

## **Ideas for Teachers: Russell's Legacy**

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A good world needs knowledge, kindness, and courage

-- Bertrand Russell, Why I Am Not A Christian (1957)

### **Introduction**

There are many indications that interest in Bertrand Russell's ideas continues unabated. Almost all of his many books are still in print, the Collected Papers project at McMaster University is now approaching the halfway mark towards an anticipated 34 volumes of his writings, a second volume of Selected Letters (Griffin, 2001) has recently appeared, the Philosopher's Index regularly reports a steady stream of articles devoted to various aspects of his work, and there is much else besides. One would be inclined to say that it is certain that his prolific and original contributions to philosophy will constitute a significant chapter in any serious account of the subject in the twentieth century were it not for Russell's own strictures on the possibility of attaining certainty.

No special occasion is required, therefore, for devoting attention to Russell's ideas. Nevertheless, 2001 marked the 75th anniversary of the publication of his first book about education, entitled On Education: Especially in Early Childhood, which appeared in February, 1926 (Russell, 1973a); and 2002 is the centenary of Russell's first work dealing with educational issues.<sup>1</sup> This makes it especially appropriate to revisit Russell's educational ideas where we find various suggestions for the improvement of teaching, a matter which is inextricably connected with Russell's views on the nature of education and the good life. Teaching can only be improved, he believes, if the aims of education are properly appreciated since one central problem is to find or prepare teachers who

themselves exemplify the qualities and virtues which give expression to those aims, and which are central to a rich and satisfying human life.

### **The power of ideas**

What does Russell have to say about the power and influence of ideas? How can ideas be helpful? As he does in a number of other cases, Russell marks out a middle ground between extremes, in this case between the extremes of complete despair and naive optimism. He maintains that “new hopes, new beliefs, and new thoughts are at all times necessary to mankind” (Russell, 1940a, in Feinberg and Kasrils, 1973, p. 307), and his unswerving commitment to open inquiry reflects a spirit of guarded optimism that new ideas, or a new interpretation of familiar ideas, may emerge from discussion and reflection to shape the future. A defiantly positive outlook is generally sustained in his social and political writings, as well as in his critique of educational thought and practice. He concedes that the lack of love shown towards children brings him close to despair at times (Russell, 1973a, p. 170), but insists that we need to remember constantly what is good in the world not just what is bad. In his later years, looking back at his work on educational ideas, Russell took some satisfaction in saying that “to a very great extent” he had been successful in the sense that educational reform had generally taken the direction he had argued for (Russell, 1959, p. 78).

His overall aim, as he puts it in one of his later books, is to present an outlook “that shall be convincing and overwhelmingly encouraging, that shall enable men of goodwill to work with the same vigour which of late has been the monopoly of cruel bigots” (Russell, 1951, p. 11). He remarks that “it is only necessary to open the doors of our hearts and minds to let the imprisoned demons escape and the beauty of the world take possession” (Russell, 1951, p. 17). The demons in question, often nurtured in schools, are all those destructive passions, such as envy, fear, and feelings of horror towards those with views different from our own, which thrive on ignorance, half-truths and rumour.

Opening our hearts and minds to new ideas may be all that is needed, but experience shows how extraordinarily difficult this can be; it is all too easy and extremely common for people to go through life “imprisoned in the prejudices derived from common sense” (Russell, 1973b, p. 91) which leads, in Russell’s words, to unfamiliar possibilities being contemptuously rejected. His educational philosophy offers new ways of thinking about teaching that reject traditional approaches which serve to inculcate destructive emotions, unanimity of thought, and fanatical conviction; and new conceptions of education that permit students to experience a sense of intellectual adventure in an atmosphere of open inquiry and not acquire a hatred of knowledge. He is well aware that there may be little prospect of ideas immediately having a beneficial influence,<sup>2</sup> but Russell finds some consolation in the lesson of history that an ideal may be all but stamped out at one time only to reemerge subsequently and take root: “It is our misfortune to live in a bad period, but it will end, and it will end the sooner for our keeping hope alive” (Russell, 1979, p. 7).

Philosophical reflection is potentially valuable to us in many ways, Russell claims, if only we are able to remain open to its influence. First, philosophy enlarges the imagination by showing us that there are different ways in which the world can be conceived, and “practice in appreciating these different world pictures stretches the mind and makes it more receptive of new and perhaps fruitful hypotheses” (Russell, 1953b, in Slater, 1997, p. 445). Second, philosophy stimulates a desire to understand what is puzzling, helps to keep alive our sense of wonder and “speculative interest” in the universe, and thereby promotes that “mental fearlessness [which] is the product of unhampered curiosity” (Russell, 1929, p. 617). Third, in fostering a critical perspective on knowledge and a skeptical attitude towards dogmatic claims, philosophy may have a role to play in reducing the hatred which results from fanaticism (Russell, 1948, in Slater, 1997, p. 278), and it can help to remove the arrogance we find in those “who have never travelled into the region of liberating doubt” (Russell, 1973b, p. 91).

The imaginative, tolerant, courageous, and critical attitudes alluded to in these suggestions need to influence our approach to teaching at every level, and in this way philosophy would contribute to bringing about progress in the field of education. Unfortunately, conditions in schools militate against the likelihood of success. Standing one's ground against conventional opinion, for example, takes courage and "the majority of teachers naturally do not care to expose themselves to these risks, and avoid giving public expression to their less orthodox opinions" (Russell, 1940a, in Feinberg and Kasrils, 1973, p. 300). Overburdened teachers, struggling through long and exhausting teaching assignments to prepare students for examinations rather than being able to offer a truly worthwhile education, cannot even keep up with recent developments in the subjects they teach let alone find spontaneous pleasure in their work and communicate a love of knowledge to their students (Russell, 1972, p. 209; Russell, 1940b, pp. 155-6).<sup>3</sup>

Russell's depressing observation is that "hardly anything is done to foster the inward growth of mind and spirit; in fact, those who have had the most education are often atrophied in their mental and spiritual life, devoid of impulse, and possessing only certain mechanical aptitudes which take the place of living thought" (Russell, 1971, pp. 103-4). Despite these harsh criticisms, however, he readily acknowledges that teachers face numerous pressures which make it all but impossible for them to do good work; and he remains convinced that "the teacher is by far the best of the forces concerned in education, and it is primarily to him or her that we must look for progress" (Russell, 1922, p. 143). The three qualities mentioned in the opening motto, kindness, knowledge and courage, which Russell sees as necessary for a good world, emerge as central to his vision of good teaching and to his ideas for reforming education.

### **Kindliness**

Russell's ideal teacher possesses a wide range of capacities, dispositions and attitudes, both intellectual and moral, and exemplifies in his or her behaviour and decisions

the kind of wisdom which should itself be one of the central aims of education (Russell, 1954, in Slater, 1997, pp. 452-4). Such wisdom is needed now more than ever, Russell believes, but it is lacking in those “whose knowledge is wide but whose feelings are narrow” (Russell, 1954, p. 452). It is feeling, Russell points out, that determines the ends we pursue and what use we will make of human power (Russell, 1958, in Thruelston and Kobler, 1958, p. 301). Wisdom, Russell insists, is more than a matter of intellect (Russell, 1965, p. 204), and the growth of wisdom involves freeing ourselves not only from the confines of a limited cognitive perspective but also from an impoverished emotional outlook.

In his autobiography, Russell remarks that his own emotional life following his marriage in 1894 to Alys Pearsall Smith (1867-1951) had been “calm and superficial” and that he had been “content with flippant cleverness” until a strangely powerful moment in February 1901 when he witnessed Evelyn Whitehead undergoing an extremely painful attack of what was thought to be angina (Russell, 1968, p. 193). Quite possibly Russell exaggerates to some extent the superficiality of his earlier emotional responses (Griffin, 1992, p. 217), but the incident nevertheless amounts to a quasi-mystical experience which reveals to him that “nothing can penetrate [the loneliness of the human soul] except the highest intensity of the sort of love that religious teachers have preached” (Russell, 1968, pp. 193-4). He tells us that within the space of five minutes, he became a different person.

The significance Russell attaches to the emotional life was enormously heightened by the horrors of the 1914-18 war which, in his own words, changed everything for him. He became convinced that most people vent their profound unhappiness in destructive rages, and he acquired “a new love for what is living” (Russell, 1969, p. 36). Later in life, looking back at newspapers published during the First World War, he would refer to the “hot blast of insanity” which leaps off the pages but which, at the time, seemed quite sensible to many people (Russell, 1939, p. 531). His book Roads To Freedom, written in early 1918, expresses his hopes for the future: “It must be a world in which affection has free play, in

which love is purged of the instinct for domination, in which cruelty and envy have been dispelled by happiness and the unfettered development of all the instincts that build up life and fill it with mental delights” (Russell, 1966, p. 138). Some commentators maintain that, in his personal life, Russell failed miserably to demonstrate genuine affection and feeling for those around him, especially for anyone who had disappointed him. If so, perhaps his own shortcomings serve to remind us of the fragile and precarious character of this emotion.<sup>4</sup>

Russell regards what he calls kindly feeling more highly than any other quality, even putting it at times ahead of veracity, primarily because “most of the social and political evils of the world arise through absence of sympathy and presence of hatred, envy or fear” (Russell, 1947, in Slater, 1997, p. 85). He voices the same concern which leads recent writers to warn against “having one’s emotional development blighted by overwhelming fear and anxiety, or by traumatic events of abuse and neglect” (Nussbaum, 2000, p. 79); and he anticipates the contemporary emphasis placed on caring relationships involving a natural response of concern and solicitude for another person which is not dependent on a sense of duty (Noddings, 1984). Russell notes, for example, that love “on principle” does not seem to him to be genuine, and it is clear that he has in mind the kind of instinctive delight characteristic of parental affection (Russell, 1925, pp. 57-8).

Russell’s discussion of the role of the kindly emotions in a good life is intimately connected with his concern for the improvement of teaching. It is worth recalling, for example, that one of the changes Russell mentions, resulting immediately from the incident involving Evelyn Whitehead in 1901, is the emergence in him for the first time of an intense interest in children (Russell, 1968, p. 194).<sup>5</sup> A number of factors, moreover, help to consolidate the emerging link he senses between the benevolent emotions and the nature of teaching. First, there is the grim realization that destructive emotions, especially hatred, envy and fear, are commonly fostered in school through an approach to teaching which promotes nationalistic propaganda and other forms of bias (Russell, 1971, p. 105). Second, there is

his growing optimism that while desirable emotions are not so easily generated as destructive ones, something can be done in education to help encourage the development of desirable emotions such as sympathy, compassion, and generosity of spirit, without which the good life is impossible (Russell, 1965, p. 204; Russell, 1939, p. 531). Finally, there is his conviction that “a kindly disposition requires, on the one hand, instinctive happiness, and on the other hand the example of kindly behaviour on the part of adults” (Russell, 1967, p. 25), and the latter, of course, would have to include kindly teachers.

Such reflections lead Russell to the striking and unusual conclusion that “much the most important of all qualifications in a teacher is the feeling of spontaneous affection toward those whom he teaches” (Russell, 1939, p. 534). Feelings of warm affection towards one’s students are for him, quite simply, the most significant factor in good teaching (Russell, 1940b, p. 154). To convey the notion of spontaneous, warm affection, Russell employs a number of informal, non-philosophical, phrases including loving kindness, instinctive liking, delight and well-wishing, and especially kindly feeling: “You cannot get any kind of improvement in the world, or any kind of good life, without a basis in the emotions. But you have to be sure that the basis is the right one. I think that the only sort of emotional basis is what I should call kindly feeling....” (Russell, 1939, p. 531). His use of everyday expressions helps to make the point that he is reminding us of a familiar and natural emotion that anyone might experience if they were fortunate in their upbringing. Referring to the importance of love and compassion, for example, Russell says that what he has in mind “is a very simple and old-fashioned thing, a thing so simple that I am almost ashamed to mention it, for fear of the derisive smile with which wise cynics will greet my words” (Russell, 1952, p. 114).

Why does Russell single out kindly feeling as the most important quality in an account of the ideal teacher? Russell constantly returns in his writings to certain fundamental deficiencies in traditional schooling, especially (i) authoritarianism and regimentation, (ii) propaganda and fanaticism, and (iii) bureaucratic interference with

teachers, all of which are interrelated. His claim is that kindly feeling, as an attribute of teachers and an aim of education, can diminish these tendencies and lead to significant changes concerning in particular (i) the teacher-student relationship, (ii) the student's development as a person, and (iii) the teacher's independence in the classroom. Familiar as the idea of kindly feeling may be, and no doubt thinking that familiarity may breed contempt, Russell is concerned to deepen our appreciation of its meaning and implications for education, with the result that a fresh look at a familiar idea "stretches the mind" to embrace a revised conception of teaching.<sup>6</sup>

First, concerning the teacher-student relationship, a kindly teacher becomes an ally of the child, rather than a natural enemy, and is genuinely capable of taking delight in the child's progress (Russell, 1973a, p. 156; Russell, 1951, p. 177). Natural affection, or vital warmth, prompts the teacher to treat each child with reverence (Russell, 1971, pp. 102-3), developing a relationship of friendliness rather than hostility as the students begin to realize that their teacher is working with them, in a spirit of inquiry, to achieve a common purpose (Russell, 1973a, p. 38), and helping them flourish as human beings (Russell, 1971, p. 110). There is a foreshadowing here, surely, of the idea of a community of inquiry in education which has become so influential in recent years. Kindly feeling towards students promotes an appreciation in teachers of the importance of an education which discourages the passive acceptance of ideas. Instead, the teacher finds sheer pleasure in the child's emerging curiosity and imagination, and tries to ensure that such traits culminate in that love of mental adventure so many adults have lost (Russell, 1971, p. 115). All of this presupposes knowing and caring about students as individuals, and Russell believes that dealing with them affectionately will lead to an appreciation of their unique qualities, unlike the teacher "who views children from a distance, through a mist of official reports" and who "wishes all children were exactly alike" (Russell, 1967, p. 143). A kindly teacher, by contrast, often likes best what is peculiar to a particular child.

Second, further to the matter of the child's personal growth, the main consideration becomes the development of the capacities and potentialities inherent in the child for the child's own sake, not what will bring credit to the school (Russell, 1922, p. 143); the teacher must love the students more than he or she loves his or her State or Church (Russell, 1973a, p. 33). No teacher is fit to educate, Russell declares, "unless he feels each person an end in himself, with his own rights and his own personality, not merely a piece in a jig-saw puzzle" (Russell, 1922, p. 152). Students must be seen as something more than raw material to be moulded to suit someone else's plans and purposes, instilled with fanatical convictions which in the end destroy their instinctive joy of life (Russell, 1965, p. 206). This aspect of kindly feeling serves to remind us that love may, quite inappropriately, lead one to foist one's ideals on another person, ignoring and subverting that person's right to self-determination (Callan, 2001, p. 123).<sup>7</sup> Kindly feeling helps to sustain the focus on the student's own ends even though the "outward helplessness" of the child might tempt the teacher to try to shape the child towards some preconceived outcome (Russell, 1971, p. 103). If the student's own emerging independence is to be nurtured, criticism by the teacher "must never be carried to such lengths as to produce timidity in self-expression" (Russell, 1967, p. 96). The challenge of teaching is to keep in mind that, despite appearances, children are capable of developing into autonomous persons with their own hopes and purposes if the teaching they experience does not stunt their growth. A teacher who can be trusted with the task of education "must care for his pupils on their own account, not merely as potential soldiers in an army of propagandists for a cause" (Russell, 1965, p. 206).<sup>8</sup>

Third, concerning the question of trust and the teacher's independence from bureaucratic interference, a greater appreciation of the meaning and value of kindly feeling in general, and its importance for teachers in particular, would mean that they might be allowed more scope to draw on their own experience and wisdom in the classroom, since kindly impulses are likely to lead to the right decision and "no rules, however wise, are a substitute for affection and tact" (Russell, 1972, p. 210). Increased autonomy for kindly

teachers would make less likely the imposition of an intolerant, cruel and hypocritical moral orthodoxy upon children (Russell, 1922, pp. 151-2). To take one example, kindly teachers might recognize and respond to the fact that those who are held out as heroes for admiration in the curriculum are often those who have killed the greatest number of people (Russell, 1973a, p. 40; cf. Noddings, 1989, p. 240). Despite the importance of protecting teachers from outside interference, however, a commitment to the ideal of kindly feeling in the teaching profession would also mean that no teacher would be tolerated who preaches hostility to some group (Russell, 1951, p. 147). If this principle had been a more vital part of our own conception of good teaching, it might have prevented a shameful episode in Canadian education (Hare, 1993, pp. 75-88).

The assumption that kindly instincts are likely to lead to wise decisions might well give us pause, and it is helpful to recall Russell's advice that all educational principles have to be applied with common sense (Russell, 1929, in Egner and Denonn, 1961, p. 617). Russell himself points out that kindly teachers may sometimes adopt "the doctrine of non-interference" and allow some students to behave cruelly towards other students (Russell, 1967, p. 56).<sup>9</sup> Moreover, there is the notorious account of Russell's own method of teaching his young son not to fear the water which makes one wonder about the slippery slope from kindness to cruelty (Russell, 1973a, p. 61). The general point is sound, however, namely that kindly feeling curtails many harmful tendencies and is an attribute which generally inspires the kind of trust we would like to be able to place in teachers. Russell, in fact, qualifies his own generalization about the likelihood of wise decisions flowing from kindly feeling. He insists that "it is not enough to go about overflowing with vague benevolence. The world is full of kindly benevolence, but a great deal of it is ineffective for lack of other and more difficult virtues" (Russell, 1979, p. 10). The latter include struggling against prejudice, trying to avoid credulity, and not allowing error and falsehood to pass unchallenged. These dispositions have to do with intellectual honesty and a concern for truth, what Russell sometimes calls trying to see things truly (Russell, 1918, in Rempel,

1995, p. 421), and this brings us to a second virtue Russell sees as indispensable if a good world is to be achieved.

## **Knowledge**

Russell tells us in his autobiography that an overwhelmingly strong passion in his life was the search for knowledge (Russell, 1968, p. 3), and this passion is closely connected with his desire to see kindly feeling become a more effective force for good. The latter possibility is seriously undermined when people succumb to pleasant illusions and allow these to cloud their minds to the existing reality. Consider, for example, intolerable suffering in the world. In the absence of intellectual honesty, Russell points out, it is easy to slip into wishful thinking and self-deception. We convince ourselves that things are not as bad as they seem; or we conveniently forget the cruelty which goes into the production of goods from which we derive a profit. By contrast, “if you feel genuine compassion you will try to apprehend the evil truly in order to be able to cure it” (Russell, 1952, p. 112). People would not allow themselves to be deceived by comfortable fairy tales if they loved humanity as they love their own children. Kindly feeling demands attention to the evidence; and the evidence helps us to direct our kindness in appropriate ways. This view, which recognizes the importance of careful inquiry and the pursuit of truth, is sometimes dismissed as “coldly intellectual”, but a great deal of suffering might be avoided, Russell believes, if it were adopted. The intimate connection sketched here between compassion and knowledge is reflected in Russell’s famous maxim that “knowledge wielded by love is what the educator needs” (Russell, 1973a, p. 169).

An important aspect of the good life, in Russell’s view, is the pure delight which comes from knowledge, that “joy of mental adventure” which is not tied to any immediate utility. Appreciating the importance of such enjoyment in a good life is part of having that “right conception of human excellence” that Russell thought was so important for the teacher (Russell, 1973a, p. 34). It is a matter of some regret to him that “people have ceased

to appreciate the delicious savour of ‘useless’ knowledge” (Russell, 1972, p. 44). Russell’s personal delight in knowledge for its own sake emerges as a child on being introduced to mathematics, and he reveals that he had not imagined there could be anything so delicious in the world. G. H. Hardy (1877-1947), the mathematician, once remarked that if he could find a proof that Russell would die in the next five minutes, he would be sorry to lose him but the sorrow would be outweighed by the pleasure derived from the proof. Russell reports that he entirely sympathized with him (Russell, 1956, p. 19). Similarly, the search for truth in philosophy raises questions which “increase the interest of the world, and show the strangeness and wonder lying just below the surface even in the commonest things of daily life” (Russell, 1973b, p. 6). It is, therefore, one of the chief tasks of the teacher, and also a mark of kindly feeling, to help develop in children the sheer enjoyment of acquiring knowledge.

It is important to be clear, of course, that Russell does not defend the intrinsic value of knowledge at the expense of more utilitarian considerations;<sup>10</sup> and he firmly rejects the notion that useful knowledge cannot itself have intrinsic value. Indeed, one thing a teacher can do is reveal the possibility of activities which are both delightful and useful (Russell, 1940b, p. 155). He emphasizes the point in one of his first essays on education that a body of abstract mathematical ideas, initially pursued for their interest alone, may turn out to have very far-reaching practical consequences not dreamed of by those who first developed the ideas in question (Russell, 1902a, p. 73). We simply cannot know in advance in what ways they may prove useful, and enormously useful results often emerge in time. Moreover, the pursuit of “useless” knowledge has the general effect of promoting what he calls “a contemplative habit of mind”. If we take this to mean a general disposition to be reflective and thoughtful (Russell, 1972, p. 41), such a disposition is extremely useful in preventing hasty and regrettable decisions; it is an important aspect of wisdom.

Knowledge of all kinds is directly useful in many ways, and makes possible intelligent action provided that knowledge can be imparted in a spirit of inquiry which

prevents belief from turning into irrational certainty. A teacher must demonstrate and foster that sense of curiosity which is the foundation of intellectual life and keeps the search for knowledge alive and all questions open. On the one hand, Russell rejects an extreme and debilitating scepticism which holds that “there is no external kingdom of truth to which, by patience and diligence, we may at last obtain admittance, but only truth for me, for you, for every separate person” (Russell, 1902a, p. 72). On the other hand, knowledge understood in an absolute and final sense, what Russell sometimes calls the big T notion of Truth, is quite beyond our reach since what passes for knowledge today will very likely require reconsideration in time. Russell defends a fallibilistic position in which claims to knowledge are viewed as “approximations subject to future correction” (Russell, 1967, p. 15). His view is that “truth is ascertainable to a certain degree, but not wholly, and that only with difficulty” (Russell, 1939, p. 529), but this is consistent with belief in the possibility of gradually advancing towards knowledge, and education must foster this belief if curiosity is to be sustained.

Knowledge, then, has a provisional and elusive character, but the teacher’s task is to nurture the belief that something approaching genuine knowledge is attainable and worth striving for. The latter means that teachers must take into account the students’ sense of what is worth knowing and be prepared to remove “ancient rubbish” from the curriculum (Russell, 1967, p. 98). Regrettably, schooling all too often leaves students with nothing more than a hatred of knowledge (Russell, 1929, in Egnor and Denonn, 1961, p. 618). Russell favours an approach to teaching which presents students with problems which are sufficiently interesting to make them want to find a solution and which produce a feeling of hopefulness that a solution can be found (Russell, 1985, p. 146).<sup>11</sup> One of the chief lessons which a philosophical perspective can teach, Russell believes, is to learn to live without certainty while continuing to be willing to act on the best hypothesis available (Russell, 1946b, p. 43). This means we should learn to hold our beliefs strongly but not intractably, and remain committed to a search for a tentative kind of knowledge.

This suggests that perhaps the most important task of the teacher with respect to knowledge, and one which reflects both its evidential basis and provisional character, is to communicate to students a certain attitude of mind which gives equal importance to (i) a determination to gather and scrutinize relevant evidence before accepting something as true, and (ii) a readiness to admit new evidence against previous beliefs in a spirit of open-mindedness. Russell captures this paradoxical blend of hesitation and caution combined with openness and acceptance in his ideal of critical receptiveness (Hare, 2001a). Receptiveness entails being open-minded with respect to ideas, willing to entertain the possibility that new evidence may cause us to revise a view we currently hold; being critical ensures that this willingness will not collapse into a mindless credulity, but will be tempered by a determination to subject purported evidence to careful scrutiny (Hare, 2001b). Knowledge is always subject to revision, but Russell is also careful to remind us that “the world is full of cranks who hold opinions that are unusual, and the immense majority of them are merely silly” (Russell, 1950a, p. 346). The crank’s plaintive cry, “They laughed at Galileo” (Beyerstein, 1982, p. 49), would evoke little sympathy from Russell who would be concerned about the drift towards gullibility.

A delicate balancing act is required to do justice to these somewhat conflicting impulses. We must not imagine that even our “best knowledge” is wholly true (Russell, 1961a, p. 245), which means that our deepest convictions may turn out to be false; at the same time, we must not think that every belief is equally plausible, but should allow the weight of evidence to determine the degree of our conviction. Russell, of course, has his own inimitable way of conveying the idea that judgment is needed to determine when belief is reasonable, and he offers an amusing example concerning newspaper reports. If we read in the newspaper that the King is dead, it is reasonable to conclude that he is. Russell points out, however, that he once read that he himself was dead and he reports that “after careful examination of the evidence I came to the conclusion that the statement was not wholly

true” (Russell, 1950a, p. 343). It is a good story, but we also remember the serious point behind it.

The challenge for teachers, then, is to communicate the ideal of critical receptiveness so that knowledge is thought of as (i) amounting to more than mere belief without coming to be held dogmatically, and (ii) falling short of certainty without opening the floodgates to nonsense.<sup>12</sup> Russell is helpful to teachers by providing a welcome focus on the acquisition of appropriate attitudes with respect to knowledge, especially open-mindedness and a concern for truth, in marked contrast with the overwhelming emphasis today on the acquisition of skills. He recognizes that the techniques students acquire for accessing knowledge may simply not be utilized if other factors (pride, habit, wishful thinking, prejudice, and so on) make us impervious to new ideas (Russell, 1973a, p. 43). Teachers can reveal their own commitment to the attitudes implicit in critical receptiveness in various ways, such as showing that they believe in the “reasons of rules” rather than presenting rules as arbitrary dictates to be committed mindlessly to memory (Russell, 1902, p. 63), resisting the temptation to pose as omniscient, and offering students ample opportunity for full and frank discussion.

Skills are vital too, of course, if these attitudes are to be actualized, and Russell mentions in particular the ability to form an opinion for oneself, the ability to identify and question assumptions, the ability to marshal and weigh relevant evidence, the ability to estimate approximate truth, and the ability to recognize and control one’s own biases. These skills require educational experiences which offer opportunities for practice, such as listening to and critically examining propaganda for rival points of view, discussing our views with people who have different biases or even imagining an argument with someone having a different perspective,<sup>13</sup> and coming to terms with very different world views as represented in anthropology and history (Russell, 1953b, in Slater, 1997, p. 446). Out of such practice may emerge corresponding dispositions which turn the skills into a way of

life. What such dispositions have in common is a commitment to truthfulness, what Russell calls trying to be right in matters of belief.

The alarming consequence of neglecting the lesson which philosophy teaches about the limits of human knowledge, the unattainable nature of certainty, and the value of constructive doubt, is that beliefs turn into dogmas and dogmatism leads to fanaticism. The dogmatic turn of mind is closed to new ideas and refuses to admit the possibility that what is presently regarded as knowledge might have to be revised. Such an attitude precludes the possibility of genuine discussion, by which Russell means “not only outward discussion, but what may be called inward discussion: the kind of debate in one’s own thoughts that is capable of leading to a change of opinion” (Russell, 1950b, in Slater, 1997, p. 411). Given that the dogmatist, however, views opposite factions as certainly mistaken, closed-mindedness readily lends itself to intolerance and ultimately generates hatred and fanaticism. Russell’s working definition of fanaticism is thinking “some one matter so overwhelmingly important that it outweighs anything else at all” (Russell, 1960, p. 117); and it is clearly a short step from this to the conclusion that any amount of cruelty is justified if it advances one’s cause.

Knowledge, together with an appropriate conception of knowledge and a disposition to reflect and inquire, offers an important safeguard against the dogmatism and fanaticism which have distorted education and generated fear. Passive acceptance of the teacher’s views undermines independent and critical thinking with the result that “men fear thought as they fear nothing else -- more than ruin, more even than death” (Russell, 1971, p. 115). Russell rejects the extreme view that knowledge can never be harmful: “I think such general propositions can almost always be refuted by well-chosen examples. What I will maintain -- and maintain vigorously -- is that knowledge is very much more often useful than harmful and that fear of knowledge is very much more often harmful than useful” (Russell, 1961b, in Newman, 1961, pp. 13-14). These remarks on fear, which he comes to think of as the

greatest obstacle to happiness, bring us to the third quality Russell identifies as necessary for a good world .

## **Courage**

Russell accepts that the ideals of cooperation, tolerance, freedom and security require some form of preparation for citizenship, understood to involve seeing oneself as a citizen of the world not just of one's own country, and he readily agrees that "the argument in favour of some education designed to produce social cohesion is overwhelming" (Russell, 1967, p. 16). At the same time, he remains convinced that such education harbours very serious dangers, not because there is any necessary conflict between citizenship and individuality when these broad aims are considered philosophically, but because administrators and officials are likely to adopt a narrow conception of citizenship education which emphasizes uniformity of opinion, and which results in credulity and fanaticism fuelled by propaganda. Russell's philosophy of education, as we have already seen, seeks to counteract these dangers by promoting the ideal of independence for the individual, who is portrayed as growing towards autonomy under the guidance of kindly teachers, and coming to think critically and receptively about what passes for knowledge and common sense. Russell describes this kind of independence as self-direction, and labels it the habit of living from one's own centre, where one is not simply determined by outside forces (Russell, 1918, in Rempel, 1995, p. 421).

It is this emphasis on independence and thinking for oneself which largely explains the significance Russell attaches to courage as an element of the good life, and which leads to a recognition of many different occasions for courage in the lives of ordinary people. There is courage, for example, in facing derision and contempt if one speaks out against the prevailing opinion; and courage in accepting the prospect of defeat on issues where one is in the minority. Russell points out that "the apostles of conformity" will always be ready to criticize the individual who questions conventional views, and he adds that "it requires a

certain capacity to stand alone, and all the courage of the unyielding fighter in what may prove to be a losing cause” (Russell, 1918, in Rempel, 1995, p. 421). He urges people not to acquiesce in what they believe to be wrong, not to shirk their responsibilities as citizens, and not to be afraid to express disagreement or to complain about injustice (Russell, 1979, p. 10). Courage, Russell suggests, requires a very basic kind of self-respect which comes from living from one’s own centre, not being haunted by the fear of losing the admiration of others. And it requires also what he calls an impersonal outlook on life, where one’s hopes and fears are not exclusively focussed on oneself.

When he is urging people to have the courage of their convictions and to speak out against wrongdoing, it is not surprising that Russell quotes the biblical text which his grandmother, Lady Russell, had inscribed on the fly-leaf of the bible she gave him as a young boy: Thou shalt not follow a multitude to do evil (Exodus 23:2). Russell tells us in his autobiography that this particular injunction encouraged him not to be afraid of belonging to minority groups later in life, and that it was his grandmother’s fearlessness, contempt for convention, and indifference to the opinion of the majority that shaped his general outlook (Russell, 1968, p. 16). The kind of moral courage called for in the verse from scripture is more important, Russell thinks, than the much vaunted military courage we tend to invite the young to admire. He views the hostility of one’s own herd as a considerable test of moral courage, one he had to face numerous times himself, because rejection and criticism by members of one’s community is, to many people, “more painful than death” (Russell, 1943, p. 143).

There are other fears too which demand a courageous outlook. There is fear of facing the unpalatable conclusions of reasoning, and the courage to deal with them honestly. Russell cites the example of Gottlob Frege (1845-1925), the German mathematician and philosopher, who calmly accepted the fact that his entire work had been effectively undermined by Russell’s discovery of a fundamental paradox within his system (Griffin, 1992, p. 244-5). This is a dramatic instance, of course, but it is not difficult to imagine cases

in everyday life where people need courage to admit to themselves what reason reveals, perhaps that a dream they have cherished cannot be realized. There is also the fear of looking critically at ourselves, turning on our own behaviour and attitudes the spotlight we are happy to see turned on others; and the courage to admit our own shortcomings. There is fear of uncertainty and adversity, and the courage to think calmly in the face of danger. In the face of fears such as these, comforting rationalizations, self-deception, and panic-stricken responses are very tempting alternatives to courageous action.

Given its significance in ordinary life, courage is an important personal virtue for teachers simply because “in the course of imparting instruction, a teacher inevitably has certain effects upon the character and aptitudes of his pupils”; and “if teachers are themselves fired by certain ideals of life, they will communicate these ideals to a certain percentage of their pupils” (Russell, 1923, p. 255). On some conceptions of teaching, however, any closer link with courage would be tenuous. If teaching were no more than the provision of generally agreed upon information, as some teachers insist upon seeing their work, the requisite virtues would be competency, efficiency, clarity, patience, and so on. Courage would hardly be relevant. Russell’s conception of education, by contrast, belongs to a tradition of open inquiry, from Socrates to John Stuart Mill, which emphasizes independent and critical thought; and this makes the possession of courage vital for teachers because the very task of teaching from the perspective of this tradition is such as to create risk, uncertainty, and conflict with authority.

Consider, first, Russell’s view that the teacher must actively promote the critical examination of controversial issues in the classroom, which involves exposing students to “the most vehement and terrific argumentation on all sides of every question” (Russell, 1939, p. 529). The aim of teaching in this manner is to enable students to resist propaganda by becoming immune to eloquence, and to develop an open-minded, critical outlook which will make it possible for them to form an intelligent opinion for themselves. It amounts to giving students that necessary preparation for freedom without which they will not be

capable of exercising critical judgment as adults. Russell goes further than this, of course, and suggests that teachers who are prevented from expressing their own views on controversial questions are likely to be rather dull (Russell, 1967, pp. 132-3). Leaving this contentious point aside, it is clear from current opposition to the availability of certain books in schools, and from other indicators also, that the principle of students being exposed to all points of view so that they might make up their own minds about controversial issues is still far from being generally recognized, and consequently it takes some courage for teachers to promote genuinely open discussion. As Passmore puts it, anyone who sets out to teach students to be critical can expect to be harassed (Passmore, 1980, p. 180).

On a related matter, Russell argues for the importance of truthfulness in teaching, by which he does not mean necessarily believing and teaching what is in fact true, since the evidence may point to what is false, but rather a commitment to intellectual honesty. For example, Russell criticizes the teaching of social studies in his day for providing students with “a sort of copybook account of how public affairs are supposed to be conducted, [shielding students] from all knowledge as to how in fact they are conducted” (Russell, 1940b, p. 156). The ideal is presented as if it were the reality, presumably because the truth itself is “unedifying”, and this is patently dishonest. Again, however, it is extremely doubtful that everyone will welcome an honest portrayal of practices and institutions in their own society, and it will take courage to live up to this ideal. Russell, as we noted earlier, is anxious to sustain an optimistic outlook, and it is no part of his aim to foster cynicism; he believes, however, that if knowledge “comes gradually, duly intermixed with a knowledge of what is good, it will have no such effect” (Russell, 1940b, p. 157). He might have added, however, that it takes a certain courage and self confidence in teachers to attempt to achieve this delicate balance between honesty and cynicism, knowing that other teachers have tried and, by their own admission, failed (Janko, 2001).

What would Russell say to the suggestion that a good world would be one where courage was not needed? Apart from the courage required in dangerous situations which

people willingly seek out, such as mountaineering, courage tends to be needed in situations where something awful happens. This explains why some philosophers have thought that the wish to be courageous is somehow absurd (Walton, 1986, p. 194), and we might conclude that a good world is one where, exceptions duly noted, courage is not needed. Presumably Russell would say something similar to what he says in response to the objection that the virtue of open-mindedness can be taken too far. There he maintains that people are so prone to prejudice and bias that there is almost always too little open-mindedness in the world, so there is no danger in practice that advocating open-mindedness will prove harmful (Russell, 1950d, p. 39). Russell would likely contend that the evidence that people are prone to hatred, envy, and cruelty is so overwhelming that courage is likely to be always needed if a good world is to be brought into being and sustained.

In discussing the danger of open-mindedness being taken to excess, Russell is in effect raising a general problem about virtue that others have labelled the tendency to expansionism, where “part of the built-in dynamic of virtuous dispositions is to look for situations in which they can be exercised” (Yearley, 1990, p. 102). Courage may lead a person to see the need for courageous confrontation rather than imaginative compromise or ironic detachment in a given situation (Yearley, 1990, p. 102). Russell’s position, I believe, contains certain safeguards against this tendency. First, his emphasis on the variety of forms courage can take makes it easier to recognize that compromise not confrontation may actually be the courageous path at times. Second, the complex connections which hold among the three virtues we have examined mean that there are beneficial checks and balances in place, as when, for example, kindly feeling tempers any tendency towards an excessively confrontational stance, or when critical receptiveness helps us to recognize that a certain virtue is not appropriate in a particular situation.

### **Concluding comment**

The general account Russell gives of good teaching continues to be relevant and significant yet it is often overlooked when a more bureaucratic and “executive” approach to teaching dominates our thinking (Russell, 1967, p. 141). Russell’s philosophy of education is often dismissed as consisting of little more than high-sounding platitudes; and cynical reactions are not uncommon when Russell portrays teachers as motivated by enlightened emotions, possessing intellectual independence and integrity, and not easily intimidated by outside forces. Russell’s contribution, however, is valuable as a liberating and inspiring conception which takes us beyond traditional attitudes and assumptions, and widens our view of what teaching can and should be. As a result, those whose task is to select and educate teachers will have a keener sense of the qualities and attributes they wish to see exemplified in applicants and nurtured during the teacher education programme. Reflection on Russell’s ideas is perhaps particularly useful for an individual who is wondering if he or she really is suited for this demanding profession.<sup>14</sup>

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Two papers on education, possibly draft chapters for a book on education which Russell may have been planning at this time, were written in 1902 though published later. These are: (i) “The study of mathematics” (Russell, 1902a); and (ii) “The education of the emotions”, (Russell 1902b). The first was not published until 1907, but is known to have been written in October 1902; the date of the second is based on convincing circumstantial evidence (paper and handwriting) and remained unpublished until it was included in the Collected Papers, Vol. 12 (Rempel, 1985, pp. 58-61). I am indebted here to the explanatory notes in that volume, pp. 56-57.

<sup>2</sup> Russell confesses, in a paper written at the end of the Second World War, that there was a time when he failed to fully appreciate just how wide the gulf is which separates an idea from its adoption and implementation: “When I was young I supposed, ignorantly, that if people were shown quite clearly the road to general happiness, including their own, they would take it” (Russell, 1946a, in Slater, 1997, p. 73). Russell admits that he had paid insufficient attention to the power of hatred.

<sup>3</sup> I use “student” in a general sense to refer to learners from elementary school to university, the level in question being clear in context.

<sup>4</sup> Russell himself remarks on the difficulty of recognizing that one’s own behaviour may betray the very emotion one is so powerfully moved by. Referring to an occasion in 1919 when he saw “The Trojan Women” at the Old Vic, Russell comments: “There was hardly a dry eye in the theatre, and the audience found the cruelty of the Greeks in the play hardly credible. Yet those very people who wept were, at that very moment, practising that very cruelty on a scale which the imagination of Euripides could have never contemplated” (Russell, 1985, p. 20).

<sup>5</sup> It is worth noting, however, that Russell’s interest in education goes back even further. In a letter to Alys in September 1894, Russell observes that he would almost like to start a co-education school for the purpose of applying his theories about sex education. See Griffin, 1992, p. 115.

<sup>6</sup> Martha Nussbaum, rightly defending the value and relevance of theory in ethics, remarks that “no normative political theory uses terms that are straightforwardly those of ordinary daily life” (Nussbaum, 2000, p. 35). Russell, I believe, wants to show what is presupposed in the ordinary term “kindly feeling” if it is taken seriously.

<sup>7</sup> One is reminded of Freire’s notion of “affirmative love” (Freire, 2001, p. 146). Certainly, because of the unconditional love felt for their children, parents are very often able to love their children even if they choose a world view different from the one their parents hold. This, of course, does not preclude the possibility of attempting to force such a view on one’s children, and the attempt is often successful. I thank Sheryle Bergmann Drewe for helping me to clarify this point.

<sup>8</sup> It is worth noting that Russell mentions consciousness of the possibility of individual excellence as a key reason why spontaneous affection is important in education (Russell, 1939, p. 534)..

<sup>9</sup> Russell’s comment is clearly relevant to the problem in our own day of school officials failing to address the problem of bullying.

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<sup>10</sup> Russell is critical of “high-class educationists” who disparage the value of technical knowledge and practical skill (Russell, 1921, p. 219).

<sup>11</sup> John Passmore’s maxim comes to mind: “Wherever possible and as soon as possible, substitute problems for exercises” (Passmore, 1980, p. 178).

<sup>12</sup> Russell describes critical receptiveness as the true attitude of science, not because it is unique to science but because it is most strikingly demonstrated in that field.

<sup>13</sup> Russell suggests that such imaginary dialogue may lead to us “growing less dogmatic and cocksure through realizing the possible reasonableness of a hypothetical opponent” (Russell, 1943, p. 138).

<sup>14</sup> A version of this paper was presented at the 29th Annual Conference of the Canadian Society for the Study of Education, Quebec City, May 2001. I am grateful to my commentator on that occasion, Sheryle Bergmann Drewe, for helpful criticisms and suggestions. I also wish to thank an anonymous reviewer for this journal for recommending the title I have used, and for other valuable comments.