

ABSTRACT. It is common for Bertrand Russell's admirers to repeat his many quips about other people's lack of good sense, for example, "most people would die sooner than think – in fact, they do so."¹ But it is less common for them to assert that this view is one of Russell's fundamental assumptions about human nature and at the core of his serious moral, social, and political thought. This essay aims to show that this expressed scepticism about human reason is indeed a core assumption of Russell's public philosophy throughout his life. Even if one accepts this, however, one can still ask: "But is it true?" It will be argued that there is much support for Russell's view of human reason in recent psychological literature. Examples of how this assumption affects Russell's social and political thought are indicated.

1. KEYNES AND RUSSELL

The economist John Maynard Keynes once said of his Cambridge friends – including the philosophers Bertrand Russell and G. E. Moore – about their beliefs before World War I, that while their conversations had all been bright, amusing and clever, there had been "no solid diagnosis of human nature underlying them." His friends, he claimed, had believed that the human race "consists of reliable, rational, decent people, influenced by truth and objective standards," failing to see that there were "insane and irrational springs of wickedness" in people. Keynes thought this view was naïve. "Bertie in particular," Keynes said of 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" (Keynes, *Two Memoirs*, 1946, pp.99-103).

But how fair is this to Russell? In fact, Russell seems to have held a decidedly less-than-rosy view of human nature early on, one which saw people as neither rational nor decent. It's not just human affairs that he thought irrational; he thought *people* are irrational, and he seemed to think that we're never likely to change. Moreover, Russell's view of human reason is one confirmed by recent research in psychology. In what is called *cognitive dissonance theory*, psychologists today maintain that we tend to avoid uncomfortable truths by replacing them in our minds with more comforting fictions. This was Russell's view of human nature as well.

2. RUSSELL, 1908

Cognitive dissonance theory is the view that people feel uncomfortable holding inconsistent beliefs, especially about themselves, and that to dispel the inconsistency and the accompanying discomfort they will modify their beliefs even to the point of adopting false ones. For example, most of us like to think of ourselves as decent people. If we treat someone shabbily, that will conflict with our self-image, so we typically rationalize such actions, say, by deciding that the person we mistreated is a bad person and deserved the shabby treatment; in fact, we were really standing up to this bad person and so doing the right thing. This is not particularly rational

* An earlier version of this essay appeared in *Philosophy Now* no. 120 (June/July 2017).

¹ The complete and correct quote is "We all have a tendency to think that the world must conform to our prejudices. The opposite view involves some effort of thought, and most people would die sooner than think – in fact, they do so." (*The ABC of Relativity*, 1925)

behavior, but it makes us feel better. Nor are such rationalizations intentional. We almost always believe them – usually with great conviction.

Psychologists began studying this idea experimentally and accumulating evidence for it in the 1950s. But one can find Russell asserting the same idea as early as 1908, and continuing to use it throughout his life. For example, in a March 1908 letter from Russell to Lucy Donnelly, when Russell was preparing the final draft of the three volume *Principia Mathematica* for the printer, he wrote:

“Since September, I have written about 2,400 pages of the MS of our book, and I am still only in the third of eight parts. I suspect that we shall both die before anyone reads it through, but people will read bits, and they will have to praise it, for the same reasons for which people praise *Clarissa Harlowe*, because otherwise they would have been wasting their time” (*The Collected Papers of Bertrand Russell*, vol. 6, 1992, p. xiv. *Clarissa Harlowe* is said to be the longest novel in English).

Just as people tend not to acknowledge that they treated someone shabbily, they won't want to admit that they'd been wasting their time reading *Principia Mathematica*, Russell says, so to justify the expenditure of time they will claim (and believe) that the book is a great one.

Note that cognitive dissonance theory diverges from behaviorism in such cases. Behaviorism predicts that if you reward someone for certain behavior, they will repeat it, punish them, and they will avoid it. Release dog food when the dog presses a lever, and it will press the lever again; shock it when it presses the lever, and it will avoid pressing it again. But dissonance theory, like Russell in the letter to Donnelly, predicts that in certain cases, for example, when people experience discomfort to achieve something, they will value it more highly, to justify the effort, than if they had gotten it without a struggle. Fraternity hazing rituals and army boot camp are based on this principle.

In 1959, to test this theory, students at Stanford were invited to join a discussion group about sex; but first they had to pass an “embarrassment test,” ostensibly to insure that they weren't too embarrassed about discussing sex to participate in the group. Some were given a very embarrassing test, others a mild one, still others – the control group – none. Afterwards, the subjects listened to a tape of the discussion group that was calculated to be boring, and were then asked to rate what they had heard on the tape for “attractiveness”: dull to interesting, unintelligent to intelligent. Those who had undergone the embarrassing test rated the group's attractiveness much higher than those in the mild test group or the control group. Dissonance theory predicts these results, behaviorism does not (Aronson and Mills, 1959, “The Effect of Severity of Initiation on Liking for a Group,” *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 59).

Appeals to cognitive dissonance, besides Russell's, can be found in other written works as early as Russell's use of it, and even earlier. For example, Benjamin Franklin, in his *Autobiography*, refers to the old maxim that “He that has once done you a kindness will be more ready to do you another than he whom you yourself have obliged.” The idea may well have been a standard one long before it was taken up as a subject of empirical study by psychologists in the middle of the twentieth century.

3. RUSSELL, 1910

Further uses of cognitive dissonance in Russell's early writings can be found in his 1910 pamphlet *Anti-Suffragist Anxieties*, which is an extended argument that women should be given the right to vote. In the pamphlet, Russell points to a problem that arises whenever one group has power over another, namely, "To inflict a special disability upon one class in the community is in itself an evil, and is calculated to generate resentment on one side and arrogance on the other." In other words, for men to have the vote and yet deny it to women it creates resentment among women and arrogance among men.

The arrogance Russell refers to here is what is called a "ruling class fiction" – it is the self-justification a dominant class makes to be comfortable about mistreating another group. Typically, they rationalize their dominance by asserting that the subordinate group is not competent to rule society, while the dominant class is. And while the fact that power is withheld from one group by another is itself unjust, there is in such cases, Russell says, an even greater injustice which also requires rationalizing, namely, that the dominant class is unlikely to pursue the interests of a subject class, but only its own. For example, Russell asserts this when he says, "from defect of imagination and good will no class can be trusted to care adequately for the interests of another class, and ... in fact women's interests have been unduly neglected by men."

The idea of a ruling class fiction is a common one among political scientists and historians. For example, Robert Dahl, dean of American political scientists throughout the second half of the twentieth century, asserted that heads of non-democratic regimes

"have usually tried to justify their rule by invoking the ancient and persistent claim that most people are just not competent to participate in governing a state. Most people would be better off, this argument goes, if they would only leave the complicated business of governing to those wiser than they – a minority at most, perhaps only one person. In practice, these rationalizations were never quite enough, so where argument left off coercion took over" (*On Democracy*, 1998).

John Stuart Mill, Russell's godfather, expressed these same ideas 49 years earlier than Russell, in his 1861 book on representative government. In that work, he wrote:

"Does Parliament, or almost any of the members composing it, ever for an instant look at any question with the eyes of a workingman? When a subject arises in which the laborers as such have an interest, is it regarded from any point of view but that of the employers of labor?" The answer? "Until [they have the vote], the working classes, with however good intentions on the part of the Legislature, will never obtain complete justice...." (John Stuart Mill, *Considerations of Representative Government*, 1861).

We will see a few more examples of this idea when we get to Russell 1953.

To sum up, a ruling class must rationalize its dominance of another group in order to think well of itself and avoid acknowledging that its dominance is not in the interest of the other group. This rationalization is the ruling class fiction, and it is a form of arrogance because it will assert in some way that "we are better than them, and they are not competent to govern themselves or others,

while we are.” In each case, self-justification is driven by a desire to avoid the dissonance caused by the need to think well of yourself on the one hand and the knowledge that you are mistreating people on the other.

4. RUSSELL, 1919

Another way of describing dissonance theory is to say that we frequently do not form our beliefs on the basis of good evidence, but rather, that we are all self-justifiers – we see what we want to see and believe what we want to believe, and we don’t want to see or believe anything that makes us feel uncomfortable about ourselves. Russell develops the same view in a comprehensive theory of human nature in his 1919 essay ‘Dreams and Facts’, which begins:

“The influence of our wishes upon our beliefs is a matter of common knowledge and observation, yet the nature of this influence is very generally misconceived. It is customary to suppose that the bulk of our beliefs are derived from some rational ground, and that desire is only an occasional disturbing force. The exact opposite of this would be nearer the truth: the great mass of beliefs by which we are supported in our daily life is merely the bodying forth of desire, corrected here and there, at isolated points, by the rude shock of fact. Man is essentially a dreamer, wakened sometimes for a moment by some peculiarly obtrusive element in the outer world, but lapsing again quickly into the happy somnolence of imagination. Freud has shown how largely our dreams at night are the pictured fulfilment of our wishes; he has, with an equal measure of truth, said the same of day-dreams; and he might have included the day-dreams which we call beliefs.”

And in general, Russell asserts of people that “every man, wherever he goes, is encompassed by a cloud of comforting convictions, which move with him like flies on a summer day.”

Russell then gives examples of convictions people carry around in order to avoid uncomfortable thoughts. Here is one of his examples:

“There can be no doubt that, in the autumn of 1914, the immense majority of the German nation felt absolutely certain of victory for Germany. In this case fact has intruded and dispelled the dream. But if, by some means, all non-German historians could be prevented from writing during the next hundred years, the dream would reinstate itself: the early triumphs would be remembered, while the ultimate disaster would be forgotten.”

If we cannot justify an uncomfortable belief to our satisfaction, we simply erase it from memory, or at least avoid thinking about it as much as possible. This is called *willed ignorance*. It is similar to the phenomenon discussed in section 3, where a dominant class cannot see the interests of a subordinate group, or even that they mistreat that group. We will run into it again in section 6.

In another example, Russell says: “Voluntary workers in a contested election always believe that their side will win, no matter what reason there may be for expecting defeat.” And after these examples, Russell describes whole hierarchies of self-justifications that people make to avoid mental discomfort – of personal beliefs, beliefs about one’s family, about one’s class, one’s nation, and humanity in general (as opposed to the rest of creation).

To return to the example of the Germans and their defeat, one might wonder: Is it really true that if German historians alone wrote histories of the Great War, they would have described the victories and forgotten the defeat? Can a nation really believe it is a mighty military force headed for victory against a puny enemy, lose the war, and then ignore, forget, or otherwise rationalize the loss, and continue thinking that it is mightier than its enemy, or even that it really won the war, or would have won it except for some unusual circumstance, say, a 'stab in the back'? By way of an answer, let us look again at psychological research on cognitive dissonance.

So far, only one experiment with cognitive dissonance has been described, and that was a canned ('in vitro') laboratory experiment with college students. But does it actually work that way in the real world? Interestingly, the first scientific study of dissonance theory was a real-world social psychology case study by Leon Festinger. In 1954, Festinger and his colleagues infiltrated a religious cult led by a charismatic woman who claimed to have had visions that the world would soon end (in a great flood), but that the cult's members would be picked up by flying saucers beforehand and saved. On the assumption that she was wrong, Festinger used dissonance theory to predict that group members would rationalize their error when the prophecy failed and even deny that they had been wrong.

As the day of destruction approached, some cult members quit their jobs and gave away their possessions – they wouldn't need them in outer space – but others did not go so far. As the reader may have guessed, on the eve of the fateful day no spaceship arrived to pick them up. At first the cult's members were very worried, but then their leader had a new vision – that due to the impressive faith of the group, God had decided to spare the world. The group's members were elated, and many became even more active in proselytizing for it than before. In particular, those who had suffered most, by quitting their jobs and getting rid of their possessions, were more active than before in the group after the initial prophecy's failure, while those who had been less committed and kept their jobs and possessions ceased to believe and drifted away, just as dissonance theory would predict (Festinger, Riecken, Schachter, *When Prophecy Fails*, 1956; recounted in Tavis and Aronson, *Mistakes Were Made*, 2007). In a similar way, a group of people can ignore the fact that they lost a war.

5. RUSSELL, 1923-1946

After 'Dreams and Facts', examples of self-justification in response to uncomfortable feelings abound in Russell's writings. In fact, from 1919 on he takes it for granted that humans justify nearly every questionable thing they do. How persistent is our will to be unreasonable? About this, Russell says in his 1923 essay 'Can Men Be Rational?': "The bias produced by such causes [as irrational desires] falsifies men's judgments as to facts in ways that are very hard to avoid." In other words (because it is "very hard to avoid"), don't count on people giving up biased thinking soon.

It needs to be said that Russell held pessimistic views about human nature besides the belief that people are irrational self-justifiers – he also believed, for example, that people enjoy persecuting other people. For example, the pleasure people take at war, along with their rationalizations to justify it, especially by demonizing those on the other side, was, after his experiences as a pacifist during WWI, something Russell believed all his life. We will see examples of this and other negative views he held about human nature intertwined with his view that people are typically

self-justifiers, but in this essay, we are only concerned to follow the thread about self-justification through his work.

In any case, in addition to thinking that people are not particularly scrupulous about the truth when the truth makes them feel uncomfortable, Russell also thinks that people are not particularly nice to one another. Unsurprisingly, then, he frequently asserts that conventional morality is often just a cover-up and justification for bad human impulses and behavior, as in his 1925 small book *What I Believe*, where he writes:

“In the ordinary man and woman there is a certain amount of active malevolence, both special ill will directed to particular enemies and general impersonal pleasure in the misfortune of others. It is customary to cover this over with fine phrases; almost half of conventional morality is a cloak for it.”

Russell continues with examples of the malevolence we use morality to justify. They include

“the glee with which people repeat and believe scandal... the unkind treatment of criminals in spite of clear proof that better treatment would have more effect in reforming them... the unbelievable barbarity with which white races treat Negroes, and... the gusto with which old ladies and clergymen pointed out the duty of military service to young men during the War” (reprinted in *Why I Am Not a Christian*, 1957).

Russell also finds moral cover-up and self-justification working together in education. For example, in 1926 he writes:

“The essence of education is that it is a change (other than death) effected in an organism to satisfy the desires of the operator. Of course the operator says that his desire is to improve the pupil, but this statement does not represent any objectively verifiable fact” (‘Psychology and Politics’; reprinted in *Sceptical Essays*, 1928).

And in 1932, adding the rationalization of bad behavior to education, he says:

“The elements of good citizenship that are emphasized in schools and universities are the worst elements and not the best... citizenship, as generally taught, perpetuates traditional injustices... Wherever an injustice exists, it is possible to invoke the ideal of legality and constitutionality in its support” (*Education and the Social Order*, 1932).

Here are two more examples from Russell’s later writings of the assertion that conventional morality is a cover-up and frequently less than rational (both reprinted in *Unpopular Essays*, 1950). In 1937 we see him saying, “One of the persistent delusions of mankind is that some sections of the human race are morally better or morally worse than others” (‘The Superior Virtue of the Oppressed’). And in 1946, in the essay ‘Ideas That Have Harmed Mankind’, he asserts: “I think that the evils that men inflict on each other, and by reflection on themselves, have their main source in evil passions rather than in ideas or beliefs. but ideas and principles that do harm are, as a rule, though not always, cloaks for evil passions.” And so on. Russell’s assumption of human intellectual dishonesty stretches across his entire career.

6. RUSSELL, 1953

In a last example, we find Russell saying in 1953 essentially what he asserted 1910 about the self-justifying behavior of dominant classes, but here more forcefully:

“Holders of power, always and everywhere, are indifferent to the good or evil of those who have no power, except in so far as they are restrained by fear. This may sound too harsh a saying. It may be said that decent people will not inflict torture on others beyond a point. This may be said, but history shows that it is not true. The decent people in question succeed in not knowing, or pretending not to know, what torments are inflicted to make them happy” (‘What Is Democracy?’ 1953; reprinted in *Fact and Fiction*, 1961).

Again, this situation is like the case where one person mistreats another and rationalizes the act, only here we have group self-deception, where one group mistreating another group, with the dominant group creating what we have called a ‘ruling class fiction’ to avoid the discomfort that recognizing its own injustice would cause it.

As noted in section 3, in addition to being an excuse for mistreating the subject people, a ruling class fiction typically includes a rationalization that the subjects were actually being treated well, or at least were not mistreated, by the ruling class. Any sort of excuse for ignoring or not knowing of one’s own injustices is *willed ignorance*, that is, desired ignorance, even if it is not consciously desired or chosen. The passage by Russell above describes willed ignorance.

Russell asserted this last example of self-deception in a 1953 publication, one year before Leon Festinger launched the field of psychology on a long investigation of its properties. Ten years later, in 1963, the African-American author, James Baldwin made good use of the same idea in his famous essay “Letter to a Nephew.” In it, Baldwin is telling his nephew what it will be like for him (the nephew) to be a talented African-American in the United States, saying, in part,

“This is the crime of which I accuse my country and my countrymen, and for which neither I nor time nor history will forgive them, that they have destroyed and are destroying hundreds of thousands of lives and do not know it and do not want to know it ... it is their innocence that constitutes the crime....”²

“Innocence” is often used as a synonym for *willed ignorance*. You are especially likely to encounter the idea expressed using this term in literary studies.

7. CONCLUSIONS

We began with the view of John Maynard Keynes – that before World War I, Russell, along with others at Cambridge, overestimated the degree to which people are rational. Based on the passages by Russell quoted above, however, one might think instead that throughout his life Russell overstated the degree to which people are *irrational*. But as has at least been suggested

² To read the rest of the passage from which this quote was taken in a tightly, well-edited version, see the last page of Michelle Alexander’s book, *The New Jim Crow*. Or read the entire essay in Baldwin’s 1963 book *The Fire Next Time*.

with a few examples psychological research, current psychology seems to support a third view – that Russell had it just about right.

So far we have seen that throughout his life Russell thought that people are likely to be irrational in many kinds of situations. But did Russell really think that people are unlikely to ever change? Yes. In the situations described above, Russell thinks that people are likely to be irrational. It follows that, in the same situations, he thinks people are unlikely to be rational.

8. BROADER HORIZONS

a. The principal aim of this essay has been to show that Russell held a certain view of human nature – that human beings are, for the most part, self-justifiers, and hence, in many important matters, not particularly rational – throughout his life, and not just in 1919 when he wrote “Dreams and Facts.” The essay does establish that point.

b. More than this, the essay shows a variety of ways in which Russell applied the view that people tend to rationalize their thoughts, assertions, and actions in order to justify them: people do this, he says, when they value something more if they had gone to some trouble to get it than if it had come to them easily, when they explain away the harm they had done someone by moralizing their actions, that is, by saying it was for the good of the other person when it was really only good for themselves, and in groups, when they always argue for the superiority of their own group over others, and especially, when one’s own group dominates another group and justifies its domination of it as somehow in the best interest of the other group, and when it turns out that the dominant group only acts in its own self-interest and yet it fails to see this, even failing to see it when they harm the other group.

c. It was further argued that Russell’s view is supported by much recent research in psychology, and so seems to be true.

d. It was also suggested that there has been a tradition of people holding this view in the past, before it became a subject of empirical study by psychologists. The essay thus contributes one data point, Russell, to any future study of the various people in the past who have maintained this view and the history of influences between them, and it has suggested a few other people who probably belonged to this tradition as well, if there ever was such a tradition (Benjamin Franklin, John Stuart Mill, James Baldwin, Robert Dahl).

e. I suppose it was noticed that the author of this essay himself seems to think that the view of human nature described in detail here has some merit to it, and that the recent studies of it by psychologists are significant evidence in its favor. This assumes that the research alluded to is itself reliable. This is in fact my view, but more generally, it seems that there are a number of different areas in psychology that have, in the past few decades, become better and more serious, that there are areas of psychology today that are more reliable and robust than psychology has previously been, and that this more reliable and robust new work is being used to build upon and produce other reliable work. In other words, some areas of recent psychology seem to be moving away from being an immature science towards being a mature one.

If this is the case and areas of psychology are better than any previous work in the field, there are several questions that must immediately arise for historians and philosophers of science, for example, which areas of psychology, and perhaps other social sciences, are more reliable and better developed than before, and which are not. Also, one might ask if these areas are more reliable than past psychology, how much better are they, that is, how much like a mature science are they and how much further in that direction must they go to be what might fairly be called “mature” and if so, whether or not they are mature in the way described by Thomas Kuhn for physics or whether they show new and different features of what a mature science can be like.

f. And if such is the case, that is, if psychology is significantly better than before, we can say that for practical purposes, this might be a good time to begin replacing all of the 18th and 19th century psychology that is intertwined with philosophy and other humanistic studies with the better work of 21st century psychology. It might even be a good time to replace the earlier twentieth century psychologies such as psychoanalysis and behaviorism with the new twenty first century work. We might then view the present study as a very small step in that direction.

g. One problem in Russell studies is that it does not have a good, comprehensive view of the foundations of Russell’s public philosophy. This essay provides one strand of some future version of such a view.

REFERENCES

- Aronson and Mills, 1959, “The Effect of Severity of Initiation on Liking for a Group,” *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 59
- Baldwin, James, 1963, “Letter to a Nephew,” in *The Fire Next Time*
- Dahl, Robert, 1998, *On Democracy*
- Festinger, Riecken, Schachter, 1956, *When Prophecy Fails*
- Franklin, Benjamin, *Autobiography*
- Keynes, John Maynard, 1946, *Two Memoirs*
- Mill, John Stuart, 1861, *Considerations of Representative Government*
- Russell, Bertrand, 1910, *Anti-Suffragist Anxieties*
- _____, 1919, “Dreams and Facts,” *The Athenaeum*, nos. 4,642, 4,643. Repr. *Sceptical Essays*
- _____, 1923, “Can Men Be Rational?” *The Rationalist Annual*. Repr. *Sceptical Essays*
- _____, 1925, *The ABC of Relativity*,
- _____, 1925, *What I Believe*. Repr. *Why I am Not a Christian*, 1957
- _____, 1926, “Psychology and Politics,” *The Dial* 80. Repr. *Sceptical Essays*
- _____, 1932, *Education and the Social Order*
- _____, 1937, “The Superior Virtue of the Oppressed,” *The Nation* 144. Repr. *Unpopular Essays*
- _____, 1946, “Ideas That Have Harmed Mankind.” Repr. *Unpopular Essays*
- _____, 1953, “What Is Democracy?” Repr. *Fact and Fiction*, 1961
- _____, 1992, *The Collected Papers of Bertrand Russell*, vol. 6
- Tavris and Aronson, 2007, *Mistakes Were Made (but not by me)*