

Smith or Rousseau?

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) argued that the life we have in modern civilization compares poorly to the life of the “noble savage.” Rousseau blames the institution of private property for making us compare what we each own to what others own and instilling in us a desire to equal or surpass them. Before we began this spiral of property accumulation, Rousseau had this view of the noble savage:

I see him satisfying his hunger at the first oak, and slaking his thirst at the first brook; finding his bed at the foot of the tree which afforded him a repast; and with that, all his wants supplied. (Ibid., p. 40)

Before the development of private property and modern-style thinking, Rousseau thought that the earth was in its state of “natural fertility,” covered by “immense forests whose trees were never mutilated by the axe.” In this condition, there were sufficient resources for the sustenance and shelter of all life on earth indefinitely.

Adam Smith (1723-1790) argued that pursuit of self-interest was the only route to wealth. We pursue our self-interest in the free market, if we succeed, we are rich; if we fail, we are out of business. The upshot of everyone competing in the free market is that everyone in the nation is better off.

the accommodation of a European prince does not so far exceed that of an industrious and frugal peasant, as the accommodation of the latter exceeds that of many an African king, the absolute master of the lives and liberties of ten thousand naked savages. (Singer, p. 39)

Smith further believes that our desire to accumulate more and more has made the world a better place. Primarily, we have

entirely changed the whole face of the globe, have turned the rude forest of nature into agreeable and fertile plains, and made the trackless and barren ocean a newfound fund of subsistence. (Ibid., p. 40)

By doing this, the people who strive successfully to accumulate possessions make the lot of every person almost as good as it could be:

The rich...are led by an invisible hand to make nearly the same distribution of the necessities of life, which would have been made, had the earth been divided into equal portions among all its inhabitants...(Ibid., p. 40-41)

This has the effect of advancing both the interests of society and the ability of society to increase its numbers.

In the end, Smith defends the desire to accumulate possessions **not** because accumulating possessions will make us any happier. In fact, he says it will not do so:

If we consider the real satisfaction which all these things are capable of affording...it will always appear in the highest degree contemptible and trifling. But we rarely view it in this abstract and philosophical light. (Ibid., p. 41)

Smith merely says that so long as the accumulation of wealth strikes us as something worth doing for its own sake, we will be driven to continue mankind’s progress.

