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Freedom to Reason and Corn-Pone Opinions

Throughout the years there has always been a discussion regarding if people shape their ideas around society or if they come up with their own ideas. Immanuel Kant’s extract Freedom to Reason and Mark Twains Corn-Pone opinions talk about the subject of where the opinions or the ideas of human beings originate. I believe Kant and Mark Twain agree in some aspects and disagree in others.

I think Kant and Mark Twain agree with the fact that people shape their opinions based on the society they live in and from the people they form relationships around.

I believe both essays are telling us that people want other people to think for them, that they just want to conform and equal their opinion to that of society as long as they remain a part of that society, without the risk of becoming an outcast. Kant mentions this by talking about guardians, people who point out the danger of having a personal opinion or of doing things a certain way. Twain also mentions this, he says that when the world starts adopting something everyone is moved to follow by an authority, because we have a natural instinct that makes us yield to a vague notion that is an authority. In short, both are telling us that we conform to something greater, be it an authority or a guardian.

But more than the idea of Kant and Twain agreeing, I believe that Kant and Twain´s black philosopher, Jerry, agree on a larger scale and Twain only uses these ideas as a base. We can see this clearly in Freedom to Reason when Kant mentions nonage as “the inability of making use of one’s own understanding without the guidance of another”. Twain mentions: “the black philosopher´s idea was that a man is not independent and cannot afford views that might interfere with his bread and butter”. What these two phrases are trying to say is that people are not capable of coming up with an opinion without the help of an external force. We cannot stand alone. From this we can move to the idea of Twains corn-pone. Twain by the sentence mentioned above is saying that the black philosopher thinks he cannot have an opinion that differs from that of whoever owns him because that would most probably mean he won’t get fed. “You tell me whar a man gits his corn pone, en I’ll tell you what his ´pinions is”, this sentence clearly explains what the black philosopher meant. Since there is someone in charge of feeding us, we have to take our ideas from them and repeat them as if they were our own, if not it could cost us greatly, it could cost us our food. Although it talks about food, Twain also specifies that any kind of sordid business interest can link us to someone else.

Here is where I find that Mark and Twain disagree. Kant says that people don’t express their opinions and conform to society because people are afraid or lack the courage to use their own opinions since it might differ from those of society. Kant uses the phrase *Sapere Aude!*, meaning dare to be wise, to use your own courage to express your ideas. Kant thinks that we willingly chose not to share our personal opinion and we prefer to conform to the opinion of the rest, we prefer to be domestic animals. On the contrary, Twain believes that we conform not only because of corn-pone opinions, but because it is in our nature to conform. He thinks that we don’t have a choice to conform, like Kant says, but that do it unconsciously and not calculated. He says that there is a yearning born in us to stand well with the rest of society, and that this yearning is so strong that we cannot resist it.

As I believe that Kant and Twain agree, I also believe they disagree in another aspect. I believe Kant thinks that most people have their own opinions, although they are not expressed, they can reach enlightenment. He mentions that there will always be a few who think for themselves, although most people were never given the trial, and with these few who think for themselves there is hope that the entire nation could become enlightened. This is where I find that there is a difference. I believe that Mark Twain believes the opposite, that no one has had a true personal opinion or idea. He makes mention of this in the essay where he is explaining the ideas with which he agreed with the black philosopher. He says that if ever such an original, first hand opinion should be encountered it should be put in a museum, since it would be one of a kind. He finds these kinds of ideas so rare and that most ideas thought to be sometimes original, actually come from public opinion. Twain also mentions that we get our ideas from outside influences, who are always pouring upon us, and that we always obey. He says that we don’t think things out, that we just conform and that all of our opinions (and customs) come through associations and sympathies. In other words I believe Twain is telling us that not everyone can reach enlightenment, since not everyone thinks about where their ideas come from but get ideas from surrounding influences.

While both Kant and Twain agree that the majority of the people are dependent of society, their opinions differ on the origins of an original idea, the reason for conformity and enlightenment. Twain and Kant relate to subjects that are part of the daily human life and subjects that most people do not even think about.