

## CONCEPT OF SCIENCE, IMMORTALITY AND GOOD LIFE IN RUSSELL'S WHAT I BELIEVE

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Bertrand Russell (May 18, 1872-February 2, 1970) is one of humanity's most illuminating thinkers. His writings are very interesting and luminous. There is something almost prophetic in the way he bridges timelessness and timeliness in contemplating ideas urgently relevant to modern life a century earlier - from how boredom makes happiness possible to why science is the key to democracy. But his genius shine more brilliantly in his book *What I Believe* (public library) which was published in 1925. This book is a source of hopes which seeks to explore our place in this cosmos and our possibilities of achieving the good life.

According to Russell, in the everyday life of man, we can see that there are some forces making for happiness, and there are some forces making for miseries. We do not know exactly which will prevail, but to act wisely and rationally we must be aware of both the forces.

One of Russell's most central point found in *What I believe* deals with our civilizational allergy to uncertainty, which we try to alleviate in ways that don't serve the human spirit. Nearly a century ago astrophysicist Marcelo Gleiser's outstanding manifesto *For mystery in the age of knowledge* and many decades before *wireless* came to mean what it means today, making the metaphor all the more prescient and apt.

According to Russell, It is very difficult to imagine anything less interesting or more different from the passionate delights of incomplete discovery. It is like climbing a high mountain and finding nothing at the top except a restaurant where they sell ginger beer, surrounded by fog but equipped with wireless. Long before modern neuroscience existed, let alone knew what it now knows about why we have the thoughts we do - the subject of an excellent recent episode of the NPR's *Invisibilia* - Russell points to the physical origins of what we often perceive as metaphysical reality.

Russell is of the view that what we call our thoughts seem to depend upon the organization of tracks in the brain in the same sort of way in which journeys depend upon roads and railways. The energy used in thinking seems to have a chemical origin; for instance, a deficiency of iodine will turn a clever man into an idiot. Mental phenomena seem to be bound up with material structure.

Russell argues that our thought-fictions stand nowhere in starker contrast with physical reality than in religious mythology. Particularly in our longing for immortality which, despite a universe whose very nature contradicts the possibility, all major religions address with some version of a promise for eternal life. With his characteristic combination of cool lucidity and warm compassion for the human experience.

Russell says, "*God and immortality, the central dogmas of the Christian religion, find no support in science. It cannot be said that either doctrine is essential to religion, since neither is found in Buddhism. But we in the West have come to think of them as irreducible minimum of theology. No doubt people will continue to entertain these beliefs, because they are pleasant, just as it is pleasant to think ourselves virtuous and our enemies wicked. But for my part I cannot see any ground for either.*"<sup>1</sup>

It is to be noted that the existence or non-existence of a God cannot be proven because it lies "*outside the region of even probable knowledge,*"<sup>2</sup> Russell considers the special case of personal immortality, which stands on a somewhat different footing and in which evidence either way is possible.

Russell says that human beings are the part of the everyday world with which science is concerned. The conditions which can determine the existence of men are discoverable. Russell says, "*A drop of water is not immortal; it can be resolved into oxygen and hydrogen. If, therefore, a drop of water were to maintain that it had a quality of aqueousness which would survive its dissolution we should be inclined to be sceptical. In like manner we know that the brain is not immortal, and that the organized energy of a living body becomes, as it were, demobilized at death, and therefore not available for collective action. All the evidence goes to show that what we regard as our mental life is bound up with brain structure and organized bodily energy. Therefore, it is rational to suppose that mental life ceases when bodily life ceases. The argument is only one of probability, but it is as strong as those upon which most scientific conclusions are based.*"<sup>3</sup>

But Russell points out that evidence has little bearing on what we actually believe.

Russell is of the opinion that believers in immortality of the soul will object to physiological arguments against personal immortality on the basis that soul and body are totally different, and the soul is something which cannot be manifested empirically through our bodily organs. Russell believes that this is a metaphysical superstition. Both Mind and matter are for certain purposes convenient terms, but they are not ultimate realities. Like the soul, electrons and protons are logical fictions; each is really a history, a series of events, not a single persistent entity. In case of the soul, this is certain from the facts of growth. Whoever considers conception, gestation, and infancy cannot seriously believe that the soul in any indivisible something, perfect and complete throughout this process. It is obvious that the soul grows like the body, and that it derives both from the spermatozoon and from the ovum, so that it cannot be indivisible.

Long before the term reductionism<sup>4</sup> would come to dismiss material answers to spiritual questions, Russell offers an elegant disclaimer: Russell says that this is not materialism: it is merely the recognition that everything interesting is a matter of organization, not of primal substance.

According to Russell, fear is the basis of religious dogma. Fear of human beings, individually or collectively, dominates much of our social life. But it is the fear of nature which gives rise to religion. The antithesis of mind and matter is more or less illusory; but there is another antithesis which is more important - that, namely, between things that can be affected by our desires and things that cannot be affected by our desires. The line between the two is neither sharp nor immutable. Science advances, more and more things and nature seems to be brought under human control. Nevertheless, there remain things definitely on the other side. Among these are all the large facts of our world, the sort of facts that are dealt with by astronomy. It is only facts on or near the surface of

the earth that we can, to some extent, mould to suit our desires. And even on the surface of the earth our powers are very limited. Above all we can often delay death with the help of latest development of medical science, but we cannot prevent it.

According to Russell, religion is an attempt to overcome this antithesis. If the world is regulated by God, and God can be moved by prayer, we acquire a share in omnipotence. Belief in God serves to humanize the world of nature, and to make men feel that physical forces are really their allies. In like way immortality can remove the fear of death. People who believe that when they die they will inherit eternal bliss may be expected to view death without horror, though, fortunately for medical men, this does not invariably happen. It does, however, reduce men's fears somewhat even when it cannot allay them wholly.

Russell suggests that science offers the antidote to such terror, even if its findings are at first frightening as they challenge our existing beliefs, the way Galileo did. He captures this necessary discomfort beautifully.

Even if the open windows of science at first make us shiver after the cosy indoor warmth of traditional humanizing myths, in the end the fresh air brings vigour, and the great spaces have splendour of their own.

But Russell's most enduring point has to do with our beliefs about the nature of the universe in relation to us. More than eight decades before legendary graphic designer Milton Glaser's said that if someone perceives the universe as being a universe of abundance, then it will be. If someone thinks of the universe as one of scarcity, then it will be.

Optimism and pessimism, as cosmic philosophies, show the same naïve humanism; the great world, so far as we know it from the philosophy of nature, is neither good nor bad, and is not concerned to make us happy or unhappy. All such philosophies spring from self-importance, and are best corrected by a little astronomy. He admonishes against confusing "the philosophy of nature," in which such neutrality is necessary, with "the philosophy of value," which beckons us to create meaning by conferring human values upon the world.

Nature is only a part of what we can imagine; everything, real or imagined, can be appraised by us, and there is no outside standard to show that our valuation is wrong. We are ourselves the ultimate and irrefutable arbiters of value, and in the world of value Nature is only a part. Thus in this world we are greater than Nature. In the world of values, Nature in itself is neutral, neither good nor bad, deserving of neither admiration nor censure. It is we who create value and our desires which confer value... It is for us to determine the good life, not for Nature - not even for Nature personified as God.

Russell's definition of the good life remains the simplest and most heartening one. He says, "*The good life is one inspired by love and guided by knowledge*"<sup>5</sup>. Knowledge and love are both indefinitely extensible. Therefore, however good a life may be, a better life can be imagined. Neither love without knowledge, nor knowledge without love can produce a good life.

'*What I Believe*' is a remarkably prescient and rewarding read in its totality. Russell goes on to explore the nature of the good life, what salvation means in a secular sense for the individual and for society, the relationship between science and happiness, and more. Complement it with Russell on

human nature, the necessary capacity for "fruitful monotony," and his ten commandments of teaching and learning, then revisit *Alan Lightman*, an American Physicist on why we long for immortality.

### Notes and References

1. Russell B., What I believe(Special Indian Edition), p-3
2. Ibid,p-3
3. Ibid, p-3-4
4. The practice of analysing and describing a complex phenomenon in terms of its simple or fundamental constituents, especially when this is said to provide a sufficient explanation.
5. Russell B., What I believe (Special Indian Edition), p-10

### Bibliography

1. Russell B., What I believe (Special Indian Edition), Public Library, 1925.