

**Paradigms of Happiness in the *Confessions* of
Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Saint Augustine**
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“The longing for happiness is never quenched in the heart of man.”
Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Confessions*

“Is not happiness precisely what all seek,
so that there is not one who does not desire it?”
St. Augustine, *Confessions*

Propelled by the depths of misery, and drawn by the summons of a yet finer state, both Aurelius Augustinus (354-430) and Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), though separated by fourteen centuries of time, and sundered by an even greater distance of conceptual space, mutually embarked on humanity’s shared journey in search of the land of happiness. We fortunately possess their travel logs, both entitled the *Confessions*, in which they recount their eudemonistic adventures, similar in destination, but vastly different in their means of arrival. Their tales are powerful, and naturally, scores of fellow human travelers have used their writings as roadmaps in their own pilgrimages to paradise. Augustine and Rousseau have served in the West as the travel agents of the human heart.

As alternative paradigms of human life and happiness, the importance of Augustine’s and Rousseau’s *Confessions* in shaping succeeding epochs in Western civilization can hardly be overstated. In this essay I will attempt to spell out the contrasting versions of happiness contained in these two monumental volumes. But first I must discuss the philosophical connection which exists between them.

Some, unfortunately, see no relationship between these two works other than that of their accidental titles. For example, in the Foreword to Ann Hartle’s *The Modern Self in Rousseau’s Confessions* (1983), Alasdair MacIntyre points out that important books on Rousseau and his *Confessions* fail to relate his work to Augustine’s in any significant way (xi). This is true of Ronald Grimsley’s *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: A Study in Self Awareness* (1969). Ernst Cassier’s treatise *The Question of Jean-Jacques*

Rousseau is without reference to the noted doctor of the church (as is Peter Gay's Introduction to the English translation of this volume, 1954). Even Karl Barth's chapter on Rousseau in his history of Protestant theology is silent on the connection. Finally Jacques Maritain, in his essay on the patriarch of romanticism, says nothing about any substantive linkage or concourse between Rousseau and Augustine.

Why is no interconnection made between these two thinkers? MacIntyre speculates that it "derives from a more general blindness to the importance of the continuing influence of Augustinianism in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries," a factor which is also responsible for any adequate account of the influence of Augustine on both Descartes and Leibniz (xi). If Augustinianism did indeed continue to grip the mindset of these two dynamic centuries in which the thinkers of the *Aufklärung* were attempting to overthrow the pre-modern/medieval (essentially Christian) world view, then one thing seems clear: the Augustinian notions of the self as the *imago Dei*, as originally and desperately sinful, as helplessly in need of grace and redemption, as finding happiness only in God—these notions had to go. As MacIntyre puts it, "...the transition to modernity required the repudiation of characteristically Augustinian modes of thought, feeling, and action" (xi). Could it be, then, that Rousseau's *Confessions*, the style and purposes of which are both similar to and yet quite different from St. Augustine's, were designed with the philosophical intention of presenting a new model of man and a new paradigm of happiness over against the Augustinianism of the ages? I think this may be the case. The proposition that "Rousseau wrote his *Confessions* as a response to St. Augustine's *Confessions*" (Hartle 9) is undergirded by the presence of several significant parallels between the two tomes in both form and content. I shall begin by pointing out correspondences in the form or structure of the two texts.

In the first sentence of the first book of his *Confessions*, Rousseau makes a statement which immediately raises eyebrows, and deploys the hermeneutic of suspicion. He writes: "I have resolved on an enterprise which has no precedent, and which

once complete, will have no imitator” (17). “No precedent?” What about the *Confessions* of St. Augustine? Surely a man of letters like Rousseau (self-taught though he was), a man raised in the Reformed Church which was heir to the Augustinian tradition, would have been familiar with this venerable volume! This red herring, though initially perplexing, should not impede the reader of Rousseau’s *Confessions* from understanding its anti-typical purpose. Parallels in the structure of the whole of both works are telling (Hartle 26-29). For instance, Augustine’s *Confessions* consists of thirteen books; Rousseau’s contains twelve. Augustine’s twelfth and thirteenth books are on the interpretation of Scripture and the creation story in Genesis. This may indicate that Augustine understood that his entire existence was derived from God, and hence the doctrine of creation became for him the foundation of his life, his happiness, and as well as his *Confessions*. That there is no such parallel in Rousseau’s text may imply a different perspective.

Augustine’s work assumes the following form. In books one through six, he considers incidents in his youth; in books seven through nine he recalls events that prepare him for his conversion (described in book eight); in book ten and following, Augustine draws a contrast between what he was in the past as a non-believer, and what he had become as a Christian (especially in regard to his source of happiness). Hence, his entire work is appropriately divided into two parts: books one through nine and books ten through thirteen in something of a “before” and “after” format.

Rousseau’s work is analogous, for he also divides his *Confessions* into two basic parts. Part One contains books one through six which, like Augustine’s, deal with his childhood and youth; in book seven he begins to narrate the dark events of his life such that to recall them was for him “to relive their bitterness” (261). Hence, like Augustine, Rousseau’s life may be divided into two distinct parts: his past which he sees clearly and remembers delightfully, and his present which is surrounded by a cloud of

darkness. Though these structural parallels are not perfect, they are perhaps sufficient to make the kind of comparison reflected in Hartle's outlines of the two texts (27):

AUGUSTINE		ROUSSEAU	
Books 1-6		Part One: Books 1-6	
	Past		Past
Books 7-9		Books 7-9	
		Part Two:	
Books 10-13 Present		Books 10-12 Present	

or:

AUGUSTINE	ROUSSEAU
Books 1-7	Books 1-7
Book 8—Conversion	Book 8—Conversion
Books 9-13	Books 9-12

As this analysis indicates, both works are organized on a past/present sequence, or may be seen to pivot on analogous conversion experiences contained in book eight.

A point of contact between Augustine's and Rousseau's works is established not only in the form but also in the content of the two treatises. In addition to the identical titles (which had to be intentional) are similar childhood events, conversion experiences, and attachments to significant female figures in the lives of both men.

Augustine's childhood heist of a bevy of pears, which has frequently been held up to ridicule as an example of a neurotic soul burdened by excessive and unnecessary guilt,¹ is conspicuously akin to Rousseau's own lifting of an apple from his master's

¹ Oliver Wendell Holmes expressed this view when he wrote to Harold Laski, "Rum thing to see a man making a mountain of robbing a peartree in his teens" (quoted by Brown 1967: 172, n. 5). Judy Jones, and William Wilson, *An Incomplete Education*, in their treatment of Augustine, have this to say about the readability of his best known works, including the *Confessions*: "Not difficult, exactly, but after reading seven pages on the wickedness of stealing a pear, ... you may decide you'd rather spend time discussing, say, flouridation of the water supply with someone closer to your own age" (1987: 307). However, from Augustine's point of view, the heist implied a violation of the very moral and rational order established by God, an act that carried with it the implications of total autonomy and freedom. Starnes explains what he thinks the theft of the pears might have really signified to Augustine, here presented as if thinking to himself about the implications of the act (1990: 42): "Everyone knows there is a divine law

storeroom, to his pilfering of asparagus from a neighboring field, and to his disgraceful snatch of a pink ribbon for which he unmercifully blamed another. The principles to which both authors trace these actions are remarkably different, however. Rousseau does not seem to regard his actions as “sin” though he regrets what he did (especially the ribbon affair), but Augustine sees his actions as the consequence of original sin for which he stands condemned.

Rousseau’s strategically placed and carefully depicted parody of Augustine’s conversion experience with one of his own bolsters the notion that he was presenting his own work as a discordant antiphony to Augustine’s. In book eight of Augustine’s *Confessions*, he tells the historic story of his garden experience in which at the voice of the child who sang “take it up and read,” he randomly opened up the Bible to Romans 13: 14 which upon reading was instantaneously and fully converted to Christ: “it was as though a light of utter confidence shone in all my heart, and all the darkness of uncertainty vanished away” (10. 12). Rousseau also chose book eight of his *Confessions* to present his own, yet vastly different, “conversion” experience. On the way to a visit with Diderot, he happens to be reading the *Mercure de France* when his eyes fall upon the question proposed by the Dijon Academy for an upcoming essay contest: “Has the progress of the sciences and arts done more to corrupt morals or improve them?” This randomly discovered text transforms his life: “The moment I read this,” he said, “I beheld another universe and became another man” (327). In a kind of delirium Rousseau collapses under a tree where he conceives his *Discourse on the Moral Effects of the Arts and Sciences*. The changes in Rousseau’s life that result from this encounter on the

which forbids theft, so if I can steal [pears] and get away with it, this will show that I am not subject to God or to any divine law. And if I am not subject to any law which defines what is good, then the good will simply be what I say it is. Hence I will be free and omnipotent. I can do what I want and what I want is the good." It is no wonder that he ends these two chapters with words of total abhorrence. "O rottenness, O monstrosity of life and depth of death" (2. 6. 14).

road to Paris are unfortunately less than pleasant. The rest of his life and its many misfortunes, he believes, are the result of this damning, rather than saving, moment.

The details of these two stories are amazingly alike: chance readings, trees and gardens, radical changes in life and personality. But the differences may be even more significant than the analogies as Hartle explains.

The differences, however, are most revealing: the *Mercure de France* is hardly the Bible; for Augustine the incident marks the beginning of his happiness, for Rousseau the incident, in some sense, marks the source of his miseries; Augustine attributes [sic] the occurrence to the action of God, Rousseau calls it a “fortunate accident.” The pictures in each case are similar but what is actually depicted may well be quite different (26).

A final analogue may also exist between the two men and their relationships with women. Both struggle with and succumbed to the demon of *luxuria* (lust). Augustine’s “Give me chastity and continence, but not yet” (8. 7) reveals the depth of his own conflict with his libido, whereas Rousseau frequently complains that women are one of the primary causes of his undoing, though he rarely if ever struggles morally over his own sexual adventures. There may also be a congruence between Rousseau’s description of Mme de Vercellis who, as a steadfast Catholic, was serene and even gay in the face of death (Book Two), and Augustine’s account of the death of his mother Monica who likewise seemed faithfully resolute and unperturbed at the prospect of her own departure (Book Nine). Most curious and significant of all would be the strange and wonderful parallels that might be drawn between Augustine and his mother Monica, and Rousseau and his “Mamma,” Mme de Warens. The intense, virtually Oedipal attachments of both men to their “mothers” provide not only interesting grist for psychoanalytic reflection, but also tie the works of these two authors into an even greater mysterious, and fascinating conjunction.

Did Rousseau deliberately craft these points of contact? Surely they must have been. What conclusion may we draw from such comparisons?² The point is that Rousseau must have written his own memoirs, not only as an *apologia pro vita sua*, but also as a counterpoint to Augustine's ancient and influential treatise in order to set forth a fresh concept of man, and to offer an image or portrait of a new humanity which is defined not by otherworldly concerns, but by the affairs of this life. Whereas Augustine's presentation of himself and humanity is *coram Deo*—spiritual man who lives unto God—Rousseau portrays his own life and humankind as *coram natura*—natural man as an end in himself. Recognizing the significant shift in anthropological perspective during the

² Two French nineteenth century essays have noted this connection between Augustine and Rousseau. They are Regis Dessalles, "*Les Confessions de Saint Augustin et de Jean-Jacques Rousseau.*" *Revue de Paris* 2 (1842): 27-44 and Ernest Legouve, "*Confessions de Jean-Jacques Rousseau et de Saint Augustin.*" *France Littéraire* 4 (1832): 241-68. Hartle spells out in this lengthy quotation the comparison and contrast to be made between Augustine's and Rousseau's *Confessions*. She writes: "In his *Confessions*, Rousseau shows us a man understanding himself. The form that Rousseau's demonstration takes is what appears to be the story of the events of his life, the events woven into a coherent history. ...this way of answering the question, 'How does man understand himself,?' that is, the autobiographical 'form' of *The Confessions*, is in function of the role of the creative imagination in modern man's understanding of himself. The imagination constructs a history, a sequence of events which are related, in terms of a 'self' (Rousseau's) which is 'always the same at all times.'

The form of Augustine's *Confessions* is that of a prayer. Augustine offers a prayer of praise to God, his Creator. It is within the context of this prayer that he 'recollects' certain incidents from his past in which he sees most clearly the manifestations of God's power and wisdom in his own life. Augustine 'remembers' God's providence. He praises God for the manner in which, unknown to Augustine and even in spite of Augustine, God has led him to where he is. It is because of God's providence that Augustine is able to offer his prayer of praise. But Augustine's prayer is public; he speaks to God in the presence of men. The publicness of his prayer is for the sake of his fellow pilgrims, so that they too will be moved to praise God, to recognize God as the source of their being. Thus, Augustine sees the public prayer which God has led him to make as the work of God's providence, God's loving care for all men. The 'story' of Augustine's life is a story of God's providential action and, at the same time a providential act" (126-27). It must be added that the 'story' of Rousseau's life is a story of his providential imagination and at the same time an imaginative act.

historic eighteenth century, J. M. Cohen, in his Introduction to Rousseau's *Confessions*, explains the meaning of the Genevan's earthy portrait of humanity in this way.

By Rousseau's age, however, men had begun to see themselves not as atoms in a society that stretched down from God to the world of nature but as unique individuals, important in their own right. It was possible for the first time, therefore, for a man to write his life in terms only of his worldly experience, and to advance views on his place in the Universe that bore only a distant relationship to the truths of revealed religion (7).

In documenting in his autobiography this essential shift from theism to humanism, and thereby facilitating the shift from the pre-modern to the modern era, what Rousseau presents to his readers is a radically new understanding of the nature of the human self, and a startling new answer to the ancient question: who and what am I? This outlook is distinguished not only from Augustine who viewed man in the light of revelation, but is also set in contrast to a Plutarchian vision of humanity in which man is understood and defined in relation to the opinion of others and in community with them. In this sociological perspective, people are no more and no less than what other people say they are; they are no more or no less than what they manifest themselves to be in public acts. Human beings identify and understand themselves in the context of their peers and/or by the power of the polis. But Rousseau's interpretation of man is as equally solitary as it is revolutionary: "In contrast to both Plutarch and Augustine, then, Rousseau presents himself as a clear case of 'living within oneself.' He is not what others say he is, even if the other were God" (Hartle 4).

Hence, Rousseau's self is an inner, private, self-created, fixed, sovereign, solipsistic self preoccupied with its own musings, imaginings, feelings, and thinking. Rousseau's self is very much like the modern, private, individual self concerned as it is with its own life, identity, needs, psychology, and happiness. The apotheosized

Rousseauian self has become the silent presupposition in modern man's own self-understanding.

Given the principle that an understanding of the nature of man determines in what his happiness consists, we should ask what would happiness be for Rousseau and for the kind of person he represents? Plutarch's doctrine of man indicates that felicity must be sociologically grounded. Augustine's anthropology insists on a theological basis for happiness. For Rousseau's natural and private man, happiness would have to be found in himself and in nature, and this exactly what his *Confessions* convey.³

Of course, the natural life of the "noble savage" is the model of humanity and happiness for Rousseau. Man is made to live according to nature (*physis*) and by doing so is to discover within himself the feeling of his own existence, the sufficiency of his essentially private self, which is to be experienced not in the form of thinking, but rather in the domain of emotions. The philosophic formula for existence is not the rational Cartesian *Cogito*, but rather emotional Rousseauian *Passion*: "I feel; therefore I am." This is Rousseau's understanding of the "State of Nature" in which the noble savage serves as his paragon of human virtue and well-being.

But these natural elements and conditions required for human happiness have been stripped away in the encounter with the variegated confusions and customs of culture (*nomos*). Man has been corrupted by the alleged progress of the arts and sciences. For Rousseau, the structures of society negate what is natural to human persons, and robs them of their intended felicity. How will humanity know what it truly is, and in what happiness actually consists unless someone is able to return to the state of

³ Grimsley (1968: 66) writes that for Rousseau, "The proper goal of human life is, therefore, happiness, that is, the enjoyment of existence: to exist is to be oneself in absolute plenitude, 'without division or obstacle'. ... That the source of all true happiness lies within ourselves is apparent at even the most rudimentary stage of existence, and becomes still more evident as man develops the 'original' possibilities of his nature.

nature and bring back the word of revelation of man's authentic nature and purpose? As depicted in his *Confessions*, this is exactly what Rousseau's life in its culturally unencumbered moments of blissful freedom, solitude, and love is meant to model. In all of its extremities and eccentricities, in all of its plenitude and unmitigated goodness, when it is in touch with what is most natural in man, and when it is not befouled by the barbarism of the city, Rousseau's experience serves as a model for his benighted brethren who may through him truly understand what is the nature of the happy life even in the midst of a decadent and opposing culture. Rousseau has seen society for what it really is and does. He recognizes in it the source of human misery, his own included.⁴ He has visited the state of nature, and returned with the word of truth about the genuine nature of man. In fact, Rousseau presents himself as the only one who has accomplished this, and in this context we obtain a new reading of his alarming proem when he says: "I have resolved on an enterprise which has no precedent, and which once complete, will have no imitator. My purpose is to display to my kind a portrait in every way true to nature, and the man I shall portray is myself" (18). Rousseau, not Augustine or Augustine's God, is the only way. No one will come after him and do what he has done. He and he alone will present in himself and in himself alone a portrait of man that corresponds faithfully to nature, to what man is supposed to be. Rousseau is the incarnation of the noble savage and has, at the tragic and painful sacrifice of himself, become the savior of man to whom he offers himself as a genuine portrait of what man really is and in what true happiness consists.

Rousseau's account of true happiness as displayed in his *Confessions*, however, is actually quite jumbled and confused. Rousseau rhapsodizes about his idyllic childhood which he remembers with great delight (22). At the same there are many

⁴ At this point, of course, Rousseau's political works become necessary, for in them he sets for his own version of a republic, or kind of culture, that will enable humanity to fulfill its teleology and find lasting happiness.

instances in which Rousseau bemoans the loss of his well-being for multifarious reasons including the death of his mother (19), his separation from “Mamma” (250), his own tempestuous and emotional nature (300), the trappings and injustices of society (362), the exploits and plots of his friends (356; 395), his departure from the Hermitage (453) and his insecurity with women (324). What is peculiar about many of these situations which Rousseau describes is his firm declaration upon their occurrence that (1) he would never find happiness again, and (2) shortly after the desperate situation passes, he notes a new found happiness in some novel state of affairs. In other words, he seems to pass rather quickly from the unhappiest moments of his life to the happiest moments of his life when all is bright and gay. Rousseau’s expostulations at the disappearance of his coveted happiness are immature as well as premature. Rousseau needed desperately to grow up, for as he himself even admitted, “although in certain respects I have been a man since birth, I was for a long time, and still am, a child in many others” (169).

In any case, Rousseau does seem to have contemplated rather deeply the nature of his elusive dream of happiness. He asserted on the occasion of one of his many “misfortunes” that it seemed to him that human beings were little made for happiness (235), and that though we are often close to it, we never quite grasp and possess it (391). Nonetheless the experience of pure happiness when it did arrive for him was utterly indescribable in words (224; 330), even though it was ephemeral, and exited quickly (215; 596; 604). Perhaps for this reason Rousseau opined that he could be happy only when recalling the happy past which could not be taken away (215-16; 540). In any case, he was sure of one thing: “The longing for happiness is never quenched in the heart of man” (385).

Rousseau also reflected on and recognized many different sources of happiness, causes that were both internal and external to him. Rousseau found joy in simple things such as the country-side (374), in favorable climatic conditions (381), in a picnic (535),

in the enjoyment of good food (159), in idleness (600), in freedom (342), in love and friendship (386; 400), and in his imagination (398). Internal traits also contributed to his understanding and experience of happiness for items such as wisdom (92), learning (224), and virtue (247; 265) were central ingredients in his recipe for felicity.

For Rousseau, however, the key to happiness was ultimately love. As he put it, he had always sought for his happiness by means of “the gentle emotion of loving” (590). Certainly the objects of his love by which he sought to be happy were clearly this-worldly, for never once in his entire *Confessions* does he so much as even mention that God or religion could, would, or should be the source of personal fulfillment and satisfaction. Rather he leaves the vivid impression that the things which make for happiness, his and others, are essentially terrestrial. Such things constitute the *sum-mum bonum*, the complete life, a happiness born of a radical engagement with an unaffected human and natural existence.

This is clearly seen in his delightful descriptions of domestic tranquility which seem to have been a special source of pleasure for him. The following narrative of his life with “Mamma” at Les Charmettes is especially poignant in this regard.

I rose with the sun, and I was happy; I went for walks, and I was happy; I saw Mamma, and I was happy; I left her, and I was happy: I strolled through the woods and over the hills, I wandered in the valleys, I read, I lazed, I worked in the garden, I picked fruit, I helped in the household, and happiness followed me everywhere; it lay in no definable object, it was entirely within me; it would not leave for a single moment (215).⁵

⁵ For other descriptions of a similar kind, see pages 107-08; 180; 231-33; 330; 374-75; 388; 408; 483; 535; 553. Complementing this source of happiness in the domestic realm are Rousseau’s delectable descriptions of food and his meals which were also a source of great joy and delight for him. For examples, see pages 159; 161-63; 165; 225; 228; 243; 254-55; 279; 290; 293; 321; 330; 349; 384; 483; 508.

Unfortunately for Rousseau, these moments of the *bonheur de vivre* were episodic and ephemeral. If we were to ask whether or not Rousseau secured for himself a permanent felicity and died a happy man “full of days,” as the biblical idiom puts it, the answer would have to be a resounding NO! The cogency of this response is based on one of the most moving and disturbing passages in all of Rousseau’s *Confessions* (Book Nine: 386ff.) wherein he openly confesses that in his quest for happiness through the attachments of love, he never found a suitable and satisfying object that would take away his emptiness, and fill the void that so painfully pummeled his heart. Here the contrast with St. Augustine’s experience is the most keen and also instructive. These texts must be quoted *in extensio* in order to appreciate their power and pathos.

The first, the greatest, the strongest, the most inextinguishable of all my needs was entirely one of the heart. It was the need for intimate companionship, for a companionship as intimate as possible, which was the chief reason why I needed a woman rather than a man, a woman friend rather than a man friend. This singular need was such that the most intimate physical union could not fulfill it; only two souls in the same body would have sufficed. Failing that, I always felt a void (386).

Rousseau points out that he had hoped that this void would be filled in his relationship with Therese, and by means of the children born to them. For various reasons this did not happen. Thus he continues, “So it was in a sincere and mutual attachment [with Therese] into which I put all the affection of my heart, the void in that heart was nevertheless never really filled” (387).⁶ Since this relationship failed to satisfy and fill his heart, he pursued other objects and courses of action in search of constant joy, including friendship, the world of scholarship, and virtue, but these also failed him (387-

⁶ In other informative texts, Rousseau states of his relationship with Therese that it “was intimate but we did not live in intimacy” (392). He further adds, “My life with her was unconstrained and, as you might say, subject to no conditions. Nevertheless I was never free from a secret heartache, whether I was with her or away from her” (395).

88). Thus he writes, “Being unable to taste to the full the intimate companionship of which I felt the need, I looked for something in addition, which would not fill the void but which would make me less conscious of it” (387). His friends, rather than satisfying him began to annoy and displease him; his encounter with virtue was profound, but temporary, and again, he found no proper, satisfying object of satisfying affection. Here is his powerful testimony.

I believed that I was approaching the end of my days almost without having tasted to the full any of the pleasures for which my heart thirsted, without having given vent to the strong emotions which I felt in had in reserve, without having even tasted that intoxicating passion, the power of which I felt in my soul—a passion which, through lack of an object, was always suppressed and could express itself in no other way but through my sighs. How could it be that, with a naturally expansive nature for which to live was to love, I had not hitherto found a friend entirely my own, a true friend—I who felt so truly formed to be a friend? How could it be that with such inflammable feelings, with a heart entirely molded for love, I had not at least once burned with love for a definite object? Devoured by a need to love that I had never been able to satisfy, I saw myself coming to the gates of my old age, and dying without having lived (396-97).

The salient theme in this text is: NO DEFINITE AND SATISFYING OBJECT FOR HIS LOVE! Hence, he continues by referring to his “long inner ferment,” observes himself to be a “love-sick swain,” and comments that at the age of forty-five, he was evidently past his prime for love in that for him to attempt “to communicate this devouring but barren flame by which ever since childhood I had felt my heart to be consumed in vain” was useless (397). What could Rousseau do *at this point of hopelessness* when it came to satisfying his love and finding happiness? He launched into the world of the imagination as a place of mental and emotional refuge. “The impossibility of attaining the real persons precipitated me into the land of chimeras; and seeing nothing that

existed worthy of my exalted feelings, I fostered them in an ideal world which my creative imagination soon peopled with beings after my own heart” (398). But soon his “celestial amours” came crashing down around him by means of his diseases and domestic disturbances. Again, Rousseau’s quest for bliss, even in the realm of the imagination, comes to nothing but frustration.

What would Augustine say to Jean-Jacques at this crucial moment in his life? What kind of counsel would the Bishop of Hippo impart to the Philosopher from Geneva? Perhaps he would refer to his own *Confessions*, and share with Rousseau his own struggles in finding a definite and satisfying object for his overpowering, and yet disordered love. Perhaps we can imagine a conversation in which the subject is happiness and the two men exchange their views. Let’s listen in.

Augustine: “Jean-Jacques, you remind me so much of myself! Our personalities and interests are so much alike I find it hard to believe. Why I didn’t think I would ever meet anyone as passionate, and as violently intense as myself. But lo and behold, here you are! And I am astounded that you are as equally concerned about the celebrated and time-honored theme of happiness as I am myself. Can you think of any more sublime object for which we must seek, or any more fitting concept upon which we should reflect? I know you will agree. And not only this, but our personal stories are so strangely similar. After all, there is our mutual purloining of pears and apples, our amazingly similar conversion experiences, our struggles with the libido, and then, of course, there is your “Mamma,” and my Monica! And we have even written books with the same title, books in which we have exposed our hearts for the whole world to behold!

Jean-Jacques: Oh, Aurelius, as you speak, I feel my heart pounding, and tears spring to my eyes in a flood. How is that Providence has aligned our lives in such similar ways? I find this to be terribly frightening and equally fascinating, don’t you? But we must also recognize how different we are. For one thing, you are

1,358 years older than I am! You are a North African, and I am Swiss. You are a theologian and I am a philosopher. You are an ancient, but I am a modern. You are deeply religious, a devout Christian, and your faith pervades your life, but my religion is natural, of the deist sort as we call it today, and while it is exceedingly important to me, I do keep it compartmentalized and quarantined in its own realm, far away from most of my daily life and doings.⁷ So may be we are not as much alike as I originally thought.

Augustine: You're right, Jean-Jacques, there are profound differences between us, these you have mentioned, and I'm sure many others. But we do have this quest for happiness in common, and this is what especially interests me. May we discuss it?

Jean-Jacques: Most definitely. My heart's single and most passionate desire is to know and experience true happiness, and to die having fully lived! *Carpe Rosam!*

Augustine: As I have been reading and listening to your *Confessions*, Jean-Jacques, I find myself moved by those profound statements of yours in which you speak about the deep and penetrating void in your heart that you have not been able to fill, that inner pain you have not been able to soothe despite your ardent quest to seize the rose, and live to the fullest.

Jean-Jacques: Yes, Aurelius, in embarrassing honesty before you, as before my readers, I confess that my heart lies fallow, and is empty. Even in my flights of fancy into imaginary worlds I never found any permanent satisfaction, for I was always recalled to earth, to the realities of this world, and to my many misfortunes! Lately I have despaired of ever finding a salve for my wounded heart, a balm for the stench of my life!

⁷ On Rousseau's religious beliefs, see Grimsley 1968.

Augustine: I understand, and also empathize deeply. Once I remember crying out to God, “My life, being such, was it life, O my God?” (3. 2). But let me go on, Jean-Jacques, and tell you a few details of my story. As you may recall from my *Confessions*, I rejected the faith of my pious mother, may she rest in peace, and pursued my own reckless course, seeking for happiness in the satisfaction of my burning lusts, and in the intense pursuit of truth in many offbeat sects, philosophies, and religions. My longing for immortal wisdom I owe to Cicero, and to the power of his book *Hortensius* which set me on this course. Do you recall my story.

Jean-Jacques: Yes, of course, I do. Please continue.

Augustine: Well, in the course of time, too much time according to my dear Monica, I came to realize that the objects to which I was extending my love, and by which I hoped to find satisfaction simply did not contain enough of whatever it was that I needed in order to be satisfied. Like you, Jean-Jacques, I had neither a definite, nor satisfying object for my love. Nothing seemed available to me, at least not in this world. The harder I looked, the worse my state became. This reminds me of a passage from my own *Confessions*. Let me read it to you. See here in Book One I wrote: “For it was my sin that not in Him, but in His creatures—myself and others—I sought for pleasures, sublimities, truths, and so fell head long into sorrows, confusions, errors (1. 18). What miserable days those were! But after my experience in the garden in Milano, I came to realize that my problem was not in loving, for we are made in the image of God who is love. Isn’t that good news for a hopeless romantic like yourself, Jean-Jacques? No, our problem is not in loving, nor is it in the things that we love, because God who is goodness itself has created all things. No, our problem is in the *manner* in which we love, and the *excessive expectation* we have in regard to the outcome of our love. Are you following me, Jean-Jacques?”

Jean-Jacques: Yes, Aurelius, you are quite perspicacious. I am also beginning to realize why the Church canonized you as a saint! I am interested in your views. Carry on.

Augustine: Thank you. Our *manner* of loving is often disordered, for we love things and people excessively, and expect a kind of fulfillment from them beyond which their divinely determined and unique natures can provide. A love for things can satisfy the need for things, and a love for people can satisfy our need for people. And surely we derive a certain, but limited amount of happiness from our love for both things and people, wouldn't you agree?

Jean-Jacques: Absolutely, for it is in many things and in certain people that I have sought for my happiness all of my life, even though it was quite ephemeral, and often terribly frustrating. How I recall, even now with tears, those beautiful days at Les Charmettes with my lovely Mamma,. Oh how happy we were! The beautiful country setting, the fruitful garden, the delicious meals, the touching conversations, the perfect freedom and idleness in which we would spend our days. How happy it makes me to relive the joys of those happy times

Augustine: Yes, Jean-Jacques, but as you wax eloquent, you must also remember why we are having this conversation today, for despite the joy of these legitimate delights, they, by your own admission, never provided the kind of lasting satisfaction which the love in your heart required. Am I not correct?

Jean-Jacques: Yes, you are right, Aurelius, for I have never been able to locate that definite and satisfying object for my ardent and expansive love, the fulfillment of those inflammable passions of mine that would finally bring me into the land of happiness for which I have continuously struggled. Where is it to be found?

Augustine: That is the burden of the whole of my own *Confessions*, Jean-Jacques, and I appreciate you asking such a perceptive question! I submit to you that complete and permanent happiness can be found only in loving and knowing

God. Before I explain, let me just say to you that your chosen path to happiness about which you have written so eloquently in your own *Confessions* is the path that most people take. Most people seek their happiness in things terrestrial, and as I told you before, there is a goodly measure of happiness to be found there. But such happiness cannot satisfy ultimately, for the finite and the temporal cannot fully meet the need for the eternal and the infinite. Your joy cannot help but remain incomplete, and your heart will continue to pine away in disturbing restlessness. As I wrote in the first book of my *Confessions*, “For Thou hast made us for Thyself and our hearts are restless till they rest in Thee” (1.1).

Jean-Jacques: Aurelius, the way you are speaking here is reminding me of my own desperate words about myself in the ninth book of my *Confessions*. I have certainly sought to fill that deep void within me with love, but maybe my love has been disordered, and may be I have expected more from love and its objects than they can reasonably be expected to supply. I always thought that love for myself and the natural life, and love relationships with my Mamma or with Therese or with any woman would be the key to my felicity. But to no avail. And in the process seeking to extract happiness from these objects of love, I fear I have disfigured my own soul as well as theirs. I must give serious consideration on one of my solitary walks, Aurelius, to these things you have said. Thank you for presenting to me again, O saintly one, the story of your pilgrimage.

Augustine: Jean-Jacques, thank you for your company. I will pray for you soul. Farewell.

Hopefully, this imaginary dialogue places in relief the Augustinian view of happiness in contrast to Rousseau’s perspective. These two men, and their two *Confessions* have contributed significantly to the mindsets of the medieval and modern periods in the Western world. They respectively embody the pre-modern and modern paradigms of happiness . In days ahead as we travel through the *terra incognita* of the postmodern

wilderness, we would do well to recall the *Confessions* of these men, and to chart our course in their light.

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