrously incompatible. He held that in fact human affairs were carried on after a most irrational fashion. but that the remedy was quite simple and easy, since all we had to do was to carry them on rationally."

I. RUSSELL'S STANCE

Bertrand Russell maintains that one of the great obstacles to human happiness is fear. In his essay "On Evils Due to Fear" he argues that "a great many of the defects from which adults suffer are due to preventable mistakes in their education, and [that] the most important of these mistakes is the inculcation of fear."¹ He also insists that *all* fear is bad. Thus, in *What I Believe*, he writes:

Religion, since it has its source in terror, has dignified certain kinds of fear, and made people think them not disgraceful. In this it has done mankind a great disservice: *all* fear is bad, and ought to be overcome not by fairy tales, but by courage and rational reflection.²

In *The Conquest of Happiness*, he again reminds us that fear of any kind is a major obstacle to happiness, whether it be fear of life in general, fear of failure, or some other kind of fear. For example, in discussing the fear of public opinion he writes:

Fear of public opinion, like every other form of fear, is oppressive and stunts growth. It is difficult to achieve any kind of

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¹ Bertrand Russell, "On the Evils Due to Fear," in *If I Could Preach Just Once* (New York: Harper, 1929), 219. He later adds "I do not believe that any good thing is to be obtained through fear, and I hold that obedience not otherwise obtainable had better not be obtained." (228)

² Bertrand Russell, *What I Believe* (New York: Dutton, 1925), 13.

greatness while a fear of this kind remains strong, and it is impossible to acquire that freedom of spirit in which true happiness consists, for it is essential to happiness that our way of living should spring from our own deep impulses and not from the accidental tastes and desires of those who happen to be our neighbors, or even our relations.³

All of us probably have had experiences of fear, and so to some extent understand its nature. If we had to describe the general nature of this experience, we might be content to say that fear is the feeling that occurs in the presence of an actual, perceived, or anticipated threat. Perhaps a more sophisticated observer would want to regard fear as the physiological and psychological state that comes about in the presence of an actual, perceived, or anticipated threat.

This characterization has its difficulties in that it leaves obscure the nature or more exact description of this state: for example, the extent to which it conforms with a general reflex type or has the characteristics that have traditionally been associated with instincts. Nonetheless, it is useful at the outset because it reminds us that fear is both a state of mind and a state of body with measurable physiological correlates, and because it appears to be the characterization Russell uses or at least seems to presuppose.

Most of us would agree that fear is a matter of degree and that some fears are more rational than others. For example, some people fear the Tarantula spider and are stricken by panic in its presence because its bite is poisonous. Other people just do not like spiders. They panic in their presence for the same reason as they panic in the presence of other insects, namely, because they believe they definitely cause disease. Still others are terrified of spiders because they believe that the bite of any spider is deadly. Most of us would agree that the first belief is rational; that the second is erroneous because spiders, unlike fleas and ticks, are generally known not to cause disease; and that the third belief is irrational because it is contrary to the widely known fact that while tarantula bites can be extremely painful, they are not deadly.

It is true that Russell distinguishes between the rational and irrational apprehension of danger. It is also true that Russell acknowledges the importance of rationally apprehending danger when faced

³ Bertrand Russell, *The Conquest of Happiness* (Garden City, New York: Garden City Publishing, 1930), 138-9.

with its presence or a genuine threat. But he also tends to identify cases as being that of fear only when the individual is stricken with panic. In other words, given the logic of Russell's position he would have to maintain that, because of panic, all three of these cases are examples of irrational behavior. This strikes me as an odd and unacceptably narrow way of characterizing fear.

Perhaps the clearest example of this narrowing of meaning occurs in *What I Believe*. After telling us that the purpose of the moralist is to improve men's behavior, that active malevolence is the worst feature of human nature, and suggesting that most of this malevolence is caused by a haunting fear of danger and ruin, Russell concludes that fear is the great enemy against which we must do primary battle. Thus, he writes:

[love of mental adventure] must ... be one of the chief concerns of the scientific moralist to combat fear. This can be done in two ways: by increasing security, and by cultivating courage. I am speaking of fear as an irrational passion, not of the rational prevision of possible misfortune. When a theatre catches fire, the rational man foresees disaster just as clearly as the man stricken with panic, but he adopts methods likely to diminish the disaster, whereas the man stricken with panic increases it.⁴

Notice that Russell is here not objecting to the belief that the theatre is on fire. Since the theatre is presumably on fire, both the rational and irrational man have grounds for believing that this is the case. What he is objecting to are the feelings – the paralyzing panic – which has become associated with the second man's belief that the theatre is on fire. And I think most of us would agree that being stricken, being paralyzed with fear, is not a rational stance. But having said this, we should also recognize the following: first, that paralyzing fear is not the only kind of fear; second, that there are important differences between having rational and irrational feelings; and finally, that the kinds of fear Russell typically attacks are of this extreme kind. Perhaps all forms of panic are bad but it does not follow from this that all forms of fear are.

His abhorrence of fear has another source. Russell, especially when doing political and social philosophy, became increasing

⁴ *What I Believe*, 70.

aware of the fact that fear kills the love of thought and mental adventure. For example, he concludes his chapter on education in *Principles of Social Reconstruction* by describing the evils caused by a mistaken education, one inspired by fear. Thus, he writes that

If the object [of education] were to make pupils think, rather than to make them accept certain conclusions, education would be conducted quite differently: there would be less rapidity of instruction and more discussion, more occasions when the pupils are encouraged to express themselves, more attempt to make education concern itself with matters in which the pupils feel some interest.

Above all, there would be an endeavour to rouse and stimulate the love of mental adventure.... To give this joy, in a greater or less measure, to all who are capable of it, is the supreme end for which the education of the mind is to be valued.⁵

Russell also explains why, although the love of mental adventure is rare among adults, it is not so with children. Among children, he writes,

It is very common, and grows naturally out of the period of make-believe and fancy. It is rare in later life because everything is done to kill it during education. Men fear thought as they fear nothing else on earth – more than ruin, more even than death.... It is fear that holds men back – fear lest their cherished beliefs should prove delusions, fear lest the institutions by which they live should prove harmful, fear lest they themselves should prove less worthy of respect than they have supposed themselves to be.... No institution inspired by fear can further life. Hope, not fear, is the creative principle in human affairs.⁶

In *New Hopes for a Changing World* he writes: “The thing that above all others I have been concerned to say in this book is that because of fears that once had a rational basis mankind has failed to

⁵ Bertrand Russell, *Principles of Social Reconstruction* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1916), 164-5.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 165-7.

profit by the techniques that, if wisely used, could make him happy” and that “the greatest obstacle to a good world is fear and [that] both conscious and unconscious fear must be eliminated.”⁷ The recurring theme, here taken from *Education and the Good Life*, is that “fear should be overcome not only in action, but in feeling; and not only in conscious feeling, but in the unconscious as well.”⁸

To sum up: Fear, for Russell, as a bio-genetic disposition or emotional attitude based on perceived dangers or threats, is a primary evil because it is responsible for, and continues to produce, the most detrimental kind of cognitive and eudemonic helplessness. It is an evil because it is responsible for causing the worst of human behavior and undermining the best. Russell’s vision is of a world without fear. It is a vision of a universal fearlessness that allows for a fuller nurturing of the good life.

II. CONCLUSION

The type of fear deserving of censure, then, is not any of the ones Russell has chosen. It is not fear *per se*, but panic fear and those ideological stances that inculcate or produce it that deserve censure. Moreover, it is difficult to reconcile the fact that fear is instinct-like with Russell’s normative claim that it ought to be eliminated. This difficulty, I should like to add, does not seem to be a logical one. For it seems consistent to say that, although X cannot be eliminated, X nonetheless ought to be.⁹

⁷ Bertrand Russell, *New Hopes for a Changing World* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1951), 188, 161-2.

⁸ Bertrand Russell, *Education and the Good Life* (New York: Boni & Live-right, 1926), 65.

⁹ Robert Hoffman, in personal correspondence, writes that “perhaps it is not a logical difficulty, but it does *seem* to be one.” Admittedly, there is an inner tension. However, I believe that this tension is not generated by inconsistency. We commonly suppose, though not with unquestioning certitude, a particular notion of consistency. We assume that it is correct to retain the notion that it is logically consistent to say “although X cannot be eliminated, X nonetheless ought to be.” For example, we may say that “although death cannot be eliminated, it nonetheless ought to be.” Now this may be an utterly unwise thing to say, but it is not inconsistent. Why not? To this question I should reply that it is the normative parts of these statements that take us “off the logical hook.” I admit that “*ceteris paribus*, one ought to, and ought not to, do X” is inconsistent; but quickly add the statement “although X cannot be eliminated, X nonetheless ought to be” does not take this form; and to insist that it does, as some may be inclined to do, is to re-

However, the assumption that the principle of futility is trump,¹⁰ when combined with Russell's claims, generates a worry. The principle of futility roughly reads that one ought not attempt to do what one knows cannot be done or that one ought not aim at what one knows to be impossible. Something here seems to be normatively amiss. This does not mean that we should not attempt in education and elsewhere to eliminate as much of the paralyzing and debilitating forms of fear as we can. But if it is true that fear is so deeply rooted in the physiological and psychological nature of man that, at present, it cannot be eliminated, then it seems to be unwise to have that aim. For as Russell elsewhere suggests: "There is no such thing as an irrational aim except in the sense of one that is impossible of realization."¹¹

This brings us to a related difficulty, to what may be called Russell's illusory optimism. For there are few areas of Russell's writings where John Maynard Keynes' criticism may be more applicable. Keynes charged that "there was no solid diagnosis of human nature" underlying Russell's views, and that Russell "sustained simultaneously a pair of opinions ludicrously incompatible. He held that in fact human affairs were carried on after a most irrational fashion, but that the remedy was quite simple and easy, since all we had to do was to carry them on rationally."¹²

Keynes' charge of being "ludicrously incompatible" may be too strong. But certainly Russell is overly optimistic about the ease in which fear may be eliminated. Briefly consider the problem generated by just the existence of unconscious fear. How does a conscious mind command or urge an unconscious mind to behave? Is Russell not too sanguine about the ease in which unconscious fears can be recognized and controlled by the conscious mind? He clearly underestimated the power and role played by repression in the minds

commend an unnecessary dilution of the notion of consistency. Therefore, I propose to conclude by at least provisionally saying that although the difficulty may seem to be a logical one, it is not.

¹⁰ For a general analysis of this idea, see Marvin Kohl, "Wisdom and Futility," *The Philosophical Forum* 32:1 (2001), 73-93.

¹¹ Bertrand Russell, *Human Society in Ethics and Politics* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1954), 11.

¹² John Maynard Keynes, *Two Memoirs* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1949), 102.

of ordinary human beings. Perhaps, given his own vast power of reason, he assumed that ordinary human beings, most of whom are considerably less well endowed, have the same ability.

Respect for fearlessness and courage is one of the outstanding marks of Western philosophy. Russell's writings bear testimony to the vitality of this tradition. His own indomitable fearlessness is a model even critics respect. Nonetheless, it is one thing to tell us to eliminate fear whenever we wisely can, it is another to be cavalier about the ease and extent of being able to do so.

I am not taking issue with the claim that abusive forms of fear are often inculcated and zealously nurtured and that Russell, as a social reformer, deserves our admiration for his courageous battle against this abuse. Nor do I deny that fear often impedes and destroys human happiness. What I wish to suggest is: (1) that we distinguish between the inculcation of specific abusive attitudinal fears, like the fear of truth or public opinion, and the bio-genetic dispositions or instincts that enable us to fear an approaching fire or enemy; (2) that it generally makes good sense to call for the elimination of the former; but (3) that neither Russell's arguments nor the evidence about the protective nature of non-panic fear warrants the conclusion that all fear ought to be eliminated; and (4) that the most vulnerable aspect of Russell's doctrine seems to be his conviction that it is desirable and possible for ordinary human beings to eliminate all fear.

I would be remiss if I concluded this discussion without commenting on one of Russell's most important insights. Russell is right on the mark in his understanding of how fear may be manipulated in order to control others. The successful manipulation of fear is an instrument of power. Russell also clearly understood that politicians typically manipulate public fear in order to advance their own agendas. From this perspective, his social philosophy may be viewed as a pioneering effort in understanding how the dread of loss and the fear of death may be used as a means of promoting various political agendas. Here I will remain relatively silent about how the current fear of terrorism has been used to reverse welfare gains and to diminish what always has been a fragile ideal, namely, the commitment to a benevolent society. What I find disconcerting is that this vital insight in Russell's may be lost because of his zeal as a social reformer and his hasty generalization.

The main object of the present paper is in part polemical, critically focusing on Russell's claim that all fear is bad and ought to be eliminated, and in part preparatory, hoping this discussion will encourage the development of a contrary neural and philosophical theory, one that conceives of fear as a system that is hardwired, part of the emotional unconscious, "a system that detects danger and produces responses that maximize the probability of surviving a dangerous situation in the most beneficial way," as Joseph LeDoux suggests.¹³ Daunting as the challenge may be, would it not be grand if this new theory also added to our understanding of knowing what to fear and what not to fear, even if this understanding is contrary to the dispositions presently embedded or programmed into the neural system by evolution?

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¹³ Joseph LeDoux, *The Emotional Brain: The Mysterious Underpinnings of Emotional Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), 128.