

# IN PRAISE OF HABIT: MAKING A CASE FOR A RELATION BETWEEN HAPPINESS AND WILLIAM JAMES'S CONCEPTION OF HABIT

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Bertrand Russell argued in his essay "In Praise of Idleness" that happiness can be derived from leisure. It can be claimed on Russell's view that leisure is a causally sufficient condition<sup>1</sup> to the achievement of happiness. Roughly, then, Russell's view is that if human beings have more leisure time, we will be happier.

An alternative to Russell's view—and a stronger alternative, as I will argue—can be found in James's account of habit in *The Principles of Psychology*<sup>2</sup>. Therein James writes,

There is no more miserable human being than one in whom nothing is habitual but indecision, and for whom the lighting of every cigar, the drinking of every cup, the time of rising and going to bed every day, and the beginning of every bit of work are subjects of express volitional deliberation. Full [*sic*] half the time of such a man goes to the deciding or regretting of matters which ought to be so ingrained in him as practically not to exist for his consciousness at all. If there be such daily duties not yet ingrained in any one of my hearers, let him begin this very hour to set the matter right.<sup>3</sup>

My aim in this paper is to make a positive case in the Jamesian spirit that there is a relation between the cultivation and exercise of useful habits<sup>4</sup>, and happiness. James does not explicitly argue for such a relation, but it can be established through an analysis of some of his writings about habit, and this is what I will set out to do in this paper. Additionally, I will argue that James's conception of habit and its relation to happiness stands as a stronger alternative to Russell's account. James is, of course, not responding to Russell's account; the purpose of including Russell in this paper is merely to use his account as a foil to the Jamesian account offered herein.

My thesis is that the Jamesian conception of habit can be construed as one of the necessary and sufficient conditions to achieving happiness, where happiness is understood in a pre-philosophical way as a state of feeling pleasure or contentment.<sup>5</sup> I will argue for this claim on the basis of an analysis of James's writings on habit from his *Principles*, and in particular from his remarks concerning both the "practical applications of [habit] to human life"<sup>6</sup> and the "ethical implications of [habit]."<sup>7</sup> If we interpret James's conception of habit as at least one of the necessary and sufficient conditions to achieving happiness, then it follows that human beings can achieve happier lives through the cultivation and exercise of (useful) habits, as James understands them. I will then argue that this is confirmed by James's example of the "miserable human being...in whom nothing is habitual but indecision," and by others of his observations on habit. I will, furthermore, show that Russell's alternative claim that leisure produces happiness is not as strong a hypothesis as the Jamesian one I will defend.

## II. RUSSELL ON THE LEISURE-HAPPINESS RELATION

The primary impetus of Russell's essay is his opinion that working, and its alleged status as a virtue, are stressed far too much.<sup>8</sup> He argues that a decrease in working hours, and the mitigation of the "belief in the virtuousness of work"<sup>9</sup> will increase our leisure time, which will in turn make us happier. Russell believes that the advent of modern technology in industry, with all its efficiencies, should make it possible that working hours be decreased and leisure time increased.<sup>10</sup> On this score, Russell argues that the workday should be reduced to four hours.<sup>11</sup> If this were the case, Russell argues, then our needs would be sufficiently met, there would be no unemployment, and our leisure time would greatly increase.<sup>12</sup> According to Russell, less work and more leisure will generate opportunities for humans to pursue and cultivate our interests and pleasures, whatever they may be.<sup>13</sup> We will, then, live happier lives, because we would be afforded the time to pursue and cultivate our interests and pleasures.<sup>14</sup>

The primary desideratum for happiness on Russell's account is that leisure is sufficient, but not necessary, to achieving happiness. Russell would not claim that happiness depends on leisure, seeing as there is nothing explicit in his account that would commit him to such a relation. Indeed, the most telling remark he makes about the relation between leisure and happiness is that "it is from leisure that [humans] derive whatever happiness they may enjoy."<sup>15</sup> Moreover, that happiness does not depend on leisure, on Russell's account, can be confirmed by examples showing that such a relation does not necessarily hold. For instance, we can easily imagine a human who has no leisure time, but is nevertheless happy. We may conclude from this simple example that on Russell's account of the leisure-happiness relation, leisure is not a necessary condition to achieving happiness, though it is plausible that leisure is a sufficient condition to achieving happiness.

So, although in some cases leisure can be plausibly said to produce happiness, it does not follow, according to Russell's view, that happiness depends on leisure. As I will argue, the cultivation and exercise of habits, as articulated by James, contributes more to our achieving happiness than does leisure. Moreover, our having habits constitutes a stronger desideratum for the achievement of happiness than does leisure.

## III. JAMES AND THE HABIT-HAPPINESS RELATION

As mentioned at the outset of this paper, I offer my argument for the relation between happiness and the Jamesian conception of habit not as a refutation of Russell's view, but as an alternative, stronger view of how happiness can be achieved. It should also be reiterated that James does not explicitly argue for a necessary and sufficient relation between habit and happiness, but such a relation can be demonstrated by what he writes about habit in the *Principles*.

After explaining the physiological nature of habit, James calls attention to the "practical applications of [habit] to human life"<sup>16</sup> as well as its "ethical implications."<sup>17</sup> He begins his discussion of the practical applications of habit to our lives by noting that "*habit simplifies the movements required to achieve a given result, makes them more accurate and diminishes fatigue.*"<sup>18</sup> Part of the practicality of habit for human life, then, is located in the way in which habits make our lives and actions more efficient. We all have a limited economy of time and energy in our lives. So, if we have to constantly think through every single action we undertake, we would not accomplish very much, and we would inevitably become very tired, which in turn would contribute to our accomplishing even less. As James writes, "[i]f practice did not make perfect,

nor habit economize the expense of nervous and muscular energy, [we] would therefore be in a sorry plight.”<sup>19</sup> This is confirmed by imagining if we did not have any habits. For example, if a musician has not cultivated the habit of playing through the various musical scales on her instrument, she would probably not have much of a productive career. We can imagine many examples of this sort, but by simply imagining our lives without our various habits validates James’s claim. Most would agree that life without habits would be tiresome and unproductive.

James identifies yet another practical application of habit. He writes, “*habit diminishes the conscious attention with which our acts are performed.*”<sup>20</sup> Imagine, again, a life without habits. Imagine having to think through every action you undertake from the most mundane to the most complicated. Again, it is plausible that most would agree that our lives would lack efficiency if we had to think through each and every step we must take towards carrying out our actions. But habits, according to James, reduce this step-by-step mental process. James provides an elucidation of this:

If an act require for its execution a chain, *A, B, C, D, E, F, G*, etc., of successive nervous events, then in the first performances of the action the conscious will must choose each of these events from a number of wrong alternatives...but habit soon brings it about that each event calls up its own appropriate successor without any alternative offering itself, and without any reference to the conscious will, until the whole chain, *A, B, C, D, E, F, G*, rattles itself off as soon as *A* occurs, just as if *A* and the rest of the chain were fused into a continuous stream.<sup>21</sup>

When we are first learning to perform some activity—for example, playing a musical instrument—we are consciously aware of the steps necessary towards carrying out that activity. But, as James notes, once we have performed those steps enough times, they become habituated, and we are able to perform the activity without having to be consciously aware of the necessary steps. Thus, habits produce in us a physical and mental efficiency and energy.

After discussing the practicality of habit, James moves on to a discussion of what he sees as the ethical implications of habit. James argues that the cultivation of habits is a crucial component to our living better lives. This is confirmed, again, by the practical implications of habit, which were described in the foregoing. Our having habits will increase both our mental and physical efficiency, which will enable us to live more productive lives. To this effect, James writes, “[h]abit is thus the enormous fly-wheel of society, its most precious conservative agent.”<sup>22</sup>

James elaborates on this by noting that it is advantageous for us to develop as many useful actions in to habits as we can.<sup>23</sup> He argues that such development will engender our being able to commit “our higher powers of mind...[to] their own proper work.”<sup>24</sup> It is worth quoting again the passage I cited at the outset of this paper, as it is the most telling and elucidatory passage from this discussion.

There is no more miserable human being than one in whom nothing is habitual but indecision, and for whom the lighting of every cigar, the drinking of every cup, the time of rising and going to bed every day, and the beginning of every bit of work are subjects of express volitional deliberation. Full [*sic*] half the time of such a man goes to the deciding or regretting of matters which ought to be so ingrained in him as practically not to exist for his consciousness at all. If there be

such daily duties not yet ingrained in any one of my hearers, let him begin this very hour to set the matter right.<sup>25</sup>

With this passage in mind, along with the foregoing presentation of James's view on habit, we can begin to make a case for the relation between habit and happiness.

As James teaches us, if we live without habits, we will not only be physically and mentally drained, but we will also be almost entirely unproductive. Committing our physical and mental energy to the carrying out of every task, without having habits to expedite the process, will, on James's view, make us miserable. But which habits are we to cultivate and exercise? The answer is *useful* habits. By 'useful habits' I mean, in accord with the foregoing analysis, those habits that enable us to live and act more efficiently both mentally and physically. Such habits make it possible for us to commit "our higher powers of mind...[to] their own proper work."<sup>26</sup> So, the habit of not practicing one's musical instrument would not count as a useful habit, because it does not contribute to the musician's acting more efficiently, and ultimately impinges on her mental and physical efficiency. However, the habit of practicing one's musical instrument does count as a useful habit, because it allows the musician to become more mentally and physically efficient when it comes to playing her musical instrument. The musician can, as a result, pursue her interest in and desire for performing more complicated and rewarding music.

Cultivating and exercising useful habits affords us the possibility of pursuing our interests and pleasures, because we will not have to spend nearly all our time thinking through each and every action we undertake. This in turn provides us with a basis upon which we can achieve a happy life, since we are, in a manner of speaking, freed up to pursue our interests and desires. It is in this sense that the Jamesian conception of habit can be construed as one of the necessary and sufficient conditions to achieving happiness. So, at least one desideratum for achieving happiness is cultivating and exercising useful habits.

It may be reasonably objected that the claim that useful habits contribute to our happiness depends on a not unproblematic assumption, namely, that if we are not miserable, then we are happy. Indeed, drawing from James's passage, it seems more likely that useful habits are sufficient for making a person *not* miserable, which is admittedly a different and weaker claim than the one being setting forth here. That one is not miserable does not necessarily entail that one is happy.

Despite this objection, James's claim, given his account of habit, can be interpreted in a stronger way than that habits contribute to our not being miserable. This can be confirmed, once again, by imagining life without useful habits. It is not likely that we would be able to achieve happiness if we did not have such habits, because most of our time and energy would be spent on the minutia of each and every one of the actions we undertake, so much so that we would have little time to pursue the interests or activities that make us happy. Thus, it can be plausibly claimed that happiness depends on our cultivating and exercising useful habits. In other words, useful habits are a necessary condition to achieving happiness. Moreover, because having useful habits, under the Jamesian conception, significantly decreases the time and energy we must spend on carrying out actions, it follows that we will have more time and energy to pursue the interests and activities that make us happy. Thus, it can, furthermore, be plausibly claimed that cultivating and exercising useful habits can contribute to our achieving happiness. In other words, useful habits are a sufficient condition to achieving happiness. To summarize, on the Jamesian account of habits' practical and ethical implications for human life, useful habits can be understood as both necessary and sufficient towards achieving happiness. That

is to say, if one has a great deal of useful habits, then one will be happier, and if one is happy, one will no doubt have lots of useful habits.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

If the preceding argument regarding the relation between the Jamesian conception of habit and happiness is correct, then it can also be claimed that James's conception of habit stands as a stronger desideratum for achieving happiness than does leisure on Russell's account. As was argued in the abovementioned, Russell articulates the claim that leisure is a sufficient condition to achieving happiness. However, there is good reason to call this conception of happiness in to doubt, because it can be imagined that one has all the leisure time in the world, yet has a life which is stricken with pain or strife. It is, therefore, not very plausible that leisure, in all cases, will produce happiness. Even if we grant the truth of Russell's claim, it still does not constitute a very strong desideratum for achieving happiness, because it can only demonstrate that happiness can be achieved through leisure, and leaves it open about what happiness depends on.

Where Russell's account fails, James's succeeds. We can interpret James's account of habit as providing something upon which happiness can depend, namely, useful habits. Moreover, we can regard useful habits as standing as a sufficient condition for achieving happiness. Thus, because we can interpret James's conception of habit as constituting one of the necessary and sufficient conditions to achieving happiness, it stands as a stronger and thereby more satisfactory account of the way in which we can achieve happiness than Russell's conception of leisure.

Ultimately, then, the following has been demonstrated in this paper: first, that the Jamesian conception of habit can be interpreted as constituting a way in which we can achieve happiness; second, that the Jamesian account does so more satisfactorily than the Russelian approach; and, third, that at least one desideratum for achieving happiness can be found in James's account of habit.

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#### REFERENCES

- James, William. *The Principles of Psychology*. Vol. 1, *The Principles of Psychology*. New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1890.  
Russell, Bertrand. *In Praise of Idleness and Other Essays*. Oxford: Routledge, 2004.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> For the purpose of succinctness, I will simply use the phrase 'sufficient

<sup>2</sup> Hereafter referred to as the *Principles*.

<sup>3</sup> William James, *The Principles of Psychology*, vol. 1, *The Principles of Psychology* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1890), 122.

<sup>4</sup> I will elaborate on what I mean by 'useful habits' in the penultimate section of this paper.

<sup>5</sup> This is admittedly a pre-critical conception of happiness, which is not entirely philosophically satisfactory. A more developed conception that might pair well with the argument I set forth in this paper could plausibly take as its intellectual predecessor Aristotle and his conception of eudaimonia, and a life of virtuous activity. Given time restrictions I will not develop such an account here.

<sup>6</sup> James, *The Principles of Psychology*, 112.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 120.

<sup>8</sup> Bertrand Russell, *In Praise of Idleness and Other Essays* (Oxford: Routledge, 2004), 1.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> James, *The Principles of Psychology*, 112.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 120.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 112; James's emphasis.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 113.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 114; James's emphasis.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.; James's emphasis.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 121.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 122.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.