James Steen

Response Paper 6

Q. What do you think is more advantageous to society, to act by instinct, like the savage man, or to act by rationale, like the civilized man?

It is difficult to answer the question of whether instinct or rational are more advantageous to society because there are two distinct contexts in which one could define society. The first of which being the greater good of each individual human, and the second being civilized man’s construct of society, which requires productive human communication and interaction. In the first case, I believe that acting by instinct is more advantageous to society because it fulfills the basic human needs for one to be satisfied and considers all else to be excess. In the second case, it is clear that rationale is the necessary motivator in order to interact and assert dominance over fellow man, thus succeeding in civilized society.

When discussing the greater good of society, the ultimate goal is either happiness or progress. It is clear through Rousseau’s depiction of savage man that each of his needs are met and thus he is content. This is because savage man’s needs include merely basic human functions such as eating, sleeping, and mating. Meeting these needs requires fairly little reasoning and can be accomplished through instinct entirely. Savage man’s needs begin to multiply as he becomes more civilized and is able to use rationale to allow himself conveniences. While it could be said that these conveniences are progress for society, utilizing them makes man’s mind and body weaker, negating any sense of real progress. Thus the question comes down to which course of action, instinctual or rational, makes man happier? It would be easy to side with the rational action, as it could lead to an escalated level of happiness or prosperity, especially through exploitation of others, but is he really happier than the savage man with all his needs met and who knows nothing of misery? In the words of Rousseau, “Now I would be pleased to have it explained to me what kind of misery can be that of a free being whose heart is at peace and whose body is in health?” (97) He goes on to conclude: “Let it be judged with less pride on which side the real misery lies.”

 In the second case, in which the ultimate goal is the longevity and perpetuation of human societal interaction, the answer is clearly rational action. Man developed rational thought in order to communicate with other humans for mutual gain, and through the use of superior rational thought, one individual could benefit unequally from the other. The society which Rousseau describes creates inequality in this manor. He who can reason beyond the capability of another can dominate him. Rousseau speaks of the necessity of reason in these societies when he says, “It must be noted that society’s having come into existence and relations among individuals having been already established meant that men were required to have qualities different from those they possessed in their primitive constitution.” (115) Thus, to exist within society, it is necessary to act with reason so as not to be taken advantage of by another, and to inversely assert one’s own dominance.

Rousseau, Jean-Jacques, Roger D. Masters, Christopher Kelly, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. 1992. *Discourse on the origins of inequality (second discourse) ; Polemics ; and, Political economy*. Hanover, NH: Published for Dartmouth College by University Press of New England.