

Discussion

Russell's happiness paradox

by Marvin Kohl

PROFESSOR KENNY, in his able and important paper on happiness,¹ argues, among other things, that "it is perfectly possible not to have as a goal the satisfaction of all one's desires, and indeed positively to hope that not all one's desires will be satisfied." Kenny quotes Russell who, in *The Conquest of Happiness*, says that "to be without some of the things you want is an indispensable part of happiness",² and concludes that "in so far as Russell wants to be happy, he must, in conformity with his dictum, want to be without some of the things he wants." Kenny then suggests that wanting to be without some of the things one wants may involve a kind of inconsistency, one akin to what logicians call ω -inconsistency.

Unfortunately Kenny's examples of ω -inconsistency are far from clear. If, as he urges, this sort of inconsistency is illustrated by the sentence "he was wearing a glove on one hand, and he was not wearing a glove on his left hand, and he was not wearing a glove on his right hand", then it is difficult to understand how Russell's purported claim is inconsistent. Admittedly if someone has only two hands, neither of which is covered by a glove, then it is contradictory to say this and also say that the same individual is wearing a glove on one hand. But it is another matter when it comes to volition. For example, I may be able to eat and not to eat cheesecake for lunch today. Yet nothing much seems to be amiss if, for different reasons, I want and do not want to eat that piece of cake. For unlike complementary terms, the expression of conflating wants does not necessarily result in a net sum of zero information.

Nor is it clear that Russell is actually saying what Kenny thinks he is. What he does say is that

the human animal, like others, is adapted to a certain amount of struggle for life, and when by means of great wealth *homo sapiens* can gratify all his whims without effort, the mere absence of effort from his life removes an essential element of happiness. The man who acquires easily things for which he feels only a very modest desire concludes that the attainment of desires does not bring happiness. If he is of a philosophical disposition, he concludes that human life is essentially wretched, since the man who has all he wants is still unhappy. He forgets that to be without some of the things you want is an indispensable part of happiness.³

This Kenny interprets to mean that Russell is committed to saying that "I want to be without some of the things I want". But why so? Why such a strong claim? If we must leap into "first-person" talk, then is it not closer to the letter of the passage to say that Russell only seems to be committed to saying that "I want it to be that there is something I do not have but want to have"? In other words: to say that "there is something I want to have and want not to have" is neither necessarily nor (I believe) typically a contradiction, and still less so is Russell's more probable claim that "I want it to be that there is something I do not have but want to have."⁴

But suppose Russell really intended to say or actually said that "we should not want to satisfy all our wants". Even if this were true, it still doesn't follow that the sentence involves an inconsistency. For the word "want" could here be used in two different ways: in the active sense of "actually desiring" and, then, in the more passive sense of "having an ultimate interest". Thus Russell might be interpreted as saying that "to be without some of the things you have an ultimate interest in is an indispensable part of happiness." This interpretation lacks dash and generates a different set of problems, but it does seem to avoid the paradox.

Another, perhaps more plausible, solution is to distinguish between first- and second-order volitions and say something along the following lines. Not every want is a first-order one, that is, a desire to do or not to do one thing or another. There seem to be second-order wants, that is, wants which attempt to regulate first-order ones. For example, I may want to satisfy all my desires. But since I know that men suffer from boredom and that human welfare must include some degree of stimulation and challenge, and further know that happiness requires having important unrealized life ends, I also choose to be without some of the

¹ Anthony Kenny, "Happiness", *Moral Concepts*, ed. Joel Feinberg (London: Oxford U.P., 1969), p. 45.

² Bertrand Russell, *The Conquest of Happiness* (New York: Liveright, 1930), p. 29.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 28–9.

⁴ I am indebted to Christopher Kirwan for the heart of this point.

things I want. This may make life much more complex, and happiness (in the sense of satisfaction of desire) always beyond my reach, but it seems neither to involve an inconsistency nor to close the door on having a relatively successful and full life.

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