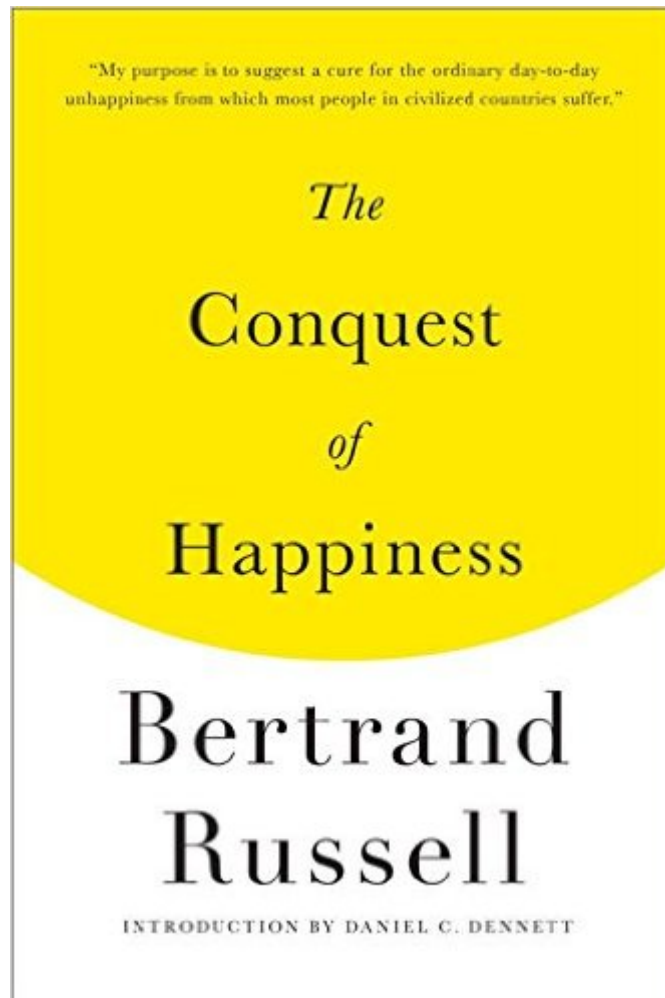


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The Conquest Of Happiness



Synopsis

• Should be read by every parent, teacher, minister, and Congressman in the land. • The Atlantic In The Conquest of Happiness, first published by Liveright in 1930, iconoclastic philosopher Bertrand Russell attempted to diagnose the myriad causes of unhappiness in modern life and chart a path out of the seemingly inescapable malaise so prevalent even in safe and prosperous Western societies. More than eighty years later, Russell's wisdom remains as true as it was on its initial release. Eschewing guilt-based morality, Russell lays out a rationalist prescription for living a happy life, including the importance of cultivating interests outside oneself and the dangers of passive pleasure. In this new edition, best-selling philosopher Daniel C. Dennett reintroduces Russell to a new generation, stating that Conquest is both a fascinating time capsule and 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. •

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Customer Reviews

Bertrand Russell's Conquest of Happiness provides a lucid commentary on the causes of happiness and unhappiness. Though it was written in 1930, its material is still relevant today. Russell writes in a clear, authoritative voice; he indulges in detailed explorations of each scenario he presents, fleshing out each possibility and presenting insights for the reader.

Bertrand Arthur William Russell (1872-1970) was an influential British philosopher, logician, mathematician, and political activist. In 1950, he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature, in

recognition of his many books such as *A History of Western Philosophy*, *The Problems of Philosophy*, *The Philosophy of Logical Atomism*, *The Analysis of Mind*, *Our Knowledge of the External World*, *Human Knowledge: Its Scope and Limits*, *Mysticism and Logic*, etc. [NOTE: page numbers below refer to the 249-page hardcover edition.] He wrote in the Preface to this 1930 book, "This book is not addressed to highbrows, or to those who regard a practical problem merely as something to be talked about. No profound philosophy or deep erudition will be found in the following pages. I have aimed only at putting together some remarks which are inspired by what I hope is common sense. All that I claim for the recipes offered to the reader is that they are such as are confirmed by my own experience and observation, and that they have increased my own happiness whenever I have acted in accordance with them." It is in the belief that many people who are unhappy could become happy by well-directed effort that I have written this book. He observes in the chapter, "What Makes People Unhappy?" that "The psychological causes of unhappiness are many and various. But all have something in common. The typical unhappy man is one who, having been deprived in youth of some normal satisfaction more than any other, has come to value this one kind of satisfaction more than any other, and has therefore given his life a one-sided direction." There is, however, a further development which is very common in the present day. A man may feel so completely thwarted that he seeks no form of satisfaction, but only distraction and oblivion. He then becomes a devotee of "pleasure." That is to say, he seeks to make life bearable by becoming less alive. Drunkenness, for example, is temporary suicide; the man who seeks intoxication has given up hope except in oblivion. (Pg. 23-24) In the chapter on "Boredom and Excitement," he notes, "Boredom as a factor in human behavior has received, in my opinion, far less attention than it deserves. It has been, I believe, one of the great motive powers throughout the historical epoch." Boredom would seem to be a distinctively human emotion. (Pg. 56) He continues, "We are less bored than our ancestors were, but we are more afraid of boredom. We have come to believe, that boredom is not part of the natural lot of man, but can be avoided by a sufficiently vigorous pursuit of excitement. Girls nowadays earn their own living and every housemaid expects at least once a week as much excitement as would have lasted a Jane Austen heroine throughout a whole novel." (Pg. 59) In the chapter "The Sense of Sin," he suggests, "But even when a man has offended against his own rational code, I doubt whether a sense of sin is the best method of arriving at a better way of life. There is in the sense of sin something abject, something lacking in self-respect. No good was ever done to anyone by the loss of self-respect. The rational man will

regard his own undesirable acts as acts produced by certain circumstances, and to be avoided either by a full realization that they are undesirable, or, where this is possible, by avoidance of the circumstances that caused them. (Pg. 105) In "Fear of Public Opinion," he states, "Fear of public opinion, like every other form of fear, is oppressive and stunts growth. It is difficult to achieve any kind of 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." (Pg. 138-139) In the chapter on "Affection," he asserts, "In sex relations there is very often almost nothing that can be called real affection, not infrequently there is even a fundamental hostility. Each is trying not to give himself or herself away, each is preserving fundamental loneliness, and each remains intact and therefore unfructified. In such experiences there is no fundamental value; the only sex relations that have real value are those in which there is no reticence and in which the whole personality of both becomes merged in a new collective personality. Of all forms of caution, caution in love is perhaps most fatal to true happiness." (Pg. 186) In the chapter on "Impersonal Interests," he points out, "Each of us is in the world for no very long time, and within the few years of his life has to acquire whatever he is to know of this strange planet and its place in the universe. To ignore our opportunities for knowledge, imperfect as they are, is like going to the theater and not listening to the play. The world is full of things that are tragic or comic, heroic or bizarre or surprising, and those who fail to be interested in the spectacle that it offers are forgoing one of the privileges that life has to offer." (Pg. 224) In the final chapter, he concludes, "The happy man is the man who does not suffer from either of these failures of unity, whose personality is neither against itself nor pitted against the world. Such a man feels himself a citizen of the universe, enjoying freely the spectacle that it offers and the joys that it affords, untroubled by the thought of death because he feels himself not really separate from those who will come after him. It is in such profound instinctive union with the stream of life that the greatest joy is to be found." (Pg. 249) Russell referred to his "popular" books written during this period as "potboilers" [they were written to support his family while he was running a progressive school]; but they are still charming examples of his fine writing style, and are enjoyable in themselves.

It is beyond belief how under-appreciated this book is. As a reviewer said, this book should be regarded as modern day bible. I have truly learned so much from the brilliant brilliant Bertrand

Russell.

Did not want to put it down. It was such a great read and in-depth learning. Russell's flow of knowledge with a way of NOT over doing it with losing you in thought and taking you on a philosophical adventure is brilliant and polite. Although written around the beginning of the 20th century, relevancy still holds its ground in 95% of the book with today's unhappiness ways of life. I suggest this book for anyone looking for a good read, to be enlightened and to obtain a better understanding of what does and does not make you happy. You think you know, but then you re-examine ;)

The smartest book on happiness we have ever read. Warning, though: this fine drink of aged wine has its floating pieces of cork. What we mean is that Russell, unfortunately, had a number of sexist views that were part of his culture and from which he didn't quite extricate himself totally. So be prepared for these small and occasional passages. But please don't toss the wine just because of the easily extractible cork pieces.

One of the best insights of Russell's book: "Of all the characteristics of ordinary human nature, envy is the most unfortunate; not only does the envious person wish to inflict misfortune and to do so wherever he can with impunity, but he is also himself rendered unhappy by envy. Instead of deriving pleasure from what he has, he derives pain from what others have. If he can, he deprives others of their advantages, which to him is as desirable as it would be to secure the same advantages himself." Ever since reading that quote from Russell's book, and after consciously making countless observations about how people think and behave, I agree that envy is one of the biggest causes of unhappiness (another is lacking of a sense of meaning in one's life). Russell's book demonstrates that not all insights into human life were discovered in the last decade. There are timeless observations about human behavior, thoughts, and emotions.

I can only wish I had read this book a few decades earlier, although I still benefited from reading it now. I just ordered two copies for my sons, one of whom is also a mathematician, like Russell. Hope they will read the book, as it will definitely help them in life.

Russell was a boss, and is always a joy to read. He pulls no punches and this book is full of straightforward thought, opinion, and advice. Don't let the date fool you, this book still has much to

offer modern readers.

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