

# Reflection Essay on Bertrand Russell's "A Free Man's Worship"

肖瑶

21 December 2022

In "A Free Man's Worship," Bertrand Russell grapples with the question of the meaning of life in the face of an indifferent and impersonal universe. Science has revealed to us the vastness and complexity of the universe and has shown that our place in it is small and insignificant. In the face of this revelation, he asserts that traditional religious beliefs, which posit the existence of a personal God who cares about and intervenes in the lives of human beings, are no longer tenable. Instead, Russell argues that the only way to find a sense of purpose and meaning in life is the pursuit of truth ——"free man's worship," further demonstrated by two of his main ideas which can be summed up in one sentence that the body belongs to nature, while the mind belongs to ourselves.

One of the major themes in Russell's essay is the wisdom of resignation, which Russell argues that man is forced to come to this world, and his birth and growth are only "the product of causes", a result of the accidental combination of various factors (80). Similarly, people cannot predict and go beyond the grave of death, and inevitably move towards the situation of being "buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins" (Russell 80). Therefore, humans originate from the force of Nature and end up with the will of Death, even during which they are also enslaved and oppressed by various external Forces that cannot be controlled. From a Marxist perspective, this idea of resignation could be seen as a form of

submission to capitalist ideology and the power dynamics that it upholds. The acceptance of the fact that we are small and insignificant in the face of the universe could be seen as an acceptance of our place in the capitalist hierarchy, in which some are able to attain power and wealth while others are relegated to positions of powerlessness and poverty. In this sense, the wisdom of resignation could not only be seen as a way of acknowledging the current power dynamics at play in the world, but also as a way of finding the strength and determination to confront and change them.

Also, the wisdom of resignation could be seen as a form of Taoism philosophical acceptance of the universe's natural flow of “inaction.” It emphasizes the importance of living in harmony with the natural world, and the idea of resignation could be seen as a way of accepting the natural course of events and finding peace and contentment in the present moment. Some scholars who study the differences between Chinese and Western philosophy point out that:

Russell also noted the influence of Taoism philosophy on Chinese politics. He says traditional Chinese politics does not have the dynamic and destructive qualities of Western rulers. In fact, they were just obeying Zhuangzi's instructions. (Xu 4)

Direct confrontation will only make our own black and blue, roundabout compliance is the best way to accumulate strength. In this way, the wisdom of resignation could be seen as a method of a focus on the present moment and a letting go of the desire to control or change the course of events.

Another theme in Russell's essay is the power of contemplation, which means that though we achieve resignation by giving up our desires of the body, and the freedom of our

minds can still actively create art, philosophy, and beauty. In both philosophical and religious traditions, the wisdom of resignation is often paired with the power of contemplation. As Russell puts it:

In action, in desire, we must submit perpetually to the tyranny of outside forces; but in thought, in aspiration, we are free, free from our fellow-men, free from the petty planet on which our bodies impotently crawl, free even, while we live, from the tyranny of death (Russell 84).

Rather than simply accepting the state of affairs, Marxists would argue that it is important to challenge and subvert capitalist ideology by critically analyzing and questioning the underlying power dynamics at play in the world. By engaging in contemplation, we will have a powerful tool to identify the ways in which capitalist ideology shapes and controls our thoughts and actions, thus working towards creating a more equitable and just society. Additionally, Russell's view of happiness has much in common with Marxist view of happiness. Russell wrote in his other book named Proposed Roads to Freedom:

The world that we must seek is a world in which the creative spirit is alive, in which life is an adventure full of joy and hope, based rather upon the impulse to construct than upon the desire to retain what we possess or to seize what is possessed by others. (242)

Such an ideal world is also very similar to the communist ideal world, where materials are highly developed and people's spirits are extremely rich.

Overall, the wisdom of resignation and the power of contemplation are both important tools for finding inner peace and contentment in the face of the challenges and uncertainties of life. By accepting what we cannot change but emancipating our thoughts and souls, we can

develop a greater awareness of the interconnectedness of all things and learn to live in harmony with the natural world, thus eventually better equipped to navigate the ups and downs of life with grace and equanimity.

Works Cited

Russell, Bertrand. Proposed Roads to Freedom. Paris: Feedbooks, 1918.

Russell, Bertrand. “A Free Man’s Worship”. Mysticism and Logic and Other Essays.

Auckland: The Floating Press, 2010.

许苏民. “‘市人矜巧智,于道若童蒙’——论罗素的中西哲学比较研究.” 学术研究 09

(2013): 1-8+2.