Russell, Daniel. *Happiness for Humans.*
Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012. Pp. 228. $65.00 (cloth).

"Nobody" (writes Nietzsche in *Twilight of the Idols*) "strives for *happiness*; only the Englishman does that." The pursuit of happiness—he means—is natural enough for a nation of shopkeepers. But it is an unworthy end for anyone truly great of soul. Nietzsche has particularly in his sights anglophone reductive-rationalist quantitative eudaimonism in the style of Godwin, Bentham, and Franklin. His deepest objection to this is not that its utility sums give the wrong answers. It is the utility sums themselves and the vision of life that fathers them: the way of seeing that Bernard Williams calls "the unblinking accountant's eye of the strict utilitarian" ("A Critique of Utilitarianism," in *Utilitarianism: For and Against* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973], 113). For Nietzsche, and Williams, such an accountant's—or shopkeeper's—eye must be myopic at best. Whatever their alleged rational credentials, the judgments it delivers are bound to be crass, shallow, and naive. q1

Part of Daniel Russell's achievement in *Happiness for Humans* is to exemplify how eudaimonism doesn't have to be like this. An older tradition of eudaimonism is hardly ever quantitative and only sometimes rationalist (with or without reductiveness); eudaimonists in this tradition are at least as interested as Nietzsche in greatness of soul. The masters of this tradition are Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics. Russell develops an exegesis of their accounts of happiness and a story of his own about what happiness is: the two (both beautifully done) interlock and interdepend.

Russell's eudaimonism says that "ultimately what practical reason seeks is to fulfil the end of finding other ends to live for, and in living for those ends to live a good life" (19). This living a good life, Aristotle's *to eu zên*, we can further identify as *eudaimonia*, a word which like most commentators Russell translates as "happiness." (For argument against this translation, see my "Eudaimonia, Happiness, and the Redemption of Unhappiness," forthcoming in *Philosophical Topics.*) Hence, there is only one ultimately final end (*teleiotaton telos*): What end could be superordinate to the end of finding some ends, in order to live well by pursuing them?

Russell apparently assumes that agents start off with no ends, and need to set about acquiring some, and that this acquiring of ends can simply be a matter of choice. For almost every actual agent, both assumptions are questionable. We are not born into a void but into families, into neighborhoods, into religions, regions, and nations. These multiple, overlapping backgrounds simply present us with reasons, with ends which are in situ for us whether we like it or not and from before we are old enough to do any choosing at all: just to have a father or a sister or a hometown is already to have ends. q2

Certainly some ends are acquired as we go through life. At least in cultures liberal enough to permit these life choices, a spouse and a career are the com-

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monest and most important acquisitions. But being acquired does not always mean that these ends are chosen, exactly. A lover can feel inevitable—so can a vocation—where "feel" is not exclusive of "be" but a ground for it. With both careers and spouses, the picture of the agent deciding ab initio in a cool rational hour what, or who, to be is right sometimes. But not always. Russell evidently sees practical rationality as typically setting out from a blank slate to "find ends to live for." But the blank-slate cases seem more like exceptions than the norm.

It is similarly so with the suggestion, likely here, that we might on arrival at some "age of questioning" review all the commitments we have inherited and thereafter either confirm or abandon them. Undoubtedly such reviews happen sometimes. But again, not always. For many agents and many commitments, the very idea of their reviewing them does not, and could not, arise. Such nonreview need be no failure of rationality. Certainly someone would be insufficiently reflective, and probably irrational too, if she never reviewed any of her commitments. It doesn't follow that, to count as rational, she must review every single commitment she has. (How, anyway?) It doesn't even follow that, for any commitment of hers, it is not reflectively enough held to count as rational unless she has reviewed it. An agent can act on such simple and instinctive thoughts as "He's my brother" and act rationally and might, indeed, be in more danger of acting irrationally if her thought was less simple and instinctive. When such commitments and the actions they elicit are rational, what makes them rational is not their passing some formal audit of procedural rationality. It is their substantive correctness.

Since eudaimonism says that "the final end for the sake of which one does everything is one's own *eudaimonia*," we naturally worry whether this implies egoism—that "all one really has reason to do is look out for one's own interests" (25). Russell thinks not, in any worrying sense: all desires and reasons have the form of being directed toward the agent's own *eudaimonia*, but that doesn't mean that they cannot be altruistic in their substance. This distinction between substantive and formal egoism is familiar but problematic. A "merely formal egoist" seems just to be an egoist with nicer desires than a substantive egoist, and niceness is a matter of degree.

Whether or not eudaimonism implies (substantive) egoism, eudaimonism itself faces counterexamples. A soldier going into battle can feel pretty certain that he will die yet keep going because he believes in his cause or his country—and not just as something that believing in which contributes to his own happiness. Political idealists, likewise: as Enjolras says to Marius in *Les Misérables*, "Who cares about your lonely soul? We strive toward a larger goal; Our little lives don't count at all!" As their outcome shows, there is plenty wrong with Enjolras's deliberations. But he is not irrational, any more than the soldier is, simply because he believes that it might be right to fight and die for a greater good in which his own happiness will play no part.

During Russell's counterattack against the egoism charge, he writes this:

> For that kind of closeness and devotion to another to continue as that kind of good [i.e., the good of being, e.g., married], one must also remember that the point of devoting oneself to another is for the sake of giving oneself a good life. . . . Choosing a relationship for the sake of *eudaimonia*, therefore,

> builds in the very sort of perspective that it takes for close relationships to be the sorts of goods that they are for humans.
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> The other thing gained by [the eudaimonist] perspective on one's ends is the very rationality of adopting them in the first place. This is because committing to an end means committing *oneself* to it. . . . One must judge whether the end in question is worth making part of one's life. (27)

For sure, every marriage is different; still, I find I am disinclined to tell my wife that the point of my devoting myself to her is "for the sake of giving myself a good life." I am not even inclined to tell her the slightly subtler thing available to Russell's sort of eudaimonist: that she is a final end for me and that I have her as a final end in my life because doing so helps me achieve my ultimate final end, namely, happiness. What I think she would like to hear me say is that I devote myself to her because I care about her—full stop. Perhaps thoughts about my own happiness were dominant when I began the tricky business of searching for a wife, but the whole point of my search was to find reasons and ends that took me beyond concern for myself and my own happiness. (Maybe Russell himself means something like this when he speaks of "maieutic" ends [17]. I think the notion of maieutic ends is a good one, but it destabilizes eudaimonism. I don't know why Russell doesn't think so too.)

Typical agents surely don't even start with the eudaimonist project of advancing their own happiness. Even if they do, that project is characteristically self-canceling. To pursue it intelligently is to come to see that the things humans are happiest pursuing are not reasonably organizable under the heading of happiness at all. To reach this conclusion is not to subtilize one's eudaimonism. It is to abandon it. (For an earlier form of this argument, see my *Understanding Human Goods* [Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998], 49.)

We have good reason to deny the eudaimonist thesis that the ultimate end of all rational agency is (the agent's own) happiness. Indeed, we have good reason to deny that anything is the ultimate end of all rational agency. Why does rational agency need any such thing as one single ultimate end? Why couldn't rational agency be genuinely what it apparently is: directed at all sorts of different ends?

Russell responds that rational agency is genuinely directed at all sorts of different ends; nonetheless, there still has to be one final end. For "multiple final ends would set the stage for . . . conflicts" between those ends—and "conflicts are precisely the sort of problems that we engage in deliberation to avoid in the first place" (18–19; presumably Russell's deliberation here is not Aristotle's *bouleusis*, which is famously not of ends: *Nicomachean Ethics* 1112b11). I suspect conflict between ends is more often a result of deliberation than a spur to it. But even when it happens, we don't automatically regard conflict as an intolerable evil which deliberation simply must remove. Often we regard conflicts between our ends as just part of the way things are. Of course, to think that such conflicts are dangerous, because, for instance, they are a possible source of tragic dilemma, has got to be right, so to eliminate such conflicts where possible has got to be sensible. That is no reason to think that conflicts of ends can be eliminated everywhere or that the best or only way to eliminate them is by reference to some final end or that any ethics is automatically better, the more conflicts it eliminates.

Still, a rational life needs to be one which has been thoroughly thought through and which involves a serious reflective effort on the part of the agent to make coherent sense of who he is and what he is trying to make of himself. True, but it is not enough to justify eudaimonism. Plenty of ways of "thoroughly thinking things through" are unconnected with asking about those things' relation to my own happiness. And "making coherent sense of who I am" can include deciding whether to adopt various possible ends by reference to my own big plan for my life. But it can also involve recognizing what ends I am just given by my own place in the world, whether or not those ends cohere with my big plan.

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*Happiness for Humans* is unusually Socratic in that it does philosophy by engaging in dialogues with the ancient eudaimonists; I would love to look more closely at the detail of Russell's dialogues but cannot do that here. It is also Socratic in that it ends in an aporia:

> Whether or not we take virtue to be sufficient for happiness depends on our choice between two conceptions of the self, what I have called the formalised and the embodied conceptions . . . as embodied vulnerability increases, one kind of loss follows, and as formalised invulnerability increases, a different kind of loss follows. . . . We would not choose to live without intimate connections, but we cannot live without virtue and autonomy either; and yet, if Cicero and Epictetus are right, then chances are that we cannot have it both ways. . . .
>
> I am stuck with this dilemma . . . if I am right, we are *all* stuck with it. (256–57)

Whether "virtue is happiness," as Socrates and Epictetus thought, depends, says Russell, on how we conceive of happiness. If happiness resides essentially in the will alone, then the identification of virtue and happiness becomes feasible, for virtue—the idea is—is also a matter solely of our choice. If, on the other hand, happiness depends on a person's place within the networks of projects and commitments that ordinarily constitute at least the social self, then virtue cannot be identified with happiness. By definition, everything outside the will is outside our control. So even the most steadfastly virtuous will for the good cannot guarantee that any good of this socially and externally embedded sort is actually achieved; willing it alone is not enough to have it.

So for Russell, how we conceive of happiness is deeply interdependent with how we conceive of the self. This interdependence thesis fits well with Russell's eudaimonist insistence that my reasons always derive from my happiness and never, ultimately, from anywhere "outside" my happiness; anyone who doubts eudaimonism will probably doubt the interdependence thesis too.

Anyway, it is the interdependence thesis that leads Russell to his final, very striking claim: that the choice between these linked conceptions of happiness and the self is just that, a choice, which he takes one way, and others might take the other.

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> I have argued . . . that happiness for humans is a life of embodied virtuous activity: a life of activity that is both wise and inextricable from the relationships that define each of us. . . . I don't believe [this] because I suppose that somehow I have proved it. . . . I believe it because I have chosen to accept the risks on that side of the dilemma over those on the Stoics' side. It is a choice I have made with some faith and much trepidation, which is I think the most that anyone can do here. . . . If I am right . . . then no *proof* as to what happiness is will ever be in the offing. (257)

But if happiness and the self are mind-independent realities, how can our conception of them be ours to choose? Well, perhaps more than one pattern discernible in the fabric of reality is worth calling "the self" or "happiness" (a Stoic who may have allowed this is Hierocles; 173). In Russell's story, the two most salient patterns are Stoicism's "formalised self" and Aristotelianism's "embodied self." Certainly such choices between conceptions are choices about "how to see things" and so, as Russell suggests, loaded with moral significance. None of this entails that there are no things to see or no distinctions between better and worse ways of seeing. Some forms of belief entail practical commitment and, as Russell suggests, may also be beyond proof or disproof.

Still, what exactly is supposed to be so dilemmatic about Russell's dilemma, his hard choice between conceptions of happiness and self as embodied and vulnerable (on the Aristotelian side) or as "formalised" and invulnerable, reduced to a pure point of will (on the Stoic side)? Maybe I am biased (here's how biased: I write this from a family member's hospital bedside), but I don't find anything remotely attractive about the Stoic side of the supposed dilemma. The idea that we can find happiness by renouncing all risky happiness seems to me psychologically unrealistic and, also, bizarrely callous. Moreover, it produces passages of writing like this:

> "So and so's son is dead. What do you think of that?" It lies outside the sphere of choice; it is not an evil. "So-and-so has been disinherited by his father. What do you think of that?" It lies outside the sphere of choice; it is not an evil. "Caesar has condemned him." This lies outside the sphere of choice; it is not an evil. "He has been distressed by all this." This is within the sphere of choice; it is an evil [i.e., he was wrong to be distressed]. "He has borne it nobly." This is within the sphere of choice; it is a good [i.e., he did well not to be distressed]. (Epictetus, *Discourses* III.8.2–3, trans. in *Happiness for Humans*, 150; my glosses)

In the purest and austerest version of Stoicism—an extreme which Epictetus approaches here—"the good man cannot be harmed" (Plato, *Apology* 41d1), simply because he amputates every part of himself that is vulnerable to harm. He recognizes only goods and evils that "lie within the sphere of choice." So long as he chooses virtuously, therefore, his happiness—or what Epictetus calls happiness—is guaranteed. But whether he chooses virtuously is—say the Stoics—entirely and impregnably up to him. Thus in pure Stoicism the retreat to the citadel of the will is complete.

I say this picture of happiness and the self has no appeal to me. It would be exaggeration to say that such a picture could not appeal to anyone. A strikingly similar view—that ("real") happiness comes only when we free ourselves of desire—is central to Buddhism:

> Like nothing lest you lose it,
> Lest it bring you grief and fear.
> Go beyond likes and dislikes.
> From passion and desire,
> Sensuousness and lust,
> Arise grief and fear.
> Free yourself from attachment.
>
> (*The Dhammapada: The Sayings of the Buddha*, trans. Thomas Byrom [London: Rider, 1976], 77–78)

Such a radical and essentially defiant vision of the self and of ("real") happiness may appeal more to those living harsher lives than affluent Westerners today: it may be an ethics for maimed slaves like Epictetus himself or for those who undergo the kind of pitilessly bloody ordeals suffered by Russell Crowe in *Gladiator*. Still, the objections to any such outlook are obvious. At the level of popular culture, Simon and Garfunkel's song "I Am a Rock" is one well-known critique of it: "I have no need of friendship; friendship causes pain." At a slightly more academic level, there is the apparently diametrically opposed outlook of the Gospels, that it is only by risking everything that anyone can truly enjoy anything: "Whoever finds his life will lose it; whoever loses his life for my sake will find it" (Matt. 10.39).

These are ethical doubts about the attractiveness of defining the self as no more than the will and the self's happiness as no more than the will controls. There are metaphysical and psychological doubts, too, about whether these "formalised" conceptions even make sense. The metaphysical doubt is simply the question what such an isolated self is supposed to be and what its virtue consists in—what it has to act on—if it is really so defiantly distant from the world in which a quite different view of virtue and the self would see it as essentially embedded. If the self is constitutively engaged with its environment, as is now argued by a whole movement in philosophy of mind and epistemology—externalism—then it is not even possible to conceive the self apart from the things it engages with and acts upon.

As for the psychological doubt, the Stoics' view of the will as an impregnable citadel presupposes that our willing is completely under our control. But we know enough about the subconscious—very likely the Stoics' contemporaries did too—to doubt that there need be any lowest level at which the self's compulsions "bottom out" and we are left simply with the pure, foundational, rational will itself. If not, we cannot hope to retreat from the world by turning into ourselves—"like a tortoise into its shell," as Krishna says to Arjuna (*Bhagavad Gita* 2.58, trans. Juan Mascaró [London: Penguin, 1962], 53)—into some pure space of detached and virtuous willing. No such space exists. However deep we go, we take the world with us; wherever we get to, the world is there already.

If these doubts are reasonable, then the Stoic side of Russell's "hard choice" is not merely an easily rejected alternative. It's not an alternative at all.

I now know from experience that it is possible to be hugely impressed by a book, and benefit enormously from reading it, while agreeing with hardly any of the main answers that it offers. If not his answers, I most certainly agree with Russell's questions. He opens up, for genuinely new reflection, problems about the ultimate point(s) of our lives and the place in those lives of commitment, risk, and vulnerability. It is wonderful to see such deep, enduring, and existentially live questions addressed with such acumen and verve. At a time when academic philosophy can often seem little more than an intellectual obstacle race for the fast-talking, pushy, and glib, we need books like Russell's to remind us what is really at stake.

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## QUERIES TO THE AUTHOR

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