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RP 6 FYS 100-50

Can Savage Man Be Truly Happy?

Despite the savage man’s lack of understanding the abstract concept of happiness within his bounded intellectual bubble, he can still manage to be happy. The existence of happiness is not dependent upon its understanding; the feeling simply exists, in spite of our arbitrary attempts to define and understand the word. As Rousseau himself says, “the term ‘miserable’ … signifies only a painful deprivation and state of suffering … [then] what kind of misery can be that of a free being whose heart is at peace and whose body is in health,” essentially calling to mind the ludicrous idea of a natural man with his needs met that is not happy and content like any other beast would be (Rousseau 97). Rousseau shows how prevalent similarities between savage man and beast are, such as acting on instinct alone and focusing intently on self-preservation, and as a result determines that the basis for the savage man’s happiness is akin to that of the beast’s. Additionally, the savage man has no knowledge or choice of another lifestyle aside from the one he has always known. Rousseau writes “Imagination … never speaks to the heart of savages,” conveying the truth that the savage man does not possess a great enough capacity for sentient thought to envision a better life for himself (103). He also says “[the savage’s] soul, which nothing disturbs, dwells only in the sensation of its present existence, without any idea of the future” because these creatures are not blessed with the (relatively) divine characteristics of foresight and curiosity (90).

Although, one might argue that the only true happiness is that of the thoughtful, developed man, and being that savages share more characteristics with animals, they are rendered in capable of being truly happy. However, Rousseau explains that savages and animals each hold the “universal virtue” of compassion, a temperament that induces the most basic sentiments of empathy, but empathy nonetheless (99). If such a characteristic of thought can be present in the instinct of a savage, then why would he be incapable of a much lesser experience of inward elation? There does not need to be any distinction between true or false happiness in terms of the experience; happiness is happiness based on one’s own personal perception of what constitutes it, and as wrong as that perception may be, it still yields the same delight as a man with a “true” happiness.

In this context, the savage man can indeed be “truly” happy. If the savage were capable of curiosity or imagination or the expression of abstract thoughts through words, he might have contemplated what happiness really meant, thereby in a sense depriving him from ever achieving it. To the contrary, such is not the case. Savage man “can have neither foresight nor curiosity,” he is never touched or spoken to by imagination, and since “general ideas can only be introduced into the mind with the assistance of words,” he has no other means of contemplating or receiving information on an alternate track of thought (90, 95). From this savage, crippled mind of linear and unchanged thinking, a sort of blessing of happiness is found, for as long as his needs and powerful physical desires are met, what more in his box of thought would constitute happiness, and what more could he ever want or need? Although the old adage is unfortunate, it appears to be true that ignorance, in this case, is indeed bliss.

I pledge that I have neither received nor given unauthorized assistance during the completion of this work. Peter George Plotas

Works Cited

Rousseau, Jean-Jacques, and Maurice Cranston. *A Discourse on Inequality*. Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin, 1984. Print.