

## Language In Rousseau's Second Discourse

Language must not be natural in Rousseau's *Second Discourse*. If it were, this would be evidence for the contention that man is a social animal. In his preface, Rousseau argues that "men must have used, for the establishment of society, enlightenment which only develops with great difficulty and in very few people in the midst of society itself" (94). It is this very same problem that plagues his account of the origin of languages--and this chicken and egg difficulty cannot, by his own admission, be solved. He formulates this paradox thus: "Which was most necessary, previously formed society for the institution of languages; or previously invented languages for the establishment of society?" (126) This paradox cannot be unlocked from within the theory. It is, in fact, an argument against it and requires the theory's rejection.

Rousseau asks his reader to consider the "inconceivable difficulties" (119) in the establishment of languages. These obstacles are indeed monumental and constitute an argument against his account. With no society among individuals, "no communication...and no need for it" (120), how could language develop? It could not be the result of mother-child communication--Rousseau argues that language would be invented anew with each birth, and be lost with the independence of each child (121). This poses a problem that cannot be resolved; to get on to the next obstacle he must "suppose this first difficulty conquered"---but it could not be (121).

An even greater problem is that Rousseau's view requires that speech be necessary to create itself. If language is rationally constructed, all at once, men would have "need of knowing how to think in order to discover the art of speech" (122) This view requires him to view language as agreed to by "a common consent" (123)--"speech seems to have been highly necessary in order to establish the use of speech" (123). Presenting the difficulty does not solve it--this problem with the argument requires its rejection.

To solve this problem, he posits that language began with words communicating much more than they do now--each word had "the meaning of a whole sentence" (123). But he contradicts this line of thought in the next paragraph when he follows the idea that forms could not exist without language--general ideas arise only out of language (124). So, "every object received at first a particular name" (123), creating a word for every discrete object and a vocabulary exploded by a lack of abstract thought (124). The first words, then, must have been proper nouns (125). Rousseau recognizes the bind he is in: "by means I cannot conceive, our new grammarians began to extend their ideas" (125).

In fact, no one could conceive how. And his resort to evolutionary language belies his untenable conjectures about the birth of language whole. Language has its prehistory with the "cry of nature" (122). Social contact, he argues (and this is consistent with his *Origin of Languages*), caused "the ideas of men...to spread and multiply" (122) The resort to such phrasing is important because it points the way out of the "almost demonstrated possibility" (126) that the entirety of language could have entered human consciousness at once.

Rousseau argues for the naturalness of upright locomotion by appeal to the universality of this practice (186). The same argument could be made about language. It is true that enlightenment is incredibly difficult, but language acquisition is not. To say that the "organ of speech is natural to man" (207) not only begs the question but would distinguish us in our inability to use it from other animals to which Rousseau resorts in so much else in his argument by analogy. And if this difficulty in language is not resolved, then man is naturally social, unequal (101), and the broader argument is lost.