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«The Multiplicity of Agreeable Consciousness»
Samuel Johnson's Sceptical Philosophy of Terrestrial Happiness

Rudolf Freiburg
(Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg, Deutschland)

Abstract Samuel Johnson's life was troubled by diverse physical diseases and – one year before his death – he experienced a stroke. Moreover, he suffered from recurring fits of depression. But Johnson was also merry, loved witty conversations, good food and his nightly tours through London pubs. Johnson maintained that pleasure and pain were closely connected with each other. In both his dialogues with James Boswell and in his comprehensive literary works, Johnson reveals a philosophy of happiness characterized by a radical skepticism reminiscent of Michel de Montaigne's Pyrrhonism. Influenced by Richard Burton, Thomas Browne and Francis Bacon, Johnson developed his specific doctrine of eudaemonic idols: as an idiosyncratic representative of Enlightenment philosophy he examined and questioned traditional *clichès* of happiness such as Stoicism, natural philosophy, learning, and marriage. Though not completely denying the possibility of earthly happiness, which he defined as the «multiplicity of agreeable consciousness», he was convinced that all earthly pleasures were doomed to fade away. As «a gloomy gazer on a world» to which he had «little relation», Johnson gave up any hope of attaining happiness on earth and exclusively trusted in felicity beyond the grave.

1 Introduction: Happiness as a Central Theme in Samuel Johnson's Literary Works

All of Johnson's major works such as *The Vanity of Human Wishes* (1749), *The Rambler* (1750-1752), *The Idler* (1758-1760), and of course *Rasselas* (1759), delve deep into the mysteries of human happiness; 'felicity' – together with 'hope', 'delusion', 'religion', and 'death' – may be identified as one of the pivotal centres of his philosophy. In the history of ideas, Johnson's eudaemonism is of great significance, since it both summarizes and transcends traditional views of happiness. As one of the most learned

men of his century, who had edited his famous *Dictionary* (1755) almost single-handed, as a scholar and polymath, who probably knew more books than any other man alive (Bate 1984, pp. 240-260, also p. 35), Johnson was intensely familiar with the roots of the philosophy of happiness in ancient times and the many ideas that were developed by later philosophers during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. On the one hand, Johnson's moral weeklies may be interpreted as complex compendia of the time-honoured wisdom of learned Europe. On the other hand, they clearly represent the sceptical notions of Enlightenment philosophy that was no longer willing to take any natural or moral laws for granted.

2 Johnson between Happiness, Despair and Melancholy

Even if James Boswell may be blamed for constructing the myth of that arch-conservative Dr Johnson, who «talked for victory» and who loved to bully his intellectual friends with the sheer amount of his learning (Chapman 1970, p. 1150), nobody can deny his achievements as Johnson's first serious biographer. Boswell describes Johnson as an extremely complex character, deeply immersed in both the happiness and misery of eighteenth-century reality. Many anecdotes presented in Boswell's *Life of Johnson* (1791) prove that Johnson was by no means averse to happiness (Weinbrot 2012, pp. 195-207). As Tom Davies observed, Johnson could laugh «like a rhinoceros»; he loved to drink wine and revealed an almost insatiable appetite for food, perhaps only topped by that of Henry Thrale, in whose family he spent so many happy hours of his life (Chapman 1970, pp. 637, 746, and 349-350). There can be no doubt that he experienced a brief spell of happiness in his marriage to Elizabeth Porter, at least until she started to drink and become more and more morose in the course of her own rather bleak life (Bate 1984, pp. 236-239). In his literary club, Johnson spent many happy hours in conversation with the coterie of his intellectual friends, among them David Garrick, Edmund Burke and Oliver Goldsmith (pp. 366-367).[1] He accompanied Bennet Langton and Topham Beauclerk on their pub-crawls through London (p. 346), which – to him and Boswell – appeared to be a kind of earthly paradise. He enjoyed the fast drive in a post-chaise, ideally in the company of a pretty woman, as he proclaimed (Chapman 1970, p. 845; Gross 2001, pp. 199-253). When Mrs Thrale prompted him to tell her about the happiest moment of his life, Johnson did not hesitate to confess that it was an unforgettable evening with the beautiful Molly Aston, whom he admired intensely: «That indeed

1 For a similar view of the 'happy Johnson', see Foldare 1984, pp. 17-44, who observes that for Johnson happiness consists of accumulating 'new ideas' (p. 18).

(said he) was not happiness, it was rapture; but the thoughts of it sweetened the whole year» (Bate 1984, p. 184).

But apart from these happy events, Johnson's life was so overshadowed by calamities that Boswell feels entitled to describe his existence as a «narrative of misery» (Chapman 1970, p. 1347). Due to his mother's unfortunate decision, Johnson was sent to a wet nurse who probably infected him with scrofula. His childhood was marred by almost constant affliction (Bate 1984, pp. 6-7); later in life Johnson confessed sadly to Sir John Hawkins that «he knew not what it was to be totally free from pain» (p. 10). As a child, and then afterwards again as a student at Oxford (p. 126), Johnson had to face poverty, and forever he refused to see it in a romantic light and declared it «a great enemy to human happiness» (Chapman 1970, pp. 1189-1190). When he grew older, the scrofula caused asthma and emphysema; the gout also tormented him. His letters to Giuseppe Baretti, James Boswell, and the Thrale family prove how deeply Johnson suffered from the effects of the terrible stroke that probably led to his death in 1784 (Bate 1984, p. 575). Pain, paralysis, lack of speech, and an ever-increasing degree of social isolation made him feel miserable thorughout his life. Moreover, Johnson was attacked by bouts of what Boswell characterizes as a «morbid melancholy» (Chapman 1970, p. 47),[2] recurring fits of despair and gloom that made him wish to «escape from himself» with the help of wine, the entertainments of theatre, or even lexicography (pp. 106, 258, 974, 136). In Johnson's case, this dismal mental state was no minor indisposition but a grave psychological chronic illness,[3] which would probably be diagnosed as severe depression nowadays (p. 427). This radical melancholy prevented him not only from being happy but, one might even say, from being alive; he was paralysed and unable to move or act;[4] as his friends discreetly mention in their letters, Johnson was on the verge of committing suicide when this despair set in. In those moments the staunch believer Johnson was about to lose his religion, to «see God in clouds» (p. 791) – if at all – and to sympathize with Hume's atheism.[5] After meeting Johnson on one of these occasions, Boswell recalls that Johnson proclaimed: «I would consent to have a limb amputated to recover my spirits» (p. 342). Boswell frequently

2 «The "morbid melancholy", [...] gathered such strength in his twentieth year, as to afflict him in a dreadful manner. While he was at Lichfield, in the college vacation of the year 1729, he felt himself overwhelmed with an horrible hypochondria, with perpetual irritation, fretfulness, and impatience; and with a dejection, gloom, and despair, which made existence misery». For the long literary history of melancholia, see Horstmann 1985.

3 Johnson may have been afflicted with the Tourette syndrome (Weinbrot 2012, p. 196).

4 See Chapman 1970, p. 48: «He told Mr. Paradise that he was sometimes so languid and inefficient, that he could not distinguish the hour upon the town-clock».

5 See Chapman 1970, p. 314: «Every thing which Hume has advanced against Christianity had passed through my mind long before he wrote».

refers to Johnson's melancholy and uses it as an explanation for his often rude conversational behavior towards friends:

> Let the most censorious of my readers suppose himself to have a violent fit of the tooth-ach, or to have received a severe stroke on the shin-bone, and when in such a state to be asked a question; and if he has any candour, he will not be surprized at the answers which Johnson sometimes gave in moments of irritation, which, let me assure them, is exquisitely painful (p. 989).

These terrifying fits of melancholy may also explain the mystery about the 'padlock' and the 'fetters', which – together with the enigmatic French letter Johnson wrote to Mrs Thrale – sensational biographers like to treat as unambiguous symptoms of Johnson's masochistic sexual behavior (Wain 1980, pp. 286-292), The truth, however, is that Johnson may have used them as a last resort to avoid injuring or killing himself, until Mrs Thrale took them away (Bate 1984, p. 385). Johnson, the unfailing defender of rationality, feared nothing more than the loss of his intellectual capacity. For him, melancholia threatened to lead towards insanity.[6] There is at least one instance in Boswell's *Life of Johnson* which clearly reveals the symptoms of a severe disturbance of Johnson's sanity; virtually driven to madness by unbearable feelings of both guilt and despair, Johnson is described kneeling in front of Reverend Delap and uttering a torrent of confused sentences, until Mr Thrale shut Johnson's mouth with his hand (p. 407).

3 The Particular Nature of Johnson's Eudaemonism

Johnson's eudaemonism can be described as a syncretic *mélange* composed of various ingredients culled from the doctrines of Callicles, Plato and Aristotle (Spaemann 1974, pp. 679-707), but he was also familiar with the history of the idea of happiness from Stoicism to the Scholastic tradition of the Middle Ages. Johnson shares Plato's idea that happiness has to be associated with the 'good' and the 'beautiful' (Griffin 1998, pp. 227-228), and the entry in his own *Dictionary* reminds the reader of Callicles, who thought that happiness consisted in satisfying one's desires: «Felicity; state in which the desires are satisfied» (Lynch 2002, p. 232). More important, however, is Richard Hooker's definition, also quoted by Johnson: «*Happiness* is that estate whereby we attain, so far as possibly may be attained, the full possession of that which simply for itself is to be

6 See Chapman 1970, pp. 49, 790-791. It is no wonder that Johnson presents the portrait of the mad astronomer in *Rasselas* in his analysis of happiness (Enright 1984b, pp. 127-128).

desired, and containeth in it after an eminent sort the contentation of our desires, the highest degree of all our perfection» (Lynch 2002, p. 232). Hooker and Johnson believe that happiness can never simply be a means; it always has to be an 'end' to an action: happiness is meaningful in itself and cannot be actively pursued but must be imagined as a welcome by-product of human activities, which – and this is self-evident – have to be invariably virtuous.[7] Furthermore, by citing John Locke's definition of happiness – «that every one does not place his happiness in the same thing» (Lynch 2002, p. 233) – Johnson emphasizes the strong individualistic and even idiosyncratic nature of felicity:

> The commonest of commonplaces is that 'happiness' can never be found if consciously and deliberately looked for (and weighted in the balance against the expectant imagination), but occurs only as a by-product when we lose ourselves in something else. Yet, after all he [Johnson] had written, and though he had rediscovered the truth of this time and again, he was himself repeatedly using 'happiness' as a yardstick with which to measure and evaluate life. That he should be so passionate in maintaining the futility of 'happiness' as a goal or end in itself showed only how persistent an obsession it was (Bate 1984, p. 380).

Johnson's intellect allowed for repetition of ultraconservative tenets, but at the same time he astounded his audience by giving free rein to the most rebellious and heretical ideas; Boswell witnessed him defending the Inquisition and finding arguments for torturing; then, again, Johnson showed so much humanity, empathy and benevolence towards prostitutes that no one could suspect him of moralistic severity (Chapman 1970, pp. 329-331, 323). Boswell, proud of justifying the achievements brought about by slavery, was brusquely rebuffed by Johnson who evinced his solidarity with slaves even bringing out a toast: «Here's to the next insurrection of the negroes in the West Indies» (pp. 876, 878 ff.). Similar contradictory behavior may also be found in his treatment of the theme of happiness.

The first and most significant prerequisite for the state of happiness is the awareness of man as a social being, a *zoon politikon*. Johnson was pretty sure that social isolation inevitably led to grief and melancholy. As the dialogues with Boswell show, Johnson let no opportunity pass for casting abuse on Jean-Jacques Rousseau, whom he criticized severely for his philosophy of nature; no man, Johnson thought, could be happy if he tried to regain the former state of primitive natural living; for 'modern' man,

7 For Johnson, obedience to God was an indispensable precondition for human happiness; see Chapman 1970, p. 373.

the respect gained in a social context is of a vital importance;[8] when Mr Dempster recommended 'merit' as the single source of happiness, this is how Johnson refuted his notion:

> If man were a savage, living in the woods by himself, this might be true; but in civilized society we all depend upon each other, and our happiness is very much owing to the good opinion of mankind. Now, Sir, in civilized society, external advantages make us more respected (pp. 310-311).

The conversations in Boswell's *Life of Johnson*, however, do not always represent Johnson's unadulterated ideas with regard to happiness; a reader familiar with Johnson's analysis of prosperity in *Rasselas* will probably be surprised to find Johnson argue in favour of riches in his dialogues with friends; the explanation may be that in society, Johnson quite often talked «for victory» (p. 528) and that a spirit of rebellion together with the sheer pleasure of contradicting made Johnson utter the most inconsistent ideas in different contexts. Whereas Imlac and Rasselas learn that riches do not guarantee happiness, Johnson reveals a rather 'commonsense' opinion when he talks to his friends; as a *zoon politikon*, man depends on money and cannot afford to despise it:

> Perhaps he who has a large fortune may not be so happy as he who has a small one; but that must proceed from other causes than from his having the large fortune: for, *cæteris paribus* [*sic*], he who is rich in a civilized society, must be happier than he who is poor; as riches, if properly used, (and it is a man's own fault if they are not,) must be productive of the highest advantages (p. 311).

The accumulation of details emerging in a social context make life worth living and present the mind with the necessary impulses «to get rid» of oneself (pp. 106, 974); this is precisely the reason why Johnson was of the opinion that a man «who is tired of London, is tired of life» (p. 859). London, with its plethora of visual, acoustic, and olfactory excitements, its street signs, advertisements, its innumerable streets, churches, bridges, pubs,[9] clubs and coffee houses was the worldly embodiment of the abstract idea of happiness.[10] The orchestra of human voices, the assorted gallery

8 See Bullitt, Bate, Powell 1963, p. 130: «Happiness is not found in self-contemplation; it is perceived only when it is reflected from another».

9 See Chapman 1970, p. 697: «No, Sir; there is nothing which has yet been contrived by man, by which so much happiness is produced as by a good tavern or inn».

10 See Chapman 1970, pp. 405-6: «The happiness of London is not to be conceived but by those who have been in it. I will venture to say, there is more learning and science within the circumference of ten miles from where we now sit, than in all the rest of the kingdom». See also p. 1014.

of rogues and simpletons, the ever-changing scenes in the street or on the Thames, the plurality of opinions revealed in coffee houses and magazines guaranteed that «multiplicity of agreeable consciousness» (p. 357) which, for Johnson, was a definition of happiness. And it is this specific combination of details which ensures happiness:

> Pound St. Paul's Church into atoms, and consider any single atom; it is, to be sure, good for nothing: but, put all these atoms together, and you have St. Paul's Church. So it is with human felicity, which is made up of many ingredients, each of which may be shewn to be very insignificant (p. 311).

Johnson definitively recommends the observation of tiny details that may enable a person to lead a happy life; talking about diaries and the relevance of entries, Johnson tells Boswell: «There is nothing, Sir, too little for so little a creature as man. It is by studying little things that we attain the great art of having as little misery and as much happiness as possible» (p. 307).

However, in Johnson's view, this awareness of one's surroundings should not be confounded with a dependence on the conditions of «external circumstances» (Bate, Strauss 1969, vol. 3, p. 30). Johnson keeps on reprimanding Boswell for being too susceptible to the changes of the weather and – though no friend of Zeno and his disciples (pp. 174-179) – he would even recommend a modicum of Stoicism as a therapy against the «vicissitudes of life».[11] Johnson believed in a clearly structured community, ruled by the principles of universal «subordination, as most conducive to the happiness of society. There is a reciprocal pleasure in governing and being governed» (Chapman 1970, pp. 289, 924). But even the form of government or the political nature of the state one lives in seems to be of no major importance if one wants to lead a happy life (p. 477). This independence from outward conditions of existence is indicative of Johnson's growing insight into the psychological aspects of happiness. He knew that the «fountain of content must spring up in the mind» and that those who «seek happiness» cannot change anything but their own «disposition» (Bate, Strauss 1969, vol. 3, p. 35). Johnson recognized that happiness must be defined as an ephemeral mental state,[12] dependent on various complex factors permanently subjected to modification, a process rather than a status that immediately ceases to exist once it has been reached.[13] Happiness can

11 See, for example, *Rambler* No. 203 (Bate, Strauss 1969, vol. 5, p. 292); see also Enright 1984b, p. 136.

12 In *Rambler* No. 151 Johnson develops his theory of the «climactericks of the mind» (Bate, Strauss 1969, vol. 5, pp. 38-39),.

13 See also Ducrocq 1984, p. 126: «Le bonheur est donc moins dans la fin que dans le movement qui conduit vers cette fin». For Johnson's indebtedness to David Hume, see Potkay 1998, pp. 170-174.

never really be defined, let alone 'fixed'; its nature is precarious, prone to sudden alterations and abrupt modifications, and as Locke's quotation in the *Dictionary* indicates (Lynch 2002, p. 233), happiness is always a highly individual experience bordering on idiosyncrasy.

Johnson clearly distinguishes between 'happiness' and 'pleasure'. Considered from a psychological point of view, many instances of 'happiness' turn out to be merely 'pleasures' of a baser origin: to be happy with a woman does not «mean conversation, but something of a very different nature. Philosophers tell you, that pleasure is contrary to happiness» (Chapman 1970, p. 912). The proverbial happiness of sailors is refuted by the following remark: «They are happy as brutes are happy, with a piece of fresh meat, – with the grossest sensuality» (p. 927). Drinking wine, for instance, might lead the drunken person to think that he or she is happier but, according to Johnson, this idea is erroneous, since drink only enhances the multitude of pleasures. Not to drink wine is a «diminution of pleasure, to be sure; but I do not say a diminution of happiness. There is more happiness in being rational» (p. 911). As the analysis of *Rasselas* will show, happiness is not exclusively the object of sensualism and cannot be reduced to the satisfaction of physical desires alone. Happiness is also an intellectual and psychological phenomenon, difficult to obtain and even more difficult to preserve: it is the ephemeral product of a train of thought. Happiness is fickle and depends on mood, even on the physical condition of the body; Boswell quotes a Turkish lady who had been educated in France: «*Ma foi, Monsieur, notre bonheur dépend de la façon que notre sang circule*» (p. 243). The impossibility of the Faustian wish to make a happy moment last forever (Goethe 1970, p. 52) permeates Johnson's psychological theory of happiness:

> Being pressed upon this subject, and asked if he really was of opinion, that though, in general, happiness was very rare in human life, a man was not sometimes happy in the moment that was present, he answered, «Never, but when he is drunk» (Chapman 1970, pp. 617-8).

4 The Ephemeral Character of Happiness: Johnson as Sceptic and Pessimist

Johnson deflates any belief in the existence of solid enjoyment: «Life is a progress from want to want, not from enjoyment to enjoyment» (Chapman 1970, p. 754). The nature of desires changes throughout one's life, «since our tastes greatly alter. The lad does not care for the child's rattle, and the old man does not care for the young man's whore» (p. 361). Since the present is unable to afford reliable instances of happiness, man projects them into the future and hopes to obtain

them at some later time. Johnson adumbrates the essentially asymptotic character of any attempt to attain happiness.[14] But these kinds of hope are themselves modest manifestations of happiness: «Hope is itself a species of happiness, and, perhaps, the chief happiness which this world affords: but, like all other pleasures immoderately enjoyed, the excesses of hope must be expiated by pain; and expectations improperly indulged, must end in disappointment» (p. 261; also p. 442).[15]

Johnson's eudaemonism is radically individualistic, psychological and relative. He knows that happiness must be measured against the backdrop of a complex psychological system of emotionality, but also of intellectuality. Happiness is not the same for everyone:

> I mentioned Hume's notion, that all who are happy are equally happy; a little miss with a new gown at a dancing school ball, a general at the head of a victorious army, and an orator, after having made an eloquent speech in a great assembly. JOHNSON. «Sir, that all who are happy, are equally happy, is not true. A peasant and a philosopher may be equally *satisfied*, but not equally *happy*. Happiness consists in the multiplicity of agreeable consciousness. A peasant has not capacity for having equal happiness with a philosopher». I remember this very question very happily illustrated in opposition to Hume, by the Reverend Mr. Robert Brown, at Utrecht. «A small drinking-glass and a large one, (said he,) may be equally full; but the large one holds more than the small» (p. 357; see also p. 945).

If London – or any other great metropolis – may be looked upon as one of the *outward* prerequisites of happiness, the rich intellect and the learned mind of a philosopher have to be regarded as the inward precondition of happiness.

The philosophy described so far, however, is only a part of Johnson's complex eudaemonism, which, probably, belongs to the most pessimistic views of earthly human happiness to be encountered in the European history of ideas. Boswell witnessed Johnson's pessimism in countless instances, and he came to doubt it:

> It was observed to Dr. Johnson, that it seemed strange that he, who has so often delighted his company by his lively and brilliant conversation,

14 In *Rambler* No. 67, Johnson illustrates the asymptotic nature of happiness by telling an allegorical story about a garden in which the fruits always disappear when one wants to pluck them (Bate, Strauss 1969, vol. 3, p. 355).

15 Compare this quotation with *The Idler* No. 59: «Yet it is necessary to hope, tho' hope should always be deluded, for hope itself is happiness, and its frustrations, however frequent, are yet less dreadful than its extinction» (Bullitt, Bate, Powell 1963, p. 182).

> should say he was miserable. JOHNSON. «Alas! it is all outside; I may be cracking my joke, and cursing the sun. *Sun, how I hate thy beams*!» I knew not well what to think of this declaration; whether to hold it as a genuine picture of his mind, or as the effect of his persuading himself contrary to fact, that the position which he had assumed as to human unhappiness, was true. We may apply to him a sentence in Mr. Greville's *Maxims, Characters, and Reflections*; a book which is entitled to much more praise than it has received: «ARISTARCHUS is charming: how full of knowledge, of sense, of sentiment. You get him with difficulty to your supper; and after having delighted every body and himself for a few hours, he is obliged to return home; – he is finishing his treatise, to prove that unhappiness is the portion of man» (pp. 1300-1301).

Boswell's impression of Johnson, however, is probably wrong; being so much younger than his mentor, and also – despite occasional fits of melancholy – being also so much happier than him, as his famous, or rather notorious, *London Journal* (1762-1763, published 1950) proves (Pottle 2004), Boswell was not able to understand the older man's sadness and despair. There is no reason to disbelieve Johnson when he confesses that after the death of his wife Tetty he felt «broken off from mankind; a kind of solitary wanderer in the wild of life, without any direction, or fixed point of view: a gloomy gazer on a world to which I have little relation» (Chapman 1970, p. 196). Johnson's childhood experiences, his despair, his lifelong anxieties, his feeling of guilt, his thanatophobia, and his fear of eternal damnation (p. 1296) had left indelible traces in his mind. As a «gloomy gazer» he did not feel at home in a world characterized by absurdity. Johnson had had his experiences, more than he had wished for, and he was not willing to ignore them; by way of induction he tried to develop universal rules from his own insights into the nature of the world and the state of happiness therein.[16] He was not prepared to let himself be deceived by the allegedly 'universal truths' handed down by tradition, and he was a staunch opponent of those philosophers who merely parroted Aristotle without understanding him.[17] In this respect, his attempt to study happiness without any prejudices resembles Sir Thomas Browne's *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* (1646) (Keynes 2007, pp. 269-510) and Sir Francis Bacon's doctrine of the

16 The best study of the complex relationship between happiness and the 'public' spirit of the Enlightenment is Joeckel 2003: «A tension thus exists between Johnson as champion of Enlightenment universals and an alter-ego Johnson who shows, but perhaps does not fully realize, that happiness may lie beyond those universals» (p. 29).

17 Johnson thinks that their «souls are mere pipes or organs, which transmit sound, but do not understand them» (Bate, Strauss 1969, vol. 4, p. 8). This is also the reason why Johnson deviated from the theory of happiness presented by James Harris (see Probyn 1978, pp. 256-266).

idols, described in his *Novum Organon* (1620) (Rees, Wakely, 2004).[18] In order to free the human intellect from the traditional «cobwebs of learning» (Johnston 1974, p. 28), Bacon had made a list of certain kinds of prejudices, or *idola*, responsible for the poor state of human knowledge concerning nature and science (Krohn 1987, pp. 93-107). Johnson follows suit and develops his own doctrine of 'eudaemonic idols'. He does what Browne and Bacon taught him to do: he studies an allegedly well-known example of human happiness and describes it in detail, trying to discern all its properties, only to refute it as a tragic deception in the end. He proves that all these phenomena of happiness are chimera rather than solid entities, instances of existential self-deception rather than evidence of the happy condition of the world.

5 Testing the Truth of Happiness: Johnson and the Essayistic Approach towards Felicity

Johnson is highly interested in «knowing himself»,[19] here following the advice of the Delphic oracle, but he understands how prone man is to self-deception (Bate, Strauss, vol. 3, p. 152). As Michel de Montaigne did two centuries before, Johnson too proves to be a clear representative of that 'observing self' that was becoming the hallmark of the essayistic approach towards life (Good 1988, pp. 26-42, 55-70). Even if the grave essays in Johnson's moral weeklies clearly deviate from the Frenchman's example in terms of style and procedure, he has quite a lot in common with Montaigne's Pyrrhonism. Montaigne was fully aware of the etymology of the term «essay», derived from the Latin word *exagium*, which means 'trial' or 'sample', and he used the 'new' genre in order to test everything (Freiburg 2006, pp. 148-172; on Montaigne, see Friedrich 1967). «*J'examine*» was his maxim, and he delved deep into the mysteries of everyday life. Nothing was too banal or trivial for him to analyse; in his studies of human nature he knew no taboos, and he likewise wrote about religion, death and sexuality. Montaigne was also interested in the process-related character of essay writing, revealing his ideas *in statu nascendi*, developing and changing them all the time while he was still trying to write them down. Taking nothing for granted, Montaigne was eager to develop new ideas, to specu-

18 Johnson's style is reminiscent of Browne's complex, Latinate prose; see Johnston, Mugglestone 2012, pp. 1-10.

19 Johnson observed and analysed himself so strictly that Mrs Thrale thought it almost pathological: «"Will anybody's mind," she once asked in desperation, "bear the eternal microscope that you place upon your own so?" And the more closely he probed into his own state of mind, the more hopeless the gulf between what he found there and what he demanded from himself» (Bate 1984, p. 377).

late, and to turn the subjunctive mode of writing into a habit. The major achievement of his essays, however, is to see the world from a completely new perspective, which allowed him to avoid all stereotypes and prejudices. Again, Johnson follows suit. It is true, his style could never compete with the Frenchman's vigour and elegance, and one also looks in vain for Montaigne's *esprit* and his airiness, which is superseded by wisdom and gravity in Johnson's case, but the complex syntax of Johnson's sentences makes it seem as if he wanted to test verities by grinding them in his own verbal mill.

Miss Beresford's opinion that in Johnson's prose «every sentence is an essay» (Chapman 1970, p. 1285) may be an overstatement, yet the aphoristic nature of his writing renders him extremely quotable. This is the reason why many of Johnson's ideas concerning happiness have attained the status of maxims and proverbs. Even if Boswell characterizes Johnson as a spontaneous thinker, the reader of the moral essays soon notices that there is a coherent system of thought underlying his ideas on happiness. The basis of his eudaemonism is a gloomy attitude toward life. Johnson firmly believes that the «condition of humanity admits no pure and unmingled happiness», and he is of the opinion «that something is always wanting to happiness» (Bate, Strauss 1969, vol. 5, pp. 260-261). The beginning of *Idler* No. 89 seems to be the confession of a melancholy man, whose sad experience paves the way to theodicy:

> How evil came into the world; for what reason it is that life is overspread with such boundless varieties of misery; why the only thinking being of this globe is doomed to think merely to be wretched, and to pass his time from youth to age in fearing or in suffering calamities, is a question which philosophers have long asked, and which philosophy could never answer (Bullitt, Bate, Powell 1963, p. 275).

Happiness is not 'luck', and if it can be attained at all, it must be acquired through hard work. Johnson was well familiar with the traditional illustrations of the famous 'choice of life', the metaphor of 'Hercules at the Crossroads' and the 'Tablet of Cebes' (see Probyn 1978, p. 261). As these illustrations show, any easy approach to happiness is doomed to fail from the outset. Since pleasure is not happiness, it is precisely the hedonistic attitude towards life that prevents people from becoming happy.[20] In his allegory of Obidah, who leaves the steep road in order to amuse himself with fruits and visual entertainments on some «more commodious path» (Bate, Strauss 1969, vol. 3, p. 345) but then recognizes that he is about to lose his way the moment darkness sets in, Johnson verifies that 'genuine' happiness must be related to labour, truth and rationality. All the gross,

20 See also *Adventurer* No. 39 (Bullitt, Bate, Powell 1963, p. 346).

and merely sensual pleasures in life are not appropriate ways to pursue happiness. They lead into the swamps of sloth and sin. Johnson would condemn nobody for loving food and wine, or for leading a 'natural' sexual life, but he would strictly censure all forms of orgiastic pleasure-seeking. In order to transcend the sphere of mere gross pleasure, one's entertainment must have both a sensual and an intellectual side. Johnson counts 'friendship' and 'conversation' among the most significant manifestations of happiness.[21] He knows that friends are a vital part of one's life, since without them all other pleasures start to lose their attraction because they cannot be shared; Johnson feels disappointed when he wants to talk with old friends in Lichfield only to find that they are dead or that they have felt neglected and no longer appreciate his presence. Johnson enjoyed it immensely to talk with friends. In conversations, ideas keep on flowing, witty repartees cause amusement, aphorisms and learned anecdotes promise the kind of intellectual joy Johnson was looking for. The dynamic metaphor of 'conversation' appropriately describes happiness, for which movement is indispensable. Being a mental phenomenon, happiness is part of the incessant 'chain of associations' that Johnson had learned from his study of Locke's philosophy (Martin 2008, pp. 1-9). A happy moment is exactly 'a moment', a brief interim between several calamities, and it becomes happy only because these calamities are known.[22] In Johnson's eudaemonism, change and contrast are affiliated and enable man to feel happy. The idea of terrestrial 'eternal happiness' is completely preposterous, since happiness would turn into torture if it were not predestined to cease at a certain time. The acceptance of the 'sense of an ending' is essential if one wants to understand Johnson's theory of happiness based on the principle *varietas delectat*.[23] Just as the seasons define themselves by being different from each other; just as night and day prove to be pleasurable because of the variation they bring; and just as leisure is so delicious after hours of hard work, happiness too can be perceived only if it is matched by misery and pain.[24] This idea, which harks back to ancient

21 See *Rambler* No. 99 and 108 (Bate, Strauss 1969, vol. 4, pp. 55-60).

22 See also *Adventurer* No. 120: «In some intervals of public prosperity, or, to use terms more proper, in some intermissions of calamity, a general diffusion of happiness may seem to overspread a people; all is triumph and exultation, jollity and plenty; there are no public fears and dangers, and 'no complainings in the streets.' But the condition of individuals is very little mended by this general calm; pain and malice and discontent still continue their havoc, the silent depredation goes incessantly forward, and the grave continues to be filled by the victims of sorrow» (Bullitt, Bate, Powell 1963, p. 467).

23 See Kermode 2000; see also *Rambler* No. 80 (Bate, Strauss 1969).

24 See also Johnson's definition of «idleness», which characterizes people «who have long since ceased to live, and at whose death the survivors can only say, that they have ceased to breathe» (Bullitt, Bate, Powell 1963, p. 96).

epistemology and turns up again in eighteenth-century doctrines of theodicy, permeates Johnson's moral writings. If he wants to attain happiness, man must follow the natural movement of the seasons, the motion of the earth through the universe, and of the planets around the sun.[25] Johnson leaves no doubt that happiness cannot be associated with indolence, idleness and paralysis; it must be a product of the active life of a person, no matter whether this person be an artisan, a farmer, an artist, or a scholar (Bullitt, Bate, Powell 1963, p. 455).

Happiness is incompatible with the idea that people are dead in the midst of life, a notion that was severely criticized by the Christian tradition as the vice of *acedia* (Freiburg 1998, p. 104). Existential paralysis is inacceptable, and therefore recurrent images of fluctuation (e.g. the 'river', the 'sea', the 'ocean') are extremely important to an understanding of what Johnson thinks about happiness; a static river, like a motionless mind, tends to become stale. But this does not mean that movement is a value *per se*. Johnson warns his readers against all forms of empty entertainment such as playing games or spending hours at the gambling table, or bubbles of activity that prove to be nothing but signs of procrastination.[26] He is against the habit of following all the follies of contemporary fashion,[27] only to stay in motion. And he makes it completely clear that no man will find his happiness just by travelling to a distant shore.[28]

The list of the preconditions for gaining terrestrial happiness is almost complete: one must not only be conscious of the importance of the present moment, of virtue, honesty, *varietas*, inter-activity, and movement; man must also be authentic if he wants to become happy. It is absurd «to counterfeit happiness»:

> The world, in its best state, is nothing more than a larger assembly of beings, combining to counterfeit happiness which they do not feel, employing ever art and contrivance to embellish life, and to hide their real condition from the eyes of one another (Bullitt, Bate, Powell 1963, p. 468).

In order to avoid this foolishness, hope and happiness must embrace a degree of rationality. In Johnson's eudaemonism, 'rational happiness' is

25 For the implications the position of the earth has for the theme of moralism, see Bullitt, Bate, Powell 1963, pp. 134-135.

26 See the description of idleness in *The Idler* (Bullitt, Bate, Powell 1963, pp. 95-98), and the portrait of Sober in particular (pp. 97-98).

27 See *Rambler* No. 100, 208 (Bate, Strauss 1969, vol. 4, pp. 169-173; vol. 5, pp. 315-320).

28 Johnson criticizes Cowley for seeking happiness in retirement; happiness is not dependent on a place; see *Rambler* No. 6 (Bate, Strauss 1969, vol. 3, pp. 30-35).

strictly distinguished from merely 'imagined happiness'; like Bacon, Johnson despises all forms of imagination, one of the three significant elements of the ancient doctrine of the faculties (*memoria*, *ratio* and *imaginatio*). In Johnson's moral philosophy, imagination is tantamount to self-deception. It is the one psychic force that leads man astray and makes him follow the *ignes fatui*, the demonic false beacons that make one unhappy and miserable. Imaginative – i.e. irrational – hope and happiness are dangerous and must be avoided at all costs. Again and again, Johnson exposes the erroneous «airy gratifications» (Bate, Strauss 1969, vol. 4, p. 106) that convey only fictitious happiness to a dreamer, or a lunatic, «whose fancy dances after meteors of happiness kindled by itself» (Bullitt, Bate, Powell 1963, p. 129). In one's private philosophical system, imagined happiness is a manifestation of hope; hope is a synonym of delusion; and delusion is a symptom of madness.

As an Enlightenment philosopher, Johnson is interested in destroying these 'cobwebs of the mind'; he sees his task in constantly reminding his readers of the existential limits which restrict any attempt to seek happiness; his admonitions, in other words, serve the «benefit of mankind» (Johnston 1974, p. 36); they are not to be misunderstood as peevish endeavors to spoil other people's enjoyment. Nobody is entitled to prevent another person's right to savour his happiness, and Johnson condemns not only envy but also all forms of disproportionate intervention into somebody else's life. In his *Rambler*, Johnson presents the incarnations of existential carpers, whom he derides as «human screech-owls» (Bate, Strauss 1969, vol. 3, p. 314). Pertinax suffers from radical scepticism to such a degree that this intellectual malady makes him doubt everything, until he is about to lose his belief in God, which is the fastest way to misery, according to Johnson. Suspirus is one of the most negative characters in the *Rambler* because he cannot suffer any one to be happy and has made up his mind to spoil everybody's day by predicting future calamities, or by reminding someone of some long-forgotten pain.[29]

Actually, Johnson warns his readers not to surrender to the allures of another illusion: the idea that it would be possible to invent 'schemes of happiness'. Johnson insisted on the universal principle of the 'vicissitudes of life', the idea that the many changes and whims of fate can never be foreseen, so that it is impossible to plan one's life. He leaves no doubt that happiness is not subjected to the principles of reason alone and that although man may do something for his felicity he can never be sure of attaining it, because the rules of existence do not follow the paradigms of logic. For Johnson, the attempt to invent a scheme of happiness is tantamount to *superbia*, but also to *naïvité* and foolishness, as he shows in his oriental

29 See *Rambler* No. 95 and 59 (Bate, Strauss 1969, vol. 4, pp. 143-148; and vol. 3, pp. 314-318).

tale of Seged, who plans to be happy for ten days only to recognize that all his endeavours to become happy merely bring about misery in himself or in others:

> Such were the days which Seged of Ethiopia had appropriated to a short respiration from the fatigues of war and the cares of government. This narrative he has bequeathed to future generations, that no man hereafter may presume to say, «This day shall be a day of happiness» (Bate, Strauss 1969, vol. 5, p. 305).

To a certain degree, Johnson may be looked upon as a follower of Boethius, who, in his *Consolatio Philosophiae* (ca. 523) tried to emphasize the soothing aspects of literature; Johnson's moral essays and in particular his *Rasselas* are outstanding examples of texts in which the desperate reader may find some solace, even if it is only because he feels that he is not alone in his suffering. One means of feeling happiness and also of mitigating one's suffering is comparison with other people's pain.[30]

In order to face the *terribilis visu formae* of life, Johnson reanimates a time-honoured trope: the 'shipwreck with spectator', a paradigmatic metaphor for all kinds of calamities and catastrophes (Blumenberg 1979). Observing a ship going down, while standing on a solid rock, paradoxically contributes to one's happiness. This happiness is not malevolent, although it corresponds to the existential joy of the survivor who compares his own situation with the misery of the victims. In fact, the spectator does not have to be physically present at the wreck but can rely on a kind of vicarious experience presented by books: poems, dramas, novels, and especially moral essays help the reader to have this experience and to guarantee that later on he will freshly appreciate his 'ordinary' state of existence as extraordinary, even happy. It is the contrast with the world of pain and suffering which turns the ordinary life of an average person into a state of felicity. Johnson's eudaemonism consciously encompasses the philosophy of suffering, in this way linking it to the theme of theodicy. To Johnson, the world was a *mélange* consisting of good and bad simultaneously: the former can only be appreciated after experiences of evil. Johnson staunchly believed, for instance, that physical suffering eventually led to moral good (Bullitt, Bate, Powell 1963, p. 278). The «armies of pain» do not distinguish between virtuous and vicious men, but affect everyone without exception (p. 469).[31]

30 It would be interesting to compare Johnson's attitudes with those described in Sontag 2003.

31 See also *Rasselas*: «But the angels of affliction spread their toils alike for the virtuous and the wicked, for the mighty and the mean» (Enright 1984b, pp. 120-121).

Johnson's ideas bear some resemblance to the concept of *Yin and Yang*: the interferences between the good and the bad have to be accepted as the natural law of eudaemonism: «But so full is the world of calamity, that every source of pleasure is polluted, and every retirement of tranquility disturbed» (Bate, Strauss 1969, vol. 5, pp. 291-292). For many philosophers, especially the disciples of Lactantius and Epicure, this analysis suffices to question the existence of God (Freiburg 2004, pp. 225-227). Although Johnson's thinking about theodicy was very complex and clearly rejected any simple explanation of suffering, such as the clumsily optimistic arguments presented by Soame Jenyns, whom he despised (Freiburg 2004, pp. 225-243), he did not believe that the evidence of misery and pain could be used as an argument against the existence of a divine being. He would probably not have subscribed to Leibniz's ideas of pre-established harmony and of the best of all possible worlds, which the were ridiculed by Voltaire's bitter satire, *Candide* (1759), a book frequently compared to Johnson's *Rasselas* (Chapman 1970, p. 997).[32] Yet Johnson would have agreed that there is some 'reason' in suffering and that every calamity reveals a hidden meaning, an enigmatic message sent to the victim in order to remind him of the genuine values in life. In the dialogues with Boswell, the idea that «intellectual beings must be made perfect through suffering» is pronounced fairly often (p. 243). Indeed Johnson believed that terrestrial misery was intended by God to lead man to a 'happy' transcendental life beyond the grave. Johnson's essays follow Montaigne's definition of philosophy, that to philosophize means 'to learn to die' (see Starobinski 1986, pp. 109-140). In Johnson's moral universe it is Athanatus who enters the stage in order to teach the lessons of dying to the *Rambler's* audience (Bate, Strauss 1969, vol. 3, pp. 289-294). The deathbed of a close friend becomes a school of life, teaching the essential lessons of a 'happy' life, which is not compatible with the superficial existence most people lead. The deathbed shows the transcendental, *sub specie aeternitatis* perspective that Johnson tries to assume in his moral essays (Link 1957, p. 123). This perspective belittles the common notion of terrestrial happiness. It exposes the «folly of terrestrial hopes» (Bate, Strauss 1969, vol. 3, p. 290) and describes all ordinary ideas of happiness as «bubbles» that prevent morbid man from clearly perceiving the imminent «gulph of eternity» (p. 292). One's deathbed is the test of the authenticity of all notions of happiness.

32 See also the interesting comparison between *Rasselas* and *Candide* in Sir Walter Scott's *Lives of the Novelists* (1821), recently analysed by Watt 2013, pp. 33-34. See also Brinton 1972, pp. 92-96, and Joost 1957, pp. 166-173, who sees *Rasselas* as an «exercise in theodicy».

6 The Final Test: *Rasselas* and the Delusions of Happiness

Terrestrial life is viewed and judged *sub specie aeternitatis*;[33] this is also the reason why Johnson's oriental tale *Rasselas* reveals the potential of a genuine essay as a narrative test of eudaemonic principles. The brief philosophical novel tells the story of Rasselas, a young prince of Abyssinia, and his wise mentor Imlac, who, together with Nekayah and her maid Pekuah,[34] leave their home, the Happy Valley, in order to satisfy their curiosity and learn something about the 'real world'.

Even the beginning of Johnson's allegory of happiness is surprising: the story starts where others quite often end, with the description of an allegedly perfect place, the Happy Valley. The place is a kind of utopia reminiscent of Thomas More: «All the diversities of the world were brought together, the blessings of nature were collected, and its evils extracted and excluded» (Enright 1984b, p. 40). Anyone familiar with Johnson's philosophy will not be surprised that the Happy Valley is nothing but a euphemism for misery; by excluding evilness, the place violates the universal law of nature that good and evil have to be combined;[35] the exclusion of either of these elements makes the alleged utopia become a dystopian world. Johnson's vision of the Happy Valley can be characterized as an eighteenth-century anticipation of Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932): the absence of misery causes a certain stasis of life. The paralysis is universal, and Rasselas feels that «pleasure has ceased to please» (p. 44). Even the wise Imlac confesses that he «knows not one of all your attendants who does not lament the hour when he entered this retreat» (p. 68). The Valley's isolation, typical of utopian literature, has caused the idyllic place to stagnate and become stale; the principles of motion and change, substantial preconditions for genuine happiness, have been ruthlessly violated. Terrestrial 'eternal' happiness is doomed to fail. The Happy Valley quickly assumes the nightmarish qualities of existential boredom, which breeds a kind of *ennui*, eventually leading to the wish to end all earthly life. The absence of desire reveals the Happy Valley as the perverse *locus amoenus* of universal satisfaction: «Every desire was immediately granted» (p. 40). The reader is not surprised when he is told that Rasselas envies the animals around him (p. 43) and wants to leave the place: «I have already enjoyed too much; give me something to desire» (p. 45).

33 In this respect, Rasselas is reminiscent of the book Ecclesiastes; see Preston 1969, pp. 274-281.

34 Women are treated in the same way as men in *Rasselas*: «*Rasselas* presents serious, educated female characters who do not define themselves in relation to men» (Hansen 1985, p. 520).

35 See also Enright 1984a, p. 14, who compares the Happy Valley with the Garden of Eden and who sees Rasselas as «an Adam in search of a serpent».

The journey into the 'real' world is an experimental test of the ways to attain happiness.[36] Despite Imlac's warning that «[h]uman life is every where a state in which much is to be endured, and little to be enjoyed» (p. 65), Rasselas and Nekayah are eager to learn about the reality outside the boundaries of the valley. Having been isolated from the real world so far, the noble pair reveals a certain degree of innocence and even *naïveté*, which is however necessary in order to put the recommended recipes of happiness to the test of experience. At the beginning, the prince is still optimistic: «I have here the world before me; I will review it at leisure: surely happiness is somewhere to be found» (p. 78).

The journey into the real world is an allegorical voyage through life; as in a gallery, different scenes of happiness are observed, described, analysed and eventually rescinded. All the theories of happiness are subjected to the test of experience, which is also a test of truth and morality (Müller 2012, pp. 113-129). It shows that the ways of reaching happiness, such as they are recommended to Rasselas, turn out to be idols, chimeras and illusions. Johnson, who knew the Stoic system quite well, makes Imlac warn Rasselas not to believe what people tell him: «"Be not too hasty", said Imlac, "to trust, or to admire, the teachers of morality: they discourse like angels, but they live like men"» (Enright 1984b, p. 80). Johnson distrusted the ideal of *ataraxia* and of the detachment preached by Stoicism; at first Rasselas is fascinated by the happy prospects of leading an undisturbed life, but then he meets again the Stoic teacher, who has tragically lost his daughter and is on the verge of despair. The recipe for happiness, which in theory would be ideal, is useless in 'real life'. In his second example, happiness is personified by a mighty man, but, again, experience shows that he merely has «the appearance of happiness» and suffers under his enemy, the Bassa of Egypt (p. 84). The same procedure is applied to all the following 'schemes' for happiness: hedonism is obliterated; the philosophy of nature, reminiscent of Rousseau's doctrines, is vehemently refuted (pp. 87-88); the option of living happily in a hermitage convinces neither the prince nor his sister (pp. 84-85); the «happiness of high stations» is exposed as a fake (p. 90); the long analysis of marriage ends in the aphoristic recognition: «Marriage has many pains, but celibacy has no pleasures» (p. 95). As the beginning of the tale had foreshadowed (p. 39), there is no chance of fulfilling plans to become happy in old age (pp. 93-94, 136-137). Imlac gives only one practical piece of advice: he confesses that he does not know how to lead a happy life but has at least some experience in coping with personal catastrophes:

> The state of a mind oppressed with a sudden calamity, said Imlac, is like that of the fabulous inhabitants of the new created earth, who, when

36 This does not mean that *Rasselas* lacks any historical reference; see Watt 2013, pp. 21-36.

> the first night came upon them, supposed that day never would return. When the clouds of sorrow gather over us, we see nothing beyond them, nor can imagine how they will be dispelled: yet a new day succeeded to the night, and sorrow is never long without a dawn of ease. But they who restrain themselves from receiving comfort, do as the savages would have done, had they put out their eyes when it was dark. Our minds, like our bodies, are in continual flux; something is hourly lost, and something acquired. To lose much at once is inconvenient to either, but while the vital powers remain uninjured, nature will find the means of reparation. Distance has the same effect on the mind as on the eye, and while we glide along the stream of time, whatever we leave behind us is always lessening, and that which we approach increasing in magnitude. Do not suffer life to stagnate; it will grow muddy for want of motion: commit yourself again to the current of the world (p. 115).

The catalogue of recipes is now almost complete: after Hedonism, Stoicism, the philosophy of nature, marriage, hermitage, old age, prosperity and power have been eliminated as practical means of attaining happiness, only knowledge seems to offer a certain prospect of felicity. However, although Imlac concedes that «we grow more happy as our minds take a wider range» (p. 65), knowledge is no final guarantee of happiness. As *The Rambler* confirms, Johnson is no clear opponent of 'curiosity': he has a very complex opinion on the *pros* and *cons* of this intellectual property, but he knows that curiosity, especially if combined with 'pedantry' (Freiburg 1990), may lead to disastrous results. In *Rasselas*, this perversion of curiosity and knowledge is illustrated by the figure of the astronomer who, although he must be admired for his knowledge of the universe and the stars, has fallen victim to the allure of pedantry. By concentrating exclusively on his object of studies, he has lost contact with reality and has glided into an idiosyncratic world of fantastic schemes. It soon becomes clear to the prince and his sister that the astronomer is on the verge of losing his mind, since he claims to be able to regulate the weather, and to have wind and rain at his command (Enright 1984b, p. 132). It is a sure sign of Johnson's deep humanity that he does not ridicule the astronomer. Being prone to fits of melancholy which border on madness himself, Johnson had great empathy for any kind of mental disturbance and reminded his audience that there is more than a vestige of madness in everyone:

> He who has nothing external that can divert him, must find pleasure in his own thoughts, and must conceive himself what he is not; for who is pleased with what he is? He then expatiates in boundless futurity, and culls from all imaginable conditions that which for the present moment he should most desire, amuses his desires with impossible enjoyments, and confers upon his pride unattainable dominion. The mind dances from scene to scene,

> unites all pleasures in all combinations, and riots in delights which nature and fortune, with all their bounty, cannot bestow (p. 133).

The astronomer is probably the only person in *Rasselas* who may have been happy for a certain while,[37] but his happiness is tantamount to madness. Equating happiness with madness is typical of Johnson's eudaemonism. Indeed, one might even say, it is the core of his theory of happiness. Johnson's criticism of the eudaemonic idols is so comprehensive that all recipes for happiness appear to be mere bubbles, illusions, 'airy gratifications', or manifestations of a cloud-cuckoo-land. None of them stands the test of truth and experience; the moment they are needed most, they vanish into nothingness. The vanity of human wishes for happiness is so absurd that «the wisest of men terminated all his experiments in search of happiness, by the mournful confession, that "all is vanity"» (Bullitt, Bate, Powell 1963, p. 466). Prosperity, hedonism, Stoicism, power, solitude, marriage, fame, youth, philosophy of nature, even knowledge seem to be but manifestations of a kind of madness, an illusion helping man to avoid that kind of 'pit gazing' which writers such as Gustave Flaubert and Julian Barnes consider to be inevitable.[38]

Although Johnson frequently castigated Jonathan Swift's ideas, both writers see eye to eye as far as happiness is concerned. Like Swift, Johnson does not really believe in the possibility of terrestrial happiness; although he confesses to Boswell that he has no reason to lament the world,[39] his moral writings and his *Rasselas* reveal that he is deeply disappointed by his experiences. It would be easy to include Swift's famous definition of happiness in the collection of aphorisms presented in *Rasselas*; in his *Tale of a Tub* (1704), Swift's hack writes:

> For, if we take an Examination of what is generally understood by *Happiness*, as it has Respect, either to the Understanding or the Senses, we shall find all its Properties and Adjuncts will herd under this short Definition: That, *it is a perpetual Possession of being well Deceived* (Guthkelch, Smith 1958, pp. 171-172).

Johnson's eudaemonism discloses a paradoxical nature; in *Rasselas*, Nekayah describes the «state of life to such, that happiness itself is the cause

37 The only other exception is the «old man» who tries to be happy by leading a life according to the principles of nature (Lawlor 1966, pp. 243-270).

38 But unlike Flaubert and Barnes, Johnson continues to believe despite his experience of absurdity; see also O'Flaherty 1970, p. 205: «The paradox of *Rasselas* is that in it an absurdist view of human life is not seen as irreconcilable with the idea of a supervising Divinity».

39 «No, no, (said he,) it has been a very agreeable world to me» (Chapman 1970, p. 848; see also p. 1153).

of misery» (Enright 1984b, p. 117), and Johnson follows suit. By showing that happiness is impossible, by – more or less – defining happiness as a kind of madness, Johnson wants to convince his readers that it would be wise to live more consciously; it is precisely such a «sense of an ending» (Kermode 2000) – painful and immense though it may be – that presents a new attitude towards life. A fresh consciousness is necessary. It is the insight into the vanity of all earthly confidences and acquisitions, the recognition that all things will fade away and that terrestrial happiness is doomed to cease.[40] Like Imlac and the astronomer, Johnson, too, is «contented to be driven along the stream of life without directing their course to any particular port» (Enrigh 1984b, p. 150). In terrestrial life, there is no need to look out for a particular destination, but this is not true of the life beyond the grave. Johnson's choice of life is rather a recommendation for eternal life,[41] and his eudaemonism is of a transcendent kind.[42] In his *Rasselas* and in his moral weeklies, he does not tire of recommending that people strive for happiness with God, to lead a life that enables the individual to find that perfect felicity, of which he was deprived on earth (Bate, Strauss 1969, vol. 5, p. 295). When Goldsmith lamented the difficulty of finding happiness through writing, Johnson supported Goldsmith's view:

> Ah, Sir, that should make a man think of securing happiness in another world, which all who try sincerely for it may attain. In comparison of that, how little are all other things! The belief of immortality is impressed upon all men, and all men act under an impression of it, however they may talk, and though, perhaps, they may be scarcely sensible of it (Chapman 1970, p. 623).[43]

40 This shift of paradigms could be interpreted as a move from Aristotelian to Thomistic teleology (Pahl 2012, p. 221).

41 See also Cope 1986, p. 110: «Irregular virtue, sporadic philanthropy, and impulsive bursts of faith are thus converted into regular installment payments against moral obligations». Although one may be tempted to interpret Johnson's notion of happiness from an economic point of view, Johnson himself probably did not think that happiness beyond the grave could be 'bought' by acts of faith; he deeply believed in the grace of God.

42 This does not mean that Johnson may be described as a 'manager' who knows about the 'price' of eternal happiness; the claim that «Swift and Johnson coincide in the economic *mode* of their ethical thinking» (Cope 1987, p. 182) needs to be revised.

43 In his prayers Johnson often asked God for the grace of eternal happiness for himself and for others (for example, for Tetty); see Chapman 1970, p. 171. «Eternal happiness» played an important role for Johnson and Boswell: see Chapman 1970, pp. 243, 373, 471 (where the two speculate about the quality of transcendent happiness), 791, 966, 1191.

7 Conclusion: Happiness beyond the Grave

Johnson cherished extremely complex views of happiness: he loved to be happy in everyday life among his friends, but in the loneliness of his attic he returned to his melancholy and pessimism that enabled him to judge all phenomena of felicity from a distance. The rare manifestations of happiness in terrestrial life were closely linked to sensuality and intellectuality, thus differing from the 'gross pleasures' he so intensely despised. Happiness is a product of the mind, prone to change and liable to cease abruptly; since it cannot be fully grasped in the present it is projected into the future but often destroyed by the vicissitudes of life. Thus happiness is often tantamount to delusion, a eudaemonic idol inducing man to believe in airy gratifications that are doomed to collapse after a brief period of time. This final insight into the ephemeral character of terrestrial happiness lies behind Johnson's profound belief in a 'happy' world beyond the grave that every man must try to attain, by leading a virtuous life and by following the rules of that Divine Being to whom Johnson dedicated his earthly life.

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