

# The faculty of self perfection philosophy essay



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In *Discourse*, Rousseau distinguishes humans from animals based on the faculty of self-perfection *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, p. 25. Animals are described as being sophisticated machines with senses that permit self-preservation, and “ nature alone does everything in the operations of an animal” (*Discourse*, p. 25). Animals must conform to the pressures of nature, submitting to its rhythmic cycles. Even in matters of life and death, a given animal species will react predictably often at its own peril. Humans are similar to animals with the exceptions of choice, reasoning, and compassion. The most important of which is choice. Rousseau states, “ man contributes, as a free agent, to his own operations” (*Discourse*, p. 25). Self-determination, not nature, drives human desires.

Rousseau uses various scenarios to differentiate humans from animals. The example describing the pigeon and the cat reveals that, because of nature, the pigeon would choose starvation prior to attempting to ingest meat and the cat would rather perish than consume fruit or grains. This is in stark contrast to human behavior, in that man can choose to defy the natural order and act to ensure survival. Humans are thus more than mere rational animals. Rousseau also admits that degenerate men may indeed choose to ignore their better judgment, i. e. the natural order, and participate in endeavors that may result in their own demise. This demonstrates that the free will that separates humans from animals is stronger than nature. Humans may choose a course of action even in the absence of a natural inclination “ because the will speaks when nature is silent” (*Discourse*, p. 25).

Regardless of the rational, the ability to act or react by choice to a given circumstance drives man's self-perfection. Each successful decision assures humans of their own unique abilities, and it is this self-assurance that leads to self-empowerment. Humans, in their quest for "perfectibility" (Discourse, p. 26), realize their authority. Indeed, self-perfection grants power, and the domination of nature may well be the ultimate ability. Humans also recognize this desire for self-perfection in other individuals, and in some cases respect those that are attempting great feats in the name of development. Such perspectives vary from the traditional view that humans are mere sensible animals. Rousseau admits that "Every animal has ideas, since it has senses; up to a certain point it even combines its ideas, and in this regard man differs from animal in degree" (Discourse, p. 25). However, Rousseau maintains that when confronted with a ferocious beast, "Man has the advantage that...he always has the alternative of accepting or leaving the encounter and the choice of taking flight or entering into combat" (Discourse, p. 21). Thus, the ability to choose the path that will lead to one's own desire for self-perfection broadens the difference between man and animal.

In the quest for self-perfection, humans have always desired knowledge. Because of knowledge, men have developed the ability to use words, develop languages, and promote reasoning skills. Rousseau writes "We seek to know only because we desire to find enjoyment...The passions in turn take their origin from our needs, and their progress from our knowledge" (Discourse, p. 26). Without passion there would be no reason to pursue increased knowledge, and our reason and understanding would thus be

incomplete. The ability to use knowledge to achieve one's desires is fascinating and according to Rousseau " it is impossible to conceive how a man could have crossed such a wide gap by his forces alone, without the aid of communication and without the provocation of necessity" (Discourse, p. 27). Indeed, the ability to communicate and pass on wisdom using words " is one reason why animals cannot form such ideas or even acquire the perfectibility that depends on them (Discourse, p. 32).

Rousseau concludes Discourse Part One with a discussion of human compassion and love. He quotes that " Nature, in giving men tears, bears witness that she gave the human race the softest hearts" (Discourse, p. 37). This compassion springs forth from the " love of oneself" (Discourse, p. 38), which again rest with our pursuit of perfectibility. Knowledge without compassion would be meaningless, and compassion without love would be senseless. Rousseau describes several vivid examples, which highlight major differences concerning human compassion and animalistic or savage behavior. He concludes that love separates humans from animals in that " love is never periodic" (Discourse, p. 41) as it is among contesting animal species.

In conclusion, humans like animals are required to make decisions. For better or for worse, free will permits the choice to deviate from the natural course, " and it is above all in the awareness of this freedom that the spirituality of his soul is made manifest" (Discourse, p. 25). The ability to choose, irrespective of nature, to promote one's own self-perfection is distinctively human. Animals lack this drive for self-perfection. The pursuit of one human's unique desire, passion for knowledge, compassion for others,

and love leads to self-perfection, which ensures the enhancement of all other capabilities.