

“Everything on earth is in a state of constant flux” (55)

The Role of Imagination and Society in Pursuing Lasting Happiness

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While explaining the peace he found at Lac de Bienne in the “Fifth Walk,” Rousseau writes that a “simple and lasting state” (55) of happiness is hard to attain, largely due to heightened emotional fluctuations caused by the imagination. Rousseau repeatedly explains that his imagination increases his emotional turmoil due to his disconnectedness from society. Upsetting interactions are capable of terrifying the imagination and therefore cause one to move away from lasting happiness and spiral into negative emotion. Conversely, there are extreme moments of pleasure that, “are too rare and too fleeting,” (55) and instead should be viewed as just a temporary positive ebb in the “constant flux” (55) of life. While looking at the surface of a lake, Rousseau relates the constant flux of his emotions to the movement of the water, explaining why a lasting state of happiness is ideal. The *Reveries* use imagery and word choice to demonstrate that the “imagination” prompts departures from an ideal “lasting state” of happiness by causing one to either get lost in the pleasurable memories of the past or be anxious about the present and future; since interactions with society activate the imagination, which causes emotional instability,

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individualism is the most crucial quality when pursuing a “lasting state” of happiness.

Through contrasting pleasure and happiness, the text demonstrates that the latter is sought after as a “quiet resting place” through personification, word choice involving movement, and Rousseau’s shifting viewpoints. When elaborating on the type of happiness he strives for, Rousseau writes:

...if there is a state where the soul can find a position solid enough to allow it to remain there entirely and gather together its whole being,...the person who is in it can call himself happy, not with an imperfect, poor, and relative happiness, such as one finds the pleasures of life, but with a sufficient, perfect, and full happiness. (55)

People often mistake an “imperfect, poor, and relative happiness,” which the text defines as “pleasure,” for the “sufficient, perfect, and full” happiness that Rousseau pursues, which is harder to obtain because it is not temporary. In order to experience this “lasting state” of happiness, one must be in a “solid” emotional position that allows them to “gather together” their “whole being.” Since Rousseau undertakes the reveries in order to deeply examine his life, it can be inferred that one of the goals of the reveries is to find this “solid” emotional position, therefore allowing him to experience “full happiness” in his later years. The text uses movement to emphasize the need to find emotional stability: “...my ardent imagination leapt over the whole span of the life that I had barely begun, as if it were unfamiliar territory to me, and sought instead to settle in a quiet resting place where I could make my dwelling” (21). Through the personification of the imagination and its ability to leap “over the whole span” of life, the text highlights living, moving, and changing qualities that

do not necessarily provide emotional stability. However, Rousseau seeking “instead to settle in a quiet resting place” relates to the “solid” emotional position (55) one needs to obtain in order to experience the “sufficient, perfect, and full” happiness. However, Rousseau contradicts himself later on, saying, “...the pleasure that we enjoy in this world is almost always transitionary; I suspect it is impossible to find any lasting happiness at all” (55). The changing viewpoints in the text can be interpreted as competing positions that win in his mind depending upon the circumstances. However, the more insightful claim is that the back-and-forth nature of Rousseau’s position on whether or not lasting happiness is attainable proves that “everything on earth is in a state of constant flux” (55), which creates the need for a “quiet resting place” to escape. Also, the fact that the text distinguishes between “happiness” and “pleasure” again in this passage solidifies that “pleasure” is just a temporary positive ebb in the “constant flux” since it is “transitionary.” Furthermore, the fact that Rousseau doesn’t have a solid stance on whether “lasting happiness” is possible starts to hint at a theme that is further developed later on: the ease with which emotional instability is caused by imagination.

The *Reveries* use imagery and diction to unpack the extreme level of instability of a “simple and lasting state” of happiness and the resulting agitation to one’s emotions. When looking at the surface of the lake, Rousseau writes, “...there came to mind some brief reflection on the instability of this world, the image of which I saw on the surface of the water: but soon these fragile impressions faded away before the steadiness of the continuous movement which lulled me...” (54). Although the generalization of the “instability of this world” creates a melancholic, pessimistic tone, the text importantly distinguishes between “instabilities” and the “steadiness of the

continuous movement” here. One little disturbance can cause many ripples on the surface of the water, just like one small event is capable of unsettling our emotional flux. In contrast, the “steadiness” of the water represents solid baseline happiness, which is calming and therefore necessary to offset the ebbs and flows. When explaining his past feelings, Rousseau writes, “...I felt, in the continual agitation of my heart, all the instability of human things. This stormy life neither gave me onward peace nor outward tranquility” (83). Again, “instability” refers to the frequency and ease with which imagination causes one to live a confusing, “stormy life” due to emotional fluctuations. Furthermore, a state of “tranquility” and “onward peace” is almost impossible to acquire due to the instability of our emotions, which instead causes a “continual agitation” of one’s heart. By using such vivid diction, the text demonstrates the emotional frustration and turmoil one goes through when they decide to live a “stormy life” controlled by their imagination, rather than pursue a more peaceful life with “full” happiness. Imagination causes emotional instability easily; however, imagination functions in specific ways as to bring one further from a “simple and lasting state” of happiness.

By evaluating the extent to which the imagination can prompt memories of pleasure in the past and ignite negative fears of the present and future, the *Reveries* show that “imagination” can create ebbs and flows in life’s “constant flux.” In the “Fifth Walk,” Rousseau explains positive moments in his emotional flux: “...it is not the memory of the periods of the sweetest joys and keenest pleasures that draws me and touches me the most” (54). Here, the text demonstrates that the imagination resurrects a happy “memory” of either the “sweetest joy” or “keenest pleasure,” therefore leading to a positive influx of emotion. Furthermore, the “Fifth Walk” as a

whole shows how imagination allows one to get lost in memories of happiness that are “too rare and too fleeting to constitute a proper state of being” (54-55). Although one could argue that memory alone causes positive fluctuations, imagination is what heightens the pleasures of the past: “...they will not stop me from transporting myself there every day on the wings of my imagination and tasting for a few hours the same pleasures as if I were still living there” (57). Therefore, one uses the “imagination” as a tool to magnify pleasurable memories, causing temporary positive ebbs in their “constant flux.” Even though the word “imagination” usually carries positive connotations, Rousseau utilizes it to describe negative emotional fluctuations as well: “These observations... once more terrified my imagination, which I had thought was deadened, and the dark shadows which were insistently piled up around me revived all the horror that they naturally inspire in me” (18). Although he thought that his imagination was “deaden,” it was still capable of “terrifying” him, which sends him into “dark shadows.” This “horror” is “naturally” inspired in him, relating it to the normal, regularly occurring instability of the “simple and lasting state” of happiness that was previously explored through the image of the surface of the lake. Negative spirals of emotion happen in the present or future since the imagination causes the “dark shadows” to start emerging where they were not present before, as opposed to positive spirals which are caused by the imagination starting a recollection of positive memories of the past. Therefore, imagination can prompt one to veer away from lasting happiness by causing vivid, positive memories of the past or anxious, overwhelming fears of the present or future. Most of the time, however, society prompts the imagination to cause a negative ebb in the constant emotional flux.

Individualism is essential for finding a “simple and lasting state” of happiness, which is demonstrated through Rousseau's condemnation of and indifference to society and its values. When Rousseau discusses his disconnectedness from society, he states, “Wherever I went I missed my sweet freedom and I felt indifference and disgust for anything that came my way that could have led to fortune and fame” (23). When Rousseau was forced to live in society among people, he missed his “sweet freedom,” implying that liberation occurs when one is alone because one can act according to their values instead of society's, therefore causing more flexibility to pursue a “lasting state” of happiness. Furthermore, by explaining that Rousseau feels an “indifference and disgust” for “fortune and fame,” the text emphasizes that these perceived standards of society are harmful and are meant to be condemned since they take away the “sweet freedom” that individuality offers. Therefore, the *Reveries* demonstrate that people must value their own “sweet freedom” over society's “fortune and fame” if they truly want to reach a “lasting state” of happiness. The text explains the role society plays in individual, lasting happiness: “I learnt through my own experience that the source of true happiness is within us and that it is not within men's ability to make anyone truly wretched who is determined to be happy” (11). Therefore, if “true happiness is within us” and it is “not within men's ability” to take away that happiness, one should disconnect and feel indifferent toward society, since it cannot add any value to the pursuit of baseline happiness. When this indifference occurs, people can finally reach their “simple and lasting state” of “true happiness,” even though imagination may prompt pleasurable memories of the past or negative emotions about the present or future.

After understanding that “imagination” is what causes departures from a “lasting state” of happiness, Rousseau's

actions and everyday people's decisions are easier to comprehend. For example, in the first few walks, Rousseau explains how he doesn't care about society, but by bringing up his indifference so frequently, it makes it seem that he does care. Today, people claim that they do not pay attention to what others think, just to post perfectly planned pictures on social media and obsess over their likes. Our heightened imaginations cause us to have anxiety and fear about how society perceives us in the present and future, moving us further from the indifference to society (which is now understood as a quality that helps one focus on their true happiness) that we so often claim to have. Many want to be happy, but to get there one must understand that a "simple and lasting" state of happiness is hard to attain because of the ease with which our imaginations prompt emotional instability. Imagination causes us to get lost in our pleasurable, "fleeting," and "rare" memories of the past or it makes us "terrified" of and anxious about situations in the present and future. Society causes our imaginations to be more volatile, so when we start to feel indifferent toward it, then we can truly experience the happiness that is within ourselves, which is able to endure life's "constant flux."

WORKS CITED

Rousseau, Jean-Jacques, and Russell Goulbourne. *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*. Oxford University Press, 2011.