

Russell, Bertrand. “What I Believe” in *The Basic Writings of Bertrand Russell*. Edited by Robert E. Egner and Lester E. Dennon. New York: Routledge, 2009.

Bertrand Russell (1872-1970) worked as a British philosopher and mathematician and social critic. Russell was one of the founders of analytic philosophy (along with Frege and G. E. Moore). Ludwig Wittgenstein studied under Russell. Russell wrote *Principia Mathematica* with Alfred N. Whitehead. Britain jailed Russell during World War I for his anti-militarist pacifism. In 1950, Russell won the Nobel Prize for Literature. Russell published *What I Believe* as a separate book in 1925. In 1940, this essay was marshaled as evidence in proceedings the aim of which was to prove Russell unfit to teach at City College of New York.

‘What I Believe’

- I. **Nature and Man.** Man is part of nature. The universe consists in very small bits of matter, each moving as prescribed by knowable rules. Physical science comes near its end, for soon all will be known about particle movements. The rest is just details. Human mental phenomena are chemical, which makes them ultimately the motions of protons and electrons. The existence of gods lies beyond human capacities, and so remains indeterminate. It is plain the brain ceases function upon death, and that thought depends upon brain function. So, death probably terminates the mental life of each individual, though this probability is no more or less certain than those probabilities supporting most scientific conclusions. Russell takes the idea that body and mind are disparate sorts of entities to be a metaphysical fiction. What is ultimate is the series of events that define the history of ultimate particles. Ultimate particles (electrons and protons) are histories, not persistent entities. Souls grow with bodies, and so are not immortal. The very idea of immortality leaps from human fear of death. Religion emerges from fear of nature. Fear governs so much of human life. Religion tames nature as immortality tames death. Both breach the line on the far side of which we have no control whatsoever. All fear injures its victims. We would do better to face our mortality and recognize that nature exceeds our control. There lies dignity in facing these truths squarely. What we want has nothing to do with what is. The former concerns ethics, the latter science. In the philosophy of nature, man is a parasite on a small planet in a corner of the Milky Way. The universe has no interest in human happiness or misery. A little astronomy proves this. But in ethics, man rules. What he wants is the core subject. Nature is a bit player in ethics; man is the sole arbiter. Man determines what is good. Nature, even when conceived as a god, has nothing to say.

- II. **The Good Life.** Peoples differ as to what constitutes the good life. Some such issues are indemonstrable. Russell takes his view of the good life to be one such. In Russell’s view, love inspires and knowledge guides the good life. Either alone is insufficient. Love is more fundamental, since love leads one to seek knowledge by which to benefit the one loved. Love is an emotion of delight in and well-wishing toward another. Civilization should tame our animality, not replace it. Our drives keep life interesting. We can delight in only a relatively small number of persons. But one should never surrender delight wholly to more generalized benevolence. That is where knowledge helps. Knowledge is knowledge of facts and probable consequences of courses of action; no strictly “ethical knowledge” exists. We must experimentally test our morality to learn whether its strictures lead us to the goals we desire. “Oughtness” is not our desire; it is some else’s desire imposed upon us, often with rewards and punishments attached. The power of such thoughts lies in the approval and disapproval they bear with them. Approval and disapproval should be meted out to achieve purposes we desire. One cannot coerce others effectively; it is impossible. But one can alter the calculations they make by imposing rewards and punishments and approval and disapproval. Human desire is the moral compass. Ethics is merely science plus desire. To live in love guided by knowledge is to say: I desire to live as and among others whose actions cause more, rather than fewer, desires to be satisfied.

- III. **Moral Rules.** Moral rules arbitrate the conflict of human desires between people, and within people. One needs prudence in his good life, turning the mind to consequences and distant results. Societies smooth interpersonal conflict in two manners. First, societies impose criminal punishments and social censure to induce people to impact or avoid impacting others in specific ways. Second, societies change the character and desires of men in such a manner as to minimize their conflicting desire by teaching them to cooperate. Superstitions are the primary source of moral rules. A lesser source is utilitarian calculations. Often these superstitions concern how gods will respond if one undertakes certain acts. These prohibitions are often arbitrary and based in wrong-headed science. They usually inflict senseless suffering on others. For example, overpopulation grows from religious rules about sexual conduct. Economic disparities savage poor children. Later education extinguishes in those who do think any further desire to think, replacing that tendency with emotionalism and fractured judgment. The morality taught punishes acts that harm no one, and encourages harmful acts. They fail to teach sexuality. Education should teach mutual respect, that jealousy erodes affection, that a child needs parental care and some financial support, and birth control, so all children born are wanted. Also, everyone needs to know how to avoid venereal disease. Sex (where there are no children forthcoming) is the concern of no one beyond the persons involved. Divorce should not be proscribed, but allowed. We must change rules that lead to greater unhappiness. Nationalism, like religion, encourages us to act short of love. We can love beyond borders. In criminal punishment, we suffer religious confusion. Criminals must be restrained for the common good, but they need not be punished. Rather, we should employ the means of changing their behavior that is least onerous to the criminal.
- IV. **Salvation: Individual and Social.** Traditional religion, especially Christianity, teaches individual salvation, with grave neglect of corporate and social concerns. We need greater emphasis on our communal relations, as one finds in Plato's thought. One cannot live the good life, guided by love and knowledge, without a host of social conditions precedent: food, trade, scientific investigations, and so forth. Without these many supports, the good life proves impossible. Those asserting otherwise recommend individualism that renders people mere parasites. The good life requires a good society in which to dwell, one that provides education, friends, children (if desired), money, health, and interesting work. Absent these, the good life proves elusive. Aristocracy impairs the good life by teaching that some deserve no good life; aristocrats are sympathy-stunted. Christian salvation also emphasizes abrupt changes of heart. Such leads to faith in revolutions, which always disappoint. The only path to the good life is patient encouragement of knowledge well-employed, self-restraint, and common feeling for others. Revolutions are spasms of impatience.
- V. **Science and Happiness.** Moralists seek to improve human choices by exhortation and schemes of rewards and punishments. Most moralists fail to notice that exhortation does not work, and the outcomes of their economic recompenses disappoint. Every person harbors malevolence toward some others. This malevolence is the primary cause of unhappiness and war. Beneath malevolence lies fear, always directed at some outsider or outside influence. The scientific moralist combats primal fear by improving security and fostering courage. To live good lives, men must be dominated by hope. One diminishes fear by a regime that recognizes the claims of all humans equally. One increases courage by good health and education. Courage is more than facing battles. Every daunting challenge calls forth courage. Malevolence starts often in fear, but may also arise from envy or disappointment. One addresses envy by improving the life of the envious and encouraging collaboration over competition. All these defects of character mount toward collective defeat. We must combat them. One must also scientifically seek to augment excellence. Our health improves; one expects great strides in health improvements to come. Wise use of science might improve the human condition remarkably. Some fear science as "unnatural." Lao-Tze made nature the Way, and Rousseau agreed. But nature is equivocal, most often a recapitulation of conditions prevailing in one's childhood. What is new is only new for a short time. A scientist is constrained by nature only to the extent that he exercises caution in introducing innovations.

One ought not to make people's lives unnatural in a manner that counters their vital impulses. Work should not be grinding routine. Where a habit injures no others, it should be permitted. The linen of happiness is woven from the thread of human desires and impulses. Physical nature has no morality; it should be tamed wherever possible to human benefit. We need not tolerate overpopulation; it is only one among many human desires that can be modified. Humans have already begun to make of their physical selves what they prefer. Thus, human nature is malleable. We can teach our grandchildren to be more knowledgeable, temperate, and cooperative than are we. Science presently teaches men how better to kill one another. When it has taught us how to control human passions, we win our perpetual freedom.