

## Furman Humanities Review

---

Volume 27 November 2016

Article 7

---

2017

# A Better Pasture: Excellent Sheep, *Amour-Propre*, and the Search for Happiness

Nathan Thompson

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarexchange.furman.edu/fhr>

---

### Recommended Citation

Thompson, Nathan (2017) "A Better Pasture: Excellent Sheep, *Amour-Propre*, and the Search for Happiness," *Furman Humanities Review*: Vol. 27 , Article 7.

Available at: <http://scholarexchange.furman.edu/fhr/vol27/iss1/7>

This Article is made available online by Journals, part of the Furman University Scholar Exchange (FUSE). It has been accepted for inclusion in Furman Humanities Review by an authorized FUSE administrator. For terms of use, please refer to the [FUSE Institutional Repository Guidelines](#). For more information, please contact [scholarexchange@furman.edu](mailto:scholarexchange@furman.edu).

# **A BETTER PASTURE: EXCELLENT SHEEP, *AMOUR-PROPRE*, AND THE SEARCH FOR HAPPINESS**

**Nathan Thompson**

*“It is a hundred times easier to be happy than to  
appear to be happy.”*

*-Jean Jacques Rousseau*

*“Of course I’m miserable, but were I not miserable,  
I wouldn’t be at Yale.”*

*-William Deresiewicz*

A double major, a sport, a musical instrument, a couple of foreign languages, service work in distant corners of the globe, and, of course, a few hobbies thrown in for good measure, each mastered with effortlessness and a serene self-assurance. This is the stuff of 21<sup>st</sup>-century super-achievers, those students at elite schools who appear cheerfully competent at everything. If that sounds anything like you, your friends, or what you aspire to be, this paper is for you. If the names Deerfield, Williams, Harvard, or Stanford mean anything to you, this paper is for you. Most importantly, if you’re tired of running laps on the well-worn treadmill of success, this paper is for you.

In his *Excellent Sheep: The Miseducation of the American Elite and the Way to a Meaningful Life*, William Deresiewicz unapologetically exposes the aspirations and deep-rooted anxieties of the “best and brightest” filing into the top universities in the United States. He introduces the reader to the formidable combination of brains, ambition, and fear of failure residing in many young people and their families. These

students' capacity to consume, analyze, and regurgitate information is breathtaking, be it every member of a class memorizing and reciting 100 lines of Shakespeare without a single error or a high school student conducting cancer research. Assign them a school task, and it will be completed with ruthless efficiency. Every "i" will be dotted. Every "t" will be crossed. Curiously, however, closer examination reveals so many similarities between these high achievers that their individual identities appear stripped away. One might even go so far as to call them sheep. Of course, they are not average sheep—they roam around together, eating AP courses for breakfast, spending summers working prestigious internships, and traveling the world for cultural enrichment. They are *excellent*.

These kinds of students, however, are no longer simply the product of the meritocracy for which America is famed. They do not come from just anywhere, nor do they embody time-honored American examples of how hard work, long hours, and a little bit of luck can take children of poverty and turn them into something exceptional. Quite the opposite. In the clear, compelling, and frightening three hundred pages of his *Coming Apart: The State of White America 1960-2010*, Charles Murray demonstrates that, for the first time, America is seeing both the drawing and hardening of class lines: a real upper class, a real lower class, and everyone in the middle moving in one direction or the other.<sup>1</sup> However, this divergence is not only a monetary one. It is also one of values, habits, education, and geographic location—and make no mistake: while a few stragglers are welcomed into the fold, Deresiewicz's sheep are the children of this new upper class.

These excellent sheep, populating the Ivies (or their neighbors who rank highly in *U.S. News and World Report*) and prestigious financial and consulting institutions after graduation, are the product of several important inputs: top-flight

---

<sup>1</sup> Charles Murray, *Coming Apart: The State of White America, 1960-2010* (New York: Crown Forum, 2012), 23-126.

education, high family income, stability at home, parents with advanced degrees, and geographic isolation from those not sharing similar characteristics. Together, these factors have begun limiting the capacity of traditional American meritocracy to generate social and economic mobility. These students are exceptionally competent, analytical, intelligent, and hard-working, but it would be dishonest to say that their smarts are the sole cause of their material success in life. Success nowadays is primarily, if not exclusively, the result of a system. It is a system caught somewhere between being hereditary and meritocratic—generally speaking, circumstances of birth are important but may not be enough to succeed anymore without the brains to match and vice versa—and its products are peerless. It is a system Deresiewicz describes as the laundering of privilege.<sup>2</sup>

Despite this system's effectiveness, the excellence it produces comes at costs much greater than a few missed parties and a handful of all-nighters. These costs are perhaps known and felt in the deepest corners of the heart and mind but go otherwise unarticulated: insecurity, fear of failure, a deep-rooted unhappiness, and the atrophy of the soul. Recognizing such costs might reasonably lead one to challenge and look for alternatives to an excellent sheep's notion of success, and because these potential costs are too great to ignore, the remainder of the paper will attempt to give them proper attention.

In order to understand these creatures of success, it is first necessary to explore the origin of their excellence. As Deresiewicz and others observe, one does not have to look long or far to see what creates this crop of high achievers. It begins in the home, where a suffocating amount of pressure is applied to achieve success from a young age. It does not even have to be intentional. But as Deresiewicz writes, the business of

---

<sup>2</sup> William Deresiewicz, *Excellent Sheep: The Miseducation of the American Elite and the Way to a Meaningful Life* (New York: Free Press, 2014), 211.

“determining the exact hierarchy of status within the upper middle class itself” is a serious one, and most, if not all, of a family’s resources tend to be directed towards building the pressure cooker that will spit out diamonds bearing Ivy League credentials.<sup>3</sup>

The lesson is learned from an early age that in life “there is no middle ground; if you’re not the best, you’re a ‘loser.’ If you’re not brilliant, you’re worthless.”<sup>4</sup> Students may find themselves identifying with the pressures that Deresiewicz claims converge at home: “status competition within extended families; peer pressure within communities; the desire to measure up to your own parents, or to best them.”<sup>5</sup> The list of achievements attained by kids trying to relieve those pressures include the usual suspects of a perfect GPA, president of a club, captain of a team, or first chair in the orchestra, but in the end, each is simply a tool with which to measure outperforming one’s peers.

As one might imagine, family relationships based on the expectation of a child excelling above and beyond his or her peers, even if unspoken, easily become conditional. Deresiewicz writes that what is “expected by many parents in affluent communities is not a personal best but the absolute best,” so even if all little Johnny can manage in his 10<sup>th</sup> grade English class is a B+, that will not cut it at home.<sup>6</sup> Ultimately, the “production of measurable virtue in children” is the goal towards which Mom and Dad direct life. As Deresiewicz aptly notes, though, measureable here means “capable of showing up on a college application.”<sup>7</sup> Spending time “hanging out” or hiking local trails on the weekend are not items that frequent most resumes; learning a second language or tutoring under-resourced kids are.

---

<sup>3</sup> Deresiewicz, *Excellent Sheep*, 41.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

Given the enormous expectations faced by students to be the very best, it is no wonder that their identities are found in “measurable” achievement. However, such identity is not only *given* to Deresiewicz’s sheep. They also consume, perpetuate, and preach it. The currency of this identity is Ivy League acceptances, perfect SAT scores, and Instagram photos from exotic trips. These are the symbols of status and accomplishment one can quietly slip into conversation with just enough of an “aw, shucks” attitude to draw the verbal affirmation of one’s peers while, one hopes, also making them jealous.

A deep, addictive satisfaction comes from such recognition. If one possesses enough of this currency, one becomes entitled to his or her peers’ praise. And these excellent sheep will do just about anything to strike it rich—or avoid coming up empty. The purpose of life “becomes the accumulation of gold stars,” and what constitutes a valid life becomes “affluence, credentials, and prestige” rather than pursuing one’s passions.<sup>8</sup> Professions that do not ultimately land six-figure salaries and luxurious homes are not worth our time. Credentials that are not instantaneously recognizable are without value. The pursuit of meaning beyond a strong resume is nonsensical. Deresiewicz imagines those deep-seated concerns with failure in the form of a series of potent questions:

How can I become a teacher, or a minister, or a carpenter? Wouldn’t that be a waste of my fancy education? What would my parents think? What would my friends think? How would I face my classmates at our twentieth reunion, when they’re all rich doctors or important people in New York? And the question that exists behind them all: isn’t it beneath me?<sup>9</sup>

These questions strike at the heart of the matter: everyone is afraid of failing in front of parents and peers, showing any sign of weakness, or having to show up at the reunion as a

---

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

non-profit worker because neither McKinsey nor Bain nor Goldman ever came calling. As a result, one must be able to do everything and do everything well. The cost of falling short in this respect becomes “not merely practical, but existential.”<sup>10</sup> To not ultimately land at an Ivy League or one of its neighbors on the way to a successful career in finance, consulting, law, or medicine is the same as being worthless. And so we develop all the necessary abilities for this kind of life—not how to think but rather those “analytical and rhetorical skills that are necessary for success in business and the professions.”<sup>11</sup>

Ross Douthat memorably relates from his four years at Harvard how he was taught to get away with doing as little as possible. For him it was hard work to “get into Harvard,” to compete for “offices and honors with thousands of brilliant and driven young people,” and to fight for “law school slots and I-banking jobs as college wound to a close.”<sup>12</sup> The academics, though, were not hard work. They were “the easy part.”<sup>13</sup> As a result, it was a rare sheep indeed that invested more time in true learning than in making connections or crafting the perfect resume. Deresiewicz is no kinder, suggesting that what “Ivy League-caliber schools like Yale or Columbia teach their students is how to pretend, and how to do it well.”<sup>14</sup> Ultimately, we build an identity around accomplishments that can pad a resume, and we hope those resumes are strong enough to shore up our self-esteem in the event of a calamitous development such as criticism or failure.

Interestingly, the question *why?* is rarely asked—*why* it matters so much that our SAT scores clear 1500 instead of 1400, *why* our BA must come from Princeton instead of Rutgers, or *why* our first job has to be with J.P Morgan instead

---

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>12</sup> Ross Douthat, *Privilege: Harvard the Education of the Ruling Class* (New York: Hyperion, 2005), 140.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 140.

<sup>14</sup> Deresiewicz, *Excellent Sheep*, 104.

of a non-profit. Dwight Macdonald once remarked upon the great curiosity that “we think it odd that a man should devote his life to writing poems . . . but natural that he should devote it to inducing children to breakfast on Crunchies instead of Krispies.”<sup>15</sup> There is a depressing humor in Macdonald’s observation, for who on the path to hard-earned success would not recognize a well-paid marketing position with Kellogg as a post more enviable than that of a high school English teacher?

Furthermore, there is a premise underlying this notion of success that is similarly left in the shadows: that “what makes for a happy life and a good society [is] simply self-evident, . . . as if in either case the exclusive answer [is] more money.”<sup>16</sup> It is a premise, though, that is accepted by a majority of students. In 1971, only 37% of incoming college freshmen said it was essential or very important to be “very well-off financially” compared to 73% who said it was similarly important to “develop a meaningful philosophy of life.”<sup>17</sup> In 2011, “the numbers were almost reversed,” with 80% believing that being very well off is essential versus only 47% emphasizing the importance of developing a meaningful philosophy of life.<sup>18</sup>

However, even those who achieve their goal of success, as has already been noted, do not do so without cost. In fact, there is a great deal of research and anecdotal evidence pointing to a deep-seated unhappiness within the hearts and minds of the high achievers among us. Deresiewicz writes that preteens and teens from affluent and well-educated families experience “among the highest rates of depression, substance abuse, anxiety disorders, somatic complaints, and unhappiness of any group of children” in the United States, with “as many as 22 percent of adolescent girls from financially comfortable families” suffering from clinical depression.<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.



The disastrous effects of the pressure placed on teens in upper-middle class homes is heartbreakingly documented by Madeline Levine in her New York Times Bestseller, *The Price of Privilege*. Her stories are similar and numerous, covering a host of problems from drug abuse to binge drinking to anxiety and depression to anorexia. Levine writes that “as many as 30 to 40 percent of twelve- to eighteen-year olds from affluent homes are experiencing troubling psychological symptoms,” which do nothing to lower the frequency of harmful behaviors and the intensity of the pressure to succeed that is felt.<sup>20</sup> The backdrop to each of her stories of young men and women abusing drugs and alcohol, cutting, contemplating suicide, and reporting remarkable unhappiness is almost universally a combination of a crushing pressure to succeed, a crippling fear of failure, and a misguided belief that pressing on might somehow lead to happiness. These are the stories of excellent sheep, and they are a wakeup call to those of us who either tacitly or expressly endorse an environment of high-pressure perfectionism.

When coupled with a deep unhappiness, this constant pursuit of “success” is exhausting. And yet, we continue to trap ourselves in this vicious cycle. The pursuit of status, success, and high achievement at the cost of sleep, relationships, true learning, and even happiness becomes a race with no finish line. So why do we keep running? Simply stated, we are slaves to the opinions of others. Students are “trained to depend” upon the “drug of praise.”<sup>21</sup> We become presidents of clubs, captains of teams, and students with perfect GPAs and SAT scores not because we genuinely enjoy them but because those are the things that ensure we will receive the most praise. These symbols of achievement “signify not just your fate, but your

---

<sup>20</sup> Madeline Levine, *The Price of Privilege: How Parental Pressure and Material Advantage Are Creating a Generation of Disconnected and Unhappy Kids* (New York: Harper, 2006), 19.

<sup>21</sup> Deresiewicz, *Excellent Sheep*, 51.

identity; not just your identity, but your value. They are who you are, and what you're worth."<sup>22</sup>

Self-worth becomes comparative in nature. If we don't score as well as other students on standardized tests, attend the same elite schools as our peers, or land the same prestigious jobs after graduation, we must suffer the low opinion of our parents, our friends, and our professors—an unacceptable prospect. The problem with self-worth based on a relative sentiment like opinion is that it engenders a severe internal uncertainty and instability. Under such circumstances, there can be little confidence of place or of one's own value as an individual. In turn, such uncertainty demands the herculean efforts exhibited by those excellent sheep climbing ever higher on the ladder of success.

Unfortunately for those sheep, though, there is no rooftop to reach, so the climbing never ends. When chasing after status and the high regard of others, one finds very quickly that “status doesn't get you much except the knowledge that you have it.” Given its endless nature, this pursuit “doesn't just not make you happy: it makes you actively unhappy” precisely because it is “comparative, and competitive, by its very nature.” Deresiewicz shares the sorry experience of those students who get to places like Yale thinking they've arrived, “only to discover that there are still other places to arrive at” and that there always will be. Clearly, contentment and the pursuit of status do not mix.<sup>23</sup>

It should come as no surprise that a life spent running a race that has no finish line would be both exhausting and deeply unsatisfying, yet it would appear that many of us remain committed to the enterprise of chasing down success. This commitment is inextricably linked to a conception of self-love that is comparative. Our worth is bolstered when we compare ourselves to others and find that we are achieving just as much as or more than our peers, that we have at least the same or,

---

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.

better yet, higher GPAs than our fellow students, or that we got the internship commensurate to our elite education.

This is a picture that many of us might recognize within ourselves. It is this kind of self love—a relative, comparative, and dangerous sentiment—that deserves further exploration, for to comprehend our unwavering commitments to success and status first requires an understanding of our own yardstick of self-worth. The comparative nature of our self-love is not unique to 21<sup>st</sup>-century high-achievers; it has long been the companion of humankind. Because this is the case, wisdom would demand that we examine what those who came before us have thought and written about our tendency to compare.

When one explores the works of the world's great thinkers, it does not take long to realize that many have identified and analyzed this very issue. Of all those who have written about it, though, there is one that stands out. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, an 18<sup>th</sup>-century political philosopher, presents an articulation and analysis of *amour-propre*, or vanity—our tendency to value ourselves based on how we compare to those around us—that is unrivaled in its clarity, frankness, and forcefulness of argument.

To read Rousseau is to view the human soul with an X-ray. He exposes, as only he can, the many masks of benevolence, humility, and selflessness we wear to cover the ambition, ill will towards others, and selfishness we harbor. However, what makes Rousseau's analysis of the problem of comparative self-love the best of its kind (and so helpful for our excellent sheep) is that he traces its development from cradle to full-fledged adulthood. According to Rousseau, we are not born as hateful, vain, or callous individuals but rather as people who *learn* to be just so. To more fully understand the quandary of Deresiewicz's excellent sheep, joining Rousseau at man's beginning is a helpful place to start, before tracing the progression to the final product—namely, an individual who bases his or her value on the opinions and judgments of others.

For Rousseau, natural man begins as a blank slate, removed from any and all “artificial faculties he could only have acquired by prolonged progress,” such as language, tools,

buildings, or farming.<sup>24</sup> In this state, Rousseau finds a man “sating his hunger beneath an oak, slaking his thirst at the first stream, finding his bed at the foot of the same tree that supplied his meal, and with that his needs are satisfied.”<sup>25</sup> This is a person in simplest form, needing nothing more than food, water, and shelter. When deprived of every sort of enlightenment, the only goods known to natural man are “food, a female, and rest,” and natural man does not even possess the “knowledge of death and its terrors.”<sup>26</sup> In fact, so blind is natural man to anything past the present that “his projects, as limited as his views, hardly extend to the close of day.”<sup>27</sup>

Part of the utter simplicity of natural man is tied to a desire for self-preservation. Rousseau writes that man’s “first care” was “that for his preservation,” a driving force that leads a person to seek only the most basic needs.<sup>28</sup> This kind of desire is described by Rousseau as “self-love—a primitive, innate passion, which is anterior to every other.”<sup>29</sup> It is not hateful or desiring of the approval of others. To Rousseau, “self-love, which regards only ourselves, is contented when our true needs are satisfied.”<sup>30</sup>

However, the trouble begins when we leave a solitary life and interact with other human beings. By virtue of seeing another person, one observes the differences that exist between one’s self and the other. In fact, Rousseau argues that the very act of thinking—something unique to the human race—requires

---

<sup>24</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, “Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality Among Men *or* Second Discourse,” in *Rousseau: The Discourses and Other Early Political Writings*, ed. Victor Gourevitch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 134.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 142.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 213.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

that we make distinctions and identify what makes each object and person unique. For instance, Rousseau challenges his reader to try and outline the image of a tree without specifics but goes on to argue that such a task is impossible. He writes that “in spite of yourself, [the tree] will have to be seen as small or large, bare or leafy, light or dark . . . you cannot help making its lines perceptible or its surface colored.”<sup>31</sup> It is impossible to see things generally—we view the world in specifics. Ultimately, thinking amounts to distinguishing between various objects and ideas, so when one person comes in contact with another, specific comparison is inevitable.

As Rousseau states, “The first glance [man] casts on his fellows leads him to compare himself with them.”<sup>32</sup> Even if no malevolence is intended, we gauge who is taller, who is faster, or who is stronger. Rousseau notes that “the relations which we express by the words great, small, strong, weak, fast, slow, fearful, bold, and other such ideas, compared as need required and almost without thinking about it, finally produced in him some sort of reflection, or rather a mechanical prudence that suggested to him the precautions most necessary for his safety.”<sup>33</sup>

It is not long, though, before elementary comparisons develop into a habit of comparing more than height, speed, or strength. Rousseau notes that while man was “scarcely able to discriminate ranks, . . . he was from afar preparing to claim first rank as an individual.”<sup>34</sup> From this first point of comparison, the long fall from innocence begins. Rousseau’s description is worth quoting at length:

Everyone began to look at everyone else and to wish to be looked at himself, and public esteem acquired a price. The one who sang or danced best; the handsomest, the

---

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 148.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 235.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

strongest, the most skillful, or the most eloquent came to be the most highly regarded, and this was the first step at once toward inequality and vice: from these first preferences arose vanity and contempt on the one hand, shame and envy on the other; and the fermentation caused by these new leavens eventually produced compounds fatal to happiness and innocence.<sup>35</sup>

Thus is born *amour-propre*, or vanity. It is “a relative sentiment, factitious, and born in society, which inclines every individual to set greater store by himself than by anyone else.”<sup>36</sup> Not only that, it also “demands others to prefer us to themselves, which is impossible.”<sup>37</sup> For Rousseau, it is inescapable. It is not just that we became vain and envious, though. *Amour-propre*, a sentiment of vanity and comparison, has a distinct character, one of “consuming ambition” that “instills in all men a black inclination to harm one another, a secret jealousy that is all the more dangerous as it often assumes the mask of benevolence in order to strike its blow in greater safety.”<sup>38</sup>

Rousseau’s analysis clearly identifies what the mental processes behind *amour-propre* actually are. After all, how often do we wear masks of benevolence in order to ensure that we are ultimately viewed as better than our peers? How often do we feign humility or generosity or kindness simply for the sake of being thought of as humble, generous, or kind? How many times have we cared far more about how others viewed us than about the morality or character of our actions? Not as immediately clear, though, are the consequences of this kind of self-love, and this is where Rousseau’s articulation of the deepest impact of *amour-propre* is so compelling.

---

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 166.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 218.

<sup>37</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile or On Education*, trans. Alan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1979), 214.

<sup>38</sup> Rousseau, “Second Discourse,” 171.

The nature of *amour-propre* is such that it takes an individual content with a simple life and teaches him or her to depend upon the opinion of others for value and meaning. The effect is one of deep unhappiness because a self-love based upon comparisons made with others is never assured of stability or fulfillment. In other words, we can always find something with which to compare ourselves and in which to find ourselves lacking.

Rousseau relates the story of a young man, who, seeing another young man “better dressed than himself,” secretly complains “about his parents’ avarice.”<sup>39</sup> However, if this same young man finds himself “more adorned than another,” he is “pained to see this other outshine him by birth or wit, and to see all his gilding humiliated in the presence of a simple cloth suit.”<sup>40</sup> If nothing else, Rousseau teaches us that there are innumerable ways to find one’s self inferior to others and that this leads to a profound unhappiness. Much like the young people Deresiewicz and Levine describe as suffering from tremendous pressure to succeed (and the resulting assortment of consequences), Rousseau’s young man is an example of the deep insecurity and unhappiness resulting from dependence on a feeling of relative success among one’s peers.

Of course, there is an assumption necessarily made preceding an individual’s dependence on his or her standing in the eyes of others, which is that status, praise, and money are actually valuable in and of themselves. Rousseau writes that “in order to see the purpose of so many cares . . . *power* and *reputation* would have to have some sort of meaning in [a man’s] mind.” There is a critical lesson learned, namely that “there is a sort of men who count how they are looked upon by the rest of the universe for something, who can be happy and satisfied with themselves on the testimony of others rather than on their own.”<sup>41</sup>

---

<sup>39</sup> Rousseau, *Emile*, 228.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 187.

There is much of ourselves to be recognized in these 18<sup>th</sup>-century writings—a frantic habit of comparison, of looking in the mirror to ensure everything appears just right, of assigning great weight to unquantifiable concepts of status or reputation—and Rousseau forcefully accounts for how we arrive at such a position. From that first glance at another human being right up to the birth of that dark inclination to see harm done to those around us, the path is well worn. But if in fact the tendency to compare to others to the point of exhaustion and unhappiness is not just a tendency but also an intractable plague, is there anything to be done?

Reading Rousseau’s assessment of our character is both a powerful and—if one takes his claims about human nature seriously—disconcerting experience. His analysis unceremoniously strips away our masks of benevolence and sincerity, revealing the jealousy, unsympathizing ambition, and paralyzing fear that we seek to hide. But does it do us any good only to know that day in and day out, we ask others to value us above themselves? That the recognition and status we inevitably pursue only makes us vain and insecure people? That the moment we meet others, we begin making comparisons that can only end in enmity? While recognizing a problem can be a helpful step, to end on such a note given the reality of *amour-propre* does little to address Rousseau’s predicament or offer solace to Deresiewicz’s sheep. Thus, an exploration of Rousseau’s conception of a life without *amour-propre*—a life of true happiness—becomes necessary.

Rousseau claims that “it is a hundred times easier to be happy than to appear to be happy,” and this serves as an outstanding introduction to his notion of happiness.<sup>42</sup> This thought demands that we ask ourselves a question, and it is one that Deresiewicz is quick to point out that many high achieving college students either do not know or are too afraid to ask. This question, surprising as it may be, is not “what will make me the most successful in life?” or “what will earn me the most

---

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 354.



money in life?” Instead the question is “what makes me happy?” As much of a cliché as it is, this remains an important question for a society that so readily surrenders its happiness and self-worth to the opinions of other people. Rousseau’s insight calls for reflection on what we are doing to appear happy to *others* and what we might change so that *we* are actually happy.

Rousseau’s answer to this question, perhaps not surprisingly, has little to do with obtaining an Ivy League degree, working for a prestigious consulting firm, or owning a nice house. In fact, it begins with simplicity, a virtue with which many at the top of the food chain may be unfamiliar. This becomes clear in a number of his writings, particularly his “Second Discourse,” “Book IV” of *Emile*, and his *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*. Rousseau describes the experience of a wealthy man who owns a palace but finds no use for all the rooms because he cannot occupy each one. In the end, it becomes a gilded cage, promising luxury but delivering an experience of imprisonment.<sup>43</sup> The great flaw of *amour-propre*’s relative nature is that it spurs the accumulation of excess (money, clothes, land, titles, reputation), which only gives people more and more ways to compare what they do or do not possess. As Rousseau writes, “Sociable man, always outside himself, is capable of living only in the opinion of others and, so to speak, derives the sentiment of his own existence solely from their judgment.”<sup>44</sup> To Rousseau, the first and proper response to the comparative tendencies of *amour-propre* is to make an effort to return to simplicity.

An example of what this kind of simplicity looks like for Rousseau is captured in his Fifth Walk of the Solitary Walker, during which he describes his days spent on a nearly deserted island in the middle of a Swiss lake. This sort of abandonment of society may strike the modern observer as decidedly odd. After all, Rousseau does not have an iPhone or laptop on his

---

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 347.

<sup>44</sup> Rousseau, “Second Discourse,” 187.

person, so there will be no way to share with others what he sees; he has only his memory to capture everything around him. The scene before Rousseau is one where “there is more natural greenery, more meadows, grove-shaded retreats, more frequent contrasts, and more variety in the terrain” than on the mainland.<sup>45</sup> Life on the island forbids “any kind of communication with the mainland so that being unaware of all that went on in the world I might forget its existence and that it might also forget mine.”<sup>46</sup> On Rousseau’s island, no filtered (or #nofilter) Instagram posts reach the rest of society. No Facebook statuses describing the “incredible” or “awesome” or “breathtaking” sights of this island reach the newsfeeds of others, and none of their communications reach Rousseau. Pleasure is taken from nothing other than a short walk. Hours are spent observing the beauty of a single flower. Reward is drawn from an afternoon paddling around the lake.

Another aspect of this simplicity is its decided lack of orientation towards a set of tasks or goals. Rousseau’s days are spent “without having any well-determined or constant object,” a concept that also might fail to compute for a 21<sup>st</sup>-century achiever.<sup>47</sup> Somehow, though, this kind of simplicity is what brings Rousseau the most happiness, and he calls these aimless days “a hundred times preferable to the sweetest things I had found in what are called the pleasures of life.”<sup>48</sup>

Simplicity is only the beginning of happiness for Rousseau, though, because the value of a simple life rests on the bedrock of a more important idea, that true contentment is found in the sentiment of one’s existence—that the fact of being alive is enough for one to always be satisfied with life. One may argue that it is impossible to live a contented and

---

<sup>45</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, in *The Collected Writings of Rousseau*, ed. Christopher Kelly (Hanover: University Press of New England, 2000), 41.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

fulfilled life by merely appreciating one's existence, but Rousseau makes a compelling case that demands a serious response.

In his *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, Rousseau describes the experience of awakening to how unnecessarily he was weighed down by the opinions of others. He first believed others viewed him as “the horror of the human race,” observing that “the only greeting passersby would give [him] would be to spit” on him.<sup>49</sup> This caused great agitation, indignation, and a tendency to struggle “without cleverness, without craft . . . without prudence.”<sup>50</sup> However, after realizing that such inner-conflict only ever resulted in an endless struggle over what cannot be controlled (the opinions of others), he took the only remaining course, namely “submitting to [his] fate without railing against necessity any longer.”<sup>51</sup> Rousseau recognized how much stock he set by the expectations and opinions of others and, understanding he could not control either one, finally decided to refrain from assigning them value. No longer chained to what others think or say about him, Rousseau is able to find ultimate meaning and value in his own life.

For Rousseau, the sentiment of existence possesses beauty and mystery. In his Fifth Walk, he says it is a sentiment “stripped of any other emotion, is in itself a precious sentiment of contentment and of peace which alone would suffice to make this existence dear and sweet to anyone able to spurn all the sensual and earthly impressions which incessantly come to distract us from it and to trouble its sweetness here-below.”<sup>52</sup> The appeal of the argument for a happiness not derived from earthly pleasures and the comparisons it leads us to make is that it is dependent on no person other than one's self. It is not by God's help that we become truly content. It is not by the help of our neighbor. Rather, we become “like God,” Rousseau claims,

---

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

when we are content in our own environment and with our own existence; by remaining in this state, “we are sufficient unto ourselves.”<sup>53</sup>

One can contest Rousseau’s claim of the ultimate source of this contentment, but his articulation of the truest expression of happiness is compelling for two reasons. First, it speaks to a longing for freedom from the social upkeep to which many feel chained, and second, there is a profound appeal found in a life committed to simplicity. In the end, Rousseau’s solution for a vain and comparing people is to attack the problem of *amour-propre* at its source: the more simply we live, the fewer points of reference we have with which to compare. Stated most succinctly, Rousseau’s conception of happiness is a simple life drawn from the deeper well of our own self-sufficiency and contentment with existence.

One may observe that no excellent sheep is an island, but even still, a serious reading of Rousseau’s assessment of *amour-propre* and his solution to the problem demands sober reflection on our habit of comparison to others and what might be done about it. To Rousseau, *amour-propre* is deeply entrenched. Worse still for us, we are unable to retreat from society in quite the same way Rousseau does in his *Reveries*. Nevertheless, we can still ask the questions of ourselves that his analysis raises—what do we do because we enjoy the praise it earns us? What do we do for fear of not measuring up if we do not? What do we refuse to do for fear of failure? How often do we find ourselves quite literally looking at another person and considering the ways in which we think he or she is better or worse than us?

These are questions that, if asked seriously, should illuminate the places where we are most enslaved to the opinions of others; as such, asking these questions can be a risk, for to examine the parts of ourselves that are dependent on others is to acknowledge vulnerabilities we may wish to remain unexposed. Despite this risk, though, a willingness to search for substantive

---

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

answers to the questions of why we burn the midnight oil, join ten clubs, and cast every part of life in terms of success or failure is, in my estimation, the first step towards freedom from the opinion of others.

Deresiewicz and Rousseau both articulate the pervasive problem of a life spent worrying about what others think of you. For them, such a life is an exercise in exhaustion and unhappiness. It is a treadmill of accomplishments, empty accolades, stress, and, most importantly, constant comparison, and it leaves those stuck running on it with no purpose other than to keep from falling off. Rousseau offers a solution to this problem, and it is one of radical contentment with the simple fact of one's own existence. One may find such an existence to be deeply unsatisfying or impractical. However, by proposing such a remedy, Rousseau moves the conversation forward, and in doing so, he raises the question that any excellent sheep should be keen to address: if a life spent on the treadmill of success leads to unhappiness, how do we step off?

### **Works Cited**

Deresiewicz, William. *Excellent Sheep: The Miseducation of the American Elite and the Way to a Meaningful Life*. New York: Free Press, 2014.

Douthat, Ross. *Privilege: Harvard and the Education of the Ruling Class*. New York: Hyperion, 2005.

Levine, Madeline. *The Price of Privilege: How Parental Pressure and Material Advantage Are Creating a Generation of Disconnected and Unhappy Kids*. New York: Harper, 2006.

Murray, Charles. *Coming Apart: The State of White America, 1960-2010*. New York: Crown Forum, 2012.

Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. "Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality among Men *or* Second Discourse." In *Rousseau: The Discourses and Other Early Political Writings*, edited by Victor Gourevitch, 113-222. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

———. *Emile or On Education*. Translated by Allan Bloom. New York: Basic Books, 1979.

———. *The Reveries of the Solitary Walker*. In *The Collected Writings of Rousseau*, edited by Christopher Kelly, 3-48. Hanover: University Press of New England, 2000.