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Constraints on the Contemplative life in Rousseau’s *Reveries*

Poor Rousseau. In *The Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, Rousseau informs us that he is a subject to “the most horrible lot any mortal has undergone on earth” (35). His agony is so all consuming that “physical suffering itself, instead of increasing my torments, would bring diversion from them… the rending of my body would stay the rending of my heart” (3). But Rousseau, in addition to informing us about the extent of his spiritual pain, also insists that he is supremely happy, saying “I am a hundred times happier in my solitude than I could ever be living among them” (4). He has arrived at new revelations about the nature of true happiness, leaning that “the source of true happiness is within us and it is not within the power of men to make anyone who can will to be happy truly miserable” (13).

In this essay we will address a few questions: what is wrong with Rousseau? Why is he so unhappy? Or is he happy? As we have just come from reading the *Social Contract*, an understanding of Rousseau’s misery (or happiness?) might seem somewhat unimportant. After all, he might just be a whiner.

But it is important—after all, politics is a response to human desires. In Rousseau’s unhappiness we are shown, with great clarity, the problematic desires of the self-aware being. Rousseau reveals that hiding beneath the activity of amour propre is the much simpler desire to have some sort of meaning in life.

First Walk

The first walk presents us with enough material to hypothesize about the causes of Rousseau’s misery and happiness.

Here, we can attribute his misery is attributed to his isolation and bad reputation. Rousseau opens the book with a statement of his alienation from society, saying: “I am now alone on earth, no longer having any brother, neighbor, friend, or society other than myself” (1). He admits to imagining that he might “wake up fully relieved of my pain and find myself once again with my friends” (1), seeming to imply that the pain could be ameliorated if he did have some society other than himself. He complains of how he has “become the horror of the human race” (2) despite his pure intentions; it turns out that the “masters of [his] fate” are people other than Rousseau.

But there is still something that Rousseau can control: his inner life. He makes the final free still can, “that of submitting to my fate without railing against necessity any longer” (2). Having recognized his own powerlessness, Rousseau becomes free from his tormenters, telling us that by revealing how hopeless things are, his persecutors, “have deprived themselves of all mastery over me, and henceforth I can laugh at them” (3).

The result is that Rousseau, while maybe not joyful, becomes godlike. Having renounced his earthly hopes and accepted that “everything is finished for me on earth…. Here I am, tranquil at the bottom of the abyss, a poor unfortunate mortal, but unperturbed, like God Himself” (5). The activity of this tranquil and self-sufficient soul is contemplation. Contemplation is the only truly free act: “Let me give myself up entirely to the sweetness of conversing with my soul, since that is the only thing men cannot take away from me” (6).

The point of writing his reflections down, however, is something else. Rousseau claims that “reading them will recall the delight I enjoy in writing them and causing the past to be born again for me will, so to speak, double my existence. In spite of mankind, I will still be able to enjoy the charm of society” (7). By being able to derive this sentiment without an actual social interaction, Rousseau appears to have transcended the difficulties of his amour propre. As an aware human being, Rousseau craves recognition—and now he receives it from himself. Rousseau claims this way of living is sustainable and satisfying. In the second walk, Rousseau says that, “no longer finding any food here on earth for my heart, I gradually became accustomed to feeding it with its own substance and to looking within myself for all its nourishment” (13). He claims that this method is so satisfying that “it soon sufficed to compensate for everything” (13).

Since he does not depend on external rewards for his happiness, he is actually freer than the legislator. The legislator might defer is need for glory, but it does not disappear. He is described as “one who, preparing his distant glory in the progress of times, could work in one century and enjoy the reward in another. It would require gods to give men laws” (Social Contract 69).

Here Rousseau is completely free and it appears all his spiritual needs are met. So, he’s happy, right? Let us pause and remember that this is not a cheerful book. The recipe for happiness hypothesized above (contemplation combined with reading ones contemplations) might be sufficient if Rousseau’s woes really were mainly caused by his solitude.

Third Walk

If this were a longer paper, I would treat the Second Walk and show how Rousseau slowly realizes that there is no order in human affairs. For now, it will suffice to examine Rousseau’s restatement of how he bears to be so detached from worldly things.

At the end of the Second Walk, Rousseau repeats the renunciation we saw in walk one. “Let me, therefore, leave men and fate to go their ways” (21). This time, however, he does not suggest that self-reliance gives him the tools to continue on. Rather, he derives consolation from one thing totally out of his control: God. He says: “God is just; He wills that I suffer; and He now that I am innocent… in the end, everything must return to order, and my turn will come sooner or later” (21). Here, he attributes his endurance to his belief that eventually, in another life, he will receive the reward for his struggle.

The need to perceive some order in things animates the Third Walk. He states this desire more explicitly in the third walk, saying “I have sought frequently and for a long time to know the true end of my life” (29) and that the nature of solitude leads one “to lift himself up incessantly to the author of things, to search with tender concern for the purpose in everything he sees and the cause of everything he feels” (30).

In the third walk, Rousseau explicitly attributes his happiness to, and only to, his perception of a cosmic order—and his misery to his skepticism about its existence. After arriving at his conclusions about God (essentially the doctrine of the Savoyard Vicar) he tells us how it makes him serene, saying: “all of the most intense pains lose their strength for anyone who sees the great and sure compensation for them, and the certainty of this compensation was the principal fruit I had drawn out of my preceding meditations” (36).

But, oddly, there never was any certainty—though Rousseau will claim otherwise. Though the cosmic order and Rousseau’s soul are “the things that were most important for me to know” they are, cruelly, “matters human intelligence has so little hold over” (34). Therefore, Rousseau “adopted for each sentiment which seemed to me the best established by direct means and the most believable in itself without paying attention to objections I could not resolve” (34). Though he could never fully answer all objections, “vain arguments will never destroy the congruity I perceive between my immortal nature, the constitution of this world, and the physical order I see reigning in it” (35).

He attributes his happiness solely to his religious conviction, literally saying that without the discovery of the moral order “I would be the most unhappy of creatures” and that it “alone suffices to render me happy in spite of fortune and men” (35).

We know that moral freedom is living by a law of ones own creation. As the religious doctrine Rousseau lives by is of his own creation and arrived at through reason, Rousseau is living by his own law. But he is not quite as free as we proposed earlier. Rousseau is still governed by necessity; that is, by the pressing need for meaning found in his own soul. This need constrains what we previously viewed as a truly free state.

After arriving at his doctrine, Rousseau continues to be plagued by skepticism. Knowing that his heart requires some sort glimmer of hope to go on, Rousseau makes what can only be described as a reasoned decision to cease reasoning. His reasons for rejecting further reasoning are twofold.

First, he was in his prime when he arrived at his doctrine—how is it reasonable to overturn such a doctrine when his reason is now feeble? He asks: “shall I place more trust in my declining reason, thereby making myself unjustly unhappy, than in my full and vigorous reason, thereby getting compensation for the evils I suffer without having deserved them?” (38). The second reason is that these modern philosophers were not really motivated by a real love of truth, but rather by “passions which govern their doctrines and their interest in having this or that believed” (32). Neither of these reasons address the actual arguments made by the skeptics.

Eventually, he reaches the point where his reasons stop looking convincingly like reasons at all. At one point, even though he is “unable to perform the mental operations needed to reassure myself, I must recall my former resolutions. The cares, the attention, the heartfelt sincerity that I applied in forming them come back to my mind then and restore all of my confidence” (39). Finally, “fallen into mental languor and heaviness, I have forgotten even the reasonings on which I grounded my belief and my maxims, but I will never forget the conclusions I drew from them” (39). At this point, Rousseau’s belief in having reasoned well (which, as we discussed, he never really did) becomes a sort of faith.

So, despite spending his time lost in contemplation, Rousseau has become intellectually closed. He tells us that “thus, I refuse all new ideas as baleful errors which have only a false appearance and are good only to trouble my rest” (39). The stakes are simply too high for Rousseau to risk further reasoning. Rousseau still needs his existence to have some meaning. At one point, Rousseau wonders:

“What would I have become... if—having remained without a refuge where I could escape from my implacable persecutors, without compensation for the disgrace to which they submit me in this world, and without hope of ever obtaining the justice due to me—I had seen myself completely surrendered up to the most horrible lot any mortal has undergone on earth?” (35)

He gives us the answer to this question, too, saying of his skepticism, “if I had ever spent an entire month in this state, my life and I would have been done for” (37). Necessity demands that he hold himself to the doctrine of a just cosmic order, no matter what his reason says. Otherwise, life simply would have been unbearable for him. It is also worth noting that this “surrender” to fate with no hope of compensation sounds an awful lot like the self-sufficient state Rousseau describes in the first walk. The nature of human desire, though, makes the kind of self-sufficiency we hypothesized impossible.

Rousseau’s Misery, Revisited

In the third walk, Rousseau evokes Socrates, who describes philosophy as “learning how to die” right before he himself does it. Rousseau says that “if there is any study appropriate for an old man, it is solely to learn to die” (28).

But where Socrates engages metaphysical questions even on his deathbed, Rousseau declares very clearly that “ignorance is still preferable” (27). Rousseau tells us that the agony of this examination is so extreme that even the philosopher must cease his quest and hold back from the “dangerous pride of wanting to learn what I am henceforth unable to know well” (40).

Where Socrates tells us is that the unexamined life is not worth living, Rousseau describes the moment where he lost his self-awareness as rapturous. Right after being struck down by the dog, Rousseau says,

“This first sensation was a delicious moment… I was born into life at that instant, and it seemed to me that I filled all the objects I perceived with my frail existence. Entirely absorbed in the present moment, I remembered nothing; I had no distinct notion of my person nor the least idea of what had just happened to me; I knew neither who I was nor where I was…. I felt a rapturous calm in my whole being; and each time I remember it I find nothing comparable to it in all the activity of known pleasures” (16)

Slowly, Rousseau regains his self-awareness, his identity—his baggage. One begins to see why Rousseau might think of the shift towards self-awareness as a curse.

Self-awareness demands that we try and understand ourselves. One way of doing this is what Rousseau describes as the activity caused by Amour Propre: striving to be better than ones peers and constantly comparing oneself to them. But people do not compare themselves with one another because they just love comparing, but because are searching for meaning in their lives and they find it socially.

In the first walk, Rousseau casually asks: “but I, detached from them and from everything, what am I? That is what remains for me to seek” (1). Originally, it sounds like this will be the animating question of this book. As it turns out, this is a statement of the tortuous question lodged in every self-aware being’s heart. So, to return to our original question: yes, Rousseau is miserable. But then again, so is everyone.

Still, there is something unique about Rousseau’s situation. Isolated from his peers, his life work rendered meaningless, Rousseau finds himself confronting the agony of self-awareness with none of the usual tools for sating it available. While the ability to meditate and read ones meditations—to provide “the charm of society” within oneself—is a helpful tool for decrepit Rousseau. But while it is one thing to have a sentiment of ones existence, it is another thing entirely to feel that one’s existence was *meaningful*. At this point, meaning needs some sort of vindication, the existence of some external judge—whether it be God or society—and the individual, no matter how whole, cannot produce it himself.