



## **Rousseau and language: a reflection on the origin of evil in humanity**

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## **Abstract**

*In the famous short story the egg and chicken of the Ukrainian writer Clarice Lispector, the author resumes that classic question that has been going through the history of humanity about who was born first; the egg or the chicken? In an analogous way we could also question the emergence of evil in humanity presenting two possibilities, namely: is language or society responsible for the birth of evil? We know that from the perspective of the philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau humanity is taken by the antagonism between nature and culture and this is the result of the process of degeneration of that through the inevitable process of perfectibility, continuously and without return causing the fall and moral degradation of the human being. However, unlike what some may think, it was not the needs that took men out of the state of nature, but passions, which can be represented by singing, dancing and sensual gesture, that is, language. For Rousseau, the spoken language is not something natural or inherent to the human being, it is something that has arisen over time in the history of mankind. According to the genebrino, the first humans did not use spoken language, because there was no need, since they lived in isolation and only found one similar sporadically. Thus, with the progress of human language, which can be considered the first social institution, we realize that the bases for the origin of civil society were established with the process of evolution of human language, which moved further and further away from nature to approach the artificiality of civil conventions, dictated by rationality, which elaborated new forms of relationship between men, based on positive laws, social contract and a new political order. In this sense, to the extent that language promotes the emergence of society, it also increasingly promotes the degeneration of the language, leaving it increasingly distant from nature, in a dialectical way. Thus, we aim at resuming the dichotomy between language and society, in order to establish a reflection about the origin of evil in humanity.*

**Keywords:** Rousseau. Language. Society. Nature. Humanity. Barely.

## **1. Introduction**

Although the philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau lived in the eighteenth century, much of his writings have very current reflections in relation to the various problems we experience, whether in the fields of politics, ethics, education or aesthetics. In his book *Essay on the origin of languages*, we can perceive the robustness and grandeur of his philosophical thought about not only the origin of the language itself, but how this human language has undergone a degeneration leading to a process of loss of naturalness and distancing from emotions and feelings, causing an exacerbated rationalization of the language, so that humanity gradually became increasingly morally degenerate, until it was trapped and subjugated by the rulers returning again to the state of "silence".

Rousseau was a thinker who was very associated with questions relating to music and language, this

is already clear before writing the Essay on the origin of languages when he wrote the Charter on French music, published in 1753, during the famous Querela dos Bufões, which divided Paris between supporters of Italian and French opera, where Rousseau stated that Italian music was more capable of expressing passions than French, since the former favored melody, while the second was harmony. With the publication of the Discourse on the foundation and inequality between men, in 1754, Rousseau returns to deal with linguistic issues, addressing as a theme society demonstrating that reason, sociability and language are late acquisitions of humanity, that is, there is an almost insurmountable gulf between nature and history.

Three years after Rousseau's death, the Essay on the Origin of Languages was published in 1781. Its controversial origin does not present a certain date of writing, some scholars speculate that the work was written in the mid-1750s. Some say that the Essay was written before the Second Discourse, and even the first, because it contained some elements of music studies originally intended for the Encyclopedia or, perhaps, as part of the Second Discourse, which would later have been withdrawn and reworked. However, all these are just hypotheses. Its structure was organized into four parts, that is: origin of language; differentiation of languages; question of music and language and government.

Thus, having presented a contextual and panoramic view of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's work in scope, I present as the main objective of this work to briefly reflect the question of the origin of languages and language itself, taking into account the issue of passions and musicality, in view of reflection on the degeneration and differentiation of human language, its consequences and possibilities, as well as the dichotomy between language and society in order to reflect on the origin of evil in humanity.

## **2. The Emergence of Human Language**

According to the reflections established by Rousseau, language, with regard to speech, is not something natural or inherent to the human being, it is something that has arisen over time in the history of humanity. According to the genebrino, the first men did not use spoken language, because there was no need, since these humans lived in isolation and only found one similar sporadically. In the state of primitive nature humans lived in full harmony with nature, because there they had everything that was necessary for their survival without any other need (ROUSSEAU, 1978). In nature itself was his diet, his rest and sexual activity at the opportune moment when he met his partner, without any other kind of connection, with him, but the natural one.

Although in this period there was no speech, itself, primitive man was not unable to communicate, because it manifested itself through screams, babbles or even imitating the sounds of nature. Moreover, the use of gestures and symbols was also a way of expressing themselves, especially when it came to simple feelings, because if humans had not exceeded physical needs, they might never have spoken (ROUSSEAU, 1978). After all, every living being, on a larger or smaller scale, communicates, although we know today that conventional language belongs only to the human being "and this is the reason why man progresses, whether for good or for evil" (ROUSSEAU, 1978, p. 163).

We can conclude so far that it was not the physical needs that established the emergence of spoken language, because physical needs promoted the separation of men and not agglutination.

It follows, by evidence, that the origin of languages is not due to the first needs of men; it would be absurd that the cause that apart them would result in the means that unites them. Where, then, is this origin? In moral needs, in passions. All passions bring men closer together, that the need to live forces to separate. It is not hunger or seed, but love, hatred, piety, anger, that have ripped the first voices from them (ROUSSEAU, 1978, p.164).

Thus, we realize that spoken language is born not from natural needs, but from artificial needs. Passions make the human being speak, in order to manifest his feelings, emotions and desires, perhaps that is why the first language born was with figurative meaning, so that at first he spoke poetically only then began to speak in a reasoned way. At first passions aroused a language based on illusory images, and over time, with the clarification of man the language became metaphorical until it became rationalized.

According to the Second Discourse, the Essay on the origin of languages reveals to us that he first felt and only then reasoned, corroborating the idea that the origin of the word is tied to the artificial needs of the human being as morals and passions. It is good to remember that the state of Rousseau nature has two phases, that is, the state of primitive nature and the state of historical nature. In the first state the so-called "natural law" was totally absent from reason, so in this state there was no existence of morality, much less society. With regard to the theme addressed in the Essay, it is already happening in the second state when men are already agglutinated in hordes and speak not only a language dictated by physical need, but also speak the language inspired by passions. This would be the main foundation that would later lead to the evolution of human language and its degeneration. According to Starobinski:

By leaving nature, working against it, by interspersing the language of which he is inventor, man becomes deaf to the voice that spoke to him at the origin. Moral existence is no longer governed by natural law: it is necessary to enunciate "positive" laws, conventions, contracts (STAROBINSKI, 1991, p. 313).

Thus, with the progress of human language, which is considered the first social institution, we realize that the bases for the origin of civil society were established with the process of evolution of this language, which moved further and further away from nature to approach the artificiality of civil conventions, dictated by rationality, which elaborated new forms of relationship between men, based on positive laws, social contract and a new political order. We see so far that the Essay on the origin of languages, although it presents the fundamental bases on the origin of human language and its transformation throughout history, from poetic and passionate language to a rationalized and degenerate language, we realize that the Essay presents us, in harmony with the Second Discourse, the same story in a double aspect as Jean Starobinski points out: "The Discourse on inequality inserts a history of language within a history of society; conversely, the Essay on the Origin of Languages introduces a history of society within a history of language" (STAROBINSKI, 1991, p. 310).

### **3. The Differentiation of Languages**

Through Rousseauian philosophy, we saw that human sociability is not something natural, because at the origin of human history there was no society, we became sociable thanks to the perfectibility that is inherent to man since its origin. Likewise, we understand that human speech is also not natural, because as we

have seen the first men, i did not have the slightest need to exercise speech by being in perfect harmony with nature by listening only to their voice. The development of speech in human beings is also the result of the perfectibility that for Rousseau was as if it were a gift nature inherited by the human being, whose effects will manifest itself gradually, through exceptional conditions that will promote the development of virtual faculties (STAROBINSKI, 1991).

In the Discourse on inequality Rousseau assumed that some human beings, moving away from temperate habitat, encountered climatic difficulties that eventually forced them to fight against the nature that surrounded them, forcing the perfectibility that was dormant, awakening from power to act. "Intelligence, technique, history originates in contact with the obstacle, when man leaves the constant tepidez of the primitive forest and is exposed to "'burning summers' or 'winters logos and rudes'" (STAROBINSKI, 1991, p. 310). In the Essay on the origin of languages, Rousseau presents a very similar idea, but more symbolically through the difference of seasons: "He who wanted man to be sociable put his finger on the axis of the globe and leaned it on the axis of the universe" (ROUSSEAU, 1978, p. 179).

In the Letter on French music Rousseau already pointed out about the difference between the languages that were more conducive to music, due to the melody, of the songs that were more focused on harmony, therefore less able to express the passions. Similarly, Rousseau addressed the differentiations of languages by establishing the closest to passions, that is, the melodious ones; of the languages that contained no melody, but harmony, and therefore were more distant from passions and closer to rationality. Thus, it distinguished the southern languages of the northern languages.

Southern languages are those born in the South in warm climates, where physical conditions are more conducive to the isolation in which men initially lived. Although the basic impulses led men to reproduction, the true social interaction that provokes the comparison with similar situations, originating from the reflection that, in itself, is the comparison of a plurality of ideas, was lacking. The northern languages, that is, of the North where life is harder, and selects the strongest men, the language is rougher and imposes on them drier and direct expressions. In this region the language originates from a constant need and not from love and tenderness. It is the language of the anger of threats, always accompanied by strong articulations, that make them rough and shrill.

Therefore, we found that although the southern region has a more mild climate and with better conditions to live, it is not in this region that brings together the largest number of people. In the South the conditions provided a greater isolation of man making this language remain closer to nature, emphasizing the sound, eloquence and vivacity. While the northern region due to the hardness and difficulties of the environment composed of needs has agglutinated a greater number of people causing the need to communicate to move away from the spoken language of nature, so that in these regions passions are born from needs, while in the southern region the needs are born from passions. According to Rousseau, the more general physical causes of the difference characteristic of primitive languages occurred because:

Those in the south had to be alive, sound, sharp, eloquent and often obscure due to energy. The northern deaf, rude, articulate, glaring, monotonous and clear, due rather to the force of words than to a good construction (ROUSSSEAU, 1978 p. 185).

Therefore, we can understand that if physical needs have alienated human beings, new needs departing from morals and passions have brought them together. For the latter to appear, "accidents of nature" were operated, through cataclysmic phenomena, or simply cyclical as the four seasons in their succession. It was through the bonfire or the fountain, quite simple resources in the confrontation of man against nature, that established the first places of meeting. And it was from the meeting that the need for communication was born, that is, the language developed, that is, the basis of the emergence of society.

#### **4. Musicality**

Human speech was born because of moral needs and passions. Indeed, the first language of humanity was endorsed with vowels with very few joints and only a few consonants in order to avoid hiatus. At first, language and music were confused, instead of speaking human beings sang. To the extent that the accents, that is, the melodious ememhes, were disappearing from the language, the accents were replaced by grammatical combinations and new articulations in a way that language separated from music, and became a clear and effective instrument, more appropriate for conveying ideas than feelings. From then on, language comes to mean the object and ceases to express the subject.

From the moment artificial needs grew, human language became more rational and less passionate. At that moment the writing appeared as a form of language, so that it was tasked with recording the process of language evolution, through three ways: the representation of objects, the representation of words by characters and the representation of the elementary parts of words through the articulation of letters (more precisely vowels) to combine them into words. These three writing possibilities were directly in correspondence with wild people, barbarian peoples and policed people.

Although modern languages throughout history have mixed, some localities have still preserved, even if in a tiny way, some of these differences presented in the division between southern and northern languages.

Rousseau, realizing the degree of degeneration of human language, observing the development of writing and the differentiation of the languages of the West and the East, emphasized as follows:

Our languages are worth more writing than spoken; read them with more pleasure than they listen to us. On the contrary, eastern languages lose, written, their life and warmth. The meaning is only partly in words, all its strength lies in the accents. To judge the genius of the Orientals by his books is to want to paint a man having as a model his corpse (ROUSSEAU, 1978, p. 186).

We realized quite clearly that for Jean-Jacques Rousseau the first human speech was sung, that is, full of melody, which expressed feelings, emotions, desires and passions. It was a poetic line. We also understood that the southern languages were more melodious, therefore, songs formed of pure melody. The northern languages for having moved away from nature were more harmonic, that is, rationalized and moralizing, away from passions and feelings. The harmonic language rationalized the sound of speech and muffled the melody of it, making speech more able to transmit ideas and theories than feelings. For the Genebrino while harmony only possessed convention beauty without ever pleasing the ears, the melody constituted exactly in music, which the drawing represents in painting, and the painting would be closer to nature, while music, to human art.



## **5. Language, Society and The Origin of Evil**

It is certain that for Rousseau the origin of evil in humanity is not in nature, but in the journey of history, society and language; the great question that arises about this reflection refers to what would have provided in the first place the surging of evil, according to that analogy of egg and chicken, presented by Clarice Lispector. Is language or society the root of all human evil? We have seen little that while the First Discourse inserts a history of language within a history of society; o Essay on the origin of languages does the reverse (STAROBINSKI, 1991). If the first places of meeting of humanity, from which the need for communication originates, that is, the birth of the developed language, occurs through the bonfire or the source, we can soon understand that this meeting promoting this language can be considered the foundation of the origin of societies. However, the problem regarding the origin of evil still remains, that is, we do not know whether society promoted the development of language or vice versa; probably this process took place in a dialectical way where one aspect provided the emergence of the other. It is true that, with regard to the theme addressed in the Essay on the origin of languages, this developed speech is already happening at a time when men are already in society enjoying a language inspired by passions, that is, the root of their degeneration and as a consequence of the birth of evil. Thus, with the evolutionary process of human language, which can be considered the first social institution, it can be considered the germ of the emergence of evil in humanity.

## **6. Final Considerations**

At the beginning of *The Emilio*, Rousseau (1992, p. 9) stated that "Everything is right to come out of the hands of the Author of things, and everything degenerates into the hands of man." In the same way it occurred with the language that of musical, melodic and dictated by passions, evolves into a harmonic language, cold and rational. For Jean-Jacques Rousseau, this evolution actually represented a fall, proportionally to the history of the moral and political degradation of humanity. From the moment the tongue lost its strength and energy, men became unable to experience true passions. It is not by chance that the Second Discourse and the Essay on the origin of languages fall in the same place, in the state of civilization in which political absolutism predominates and in the "silence" of society.

It is not the reason, which is a late acquisition of humanity, the correct presupposition to understand or explain language, but passions, because before reasoning was poetized. Thus, music, not grammatical rules should be the paradigm of language, whose first function was to speak to feelings and not communicate theories. Thus, with the degeneration of the language, with the succumbing of the melody before the new rules, the communication of men was trampled by the whirlwind of tyranny and arbitrary violence represented by cannons, moneys and posters, reducing individuals to silence.

In the context in which we live humanity is already engrossed by the ideologies, theories, preaching and promises coming from the tyrants of contemporaneity. Silent humanity continues to live a false freedom with the shackles trapped in their minds. There seems to be no more room for poetry, music, feelings, emotions and desires. When these words appear most often they are dressed as goods. Contemporary men suffer because they cannot say their word and see no more meaning in what is in fact meaningless.

Therefore, we know that the path traced by perfectability has no return, progress will continue.

Therefore, what we have left is to prepare for the adversities of this life through a deeper educational process of one's life taking into account what really matters to us, that is, what makes sense. We have seen throughout history and we still see that theoretical reason has not always brought benefits to humanity. The exacerbated belief in theoretical reason made us more selfish, consumerist and individualistic human beings. I do not want to disregard human reason here, but I believe that it also needs to be re-educated, and a good opportunity for that would be for us human beings to get closer to nature and ourselves, through mechanisms that make us express our feelings, desires and emotions. Suddenly the aesthetic experience could be a good possibility.

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