The Two-fold role of “passion” in Rousseau’s theory of first language

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Abstract

In this study, the concept of first language and its relationship with the theme of “passion” in Rousseau’s Essay on the Origin of Languages is studied. Some of Rousseau’s basic arguments related to the origin of language coincide with the first invention of speech that is based solely on passions. Such impulses make human beings get together in a state of nature while the role of passion in human beings’ lives cannot be reduced to that state of nature because this relationship is seen by Rousseau as at the border between the state of society and the state of nature. In this paper, it is argued that passions are the social in the natural, that is to say, they work both in the foundations of the first as well as in the complicated process of civilized language. For Rousseau, the first language is figurative, poetic, melodic and songlike which includes a more immediate way of communication than our writing-centered language.

Keywords: machine, immanence, melody, passion, grammar, language of freedom

“Now, everything in the universe is only relations.”

J.J. Rousseau

The philosophical question of ‘what is x?’ intends to uncover the essence of the things and makes a distinction between appearance and reality. For its part, this type of philosophical question seeks a truth beyond the phenomenon, in so doing it forms a hierarchical arrangement in which all appearances can be eliminated for the sake of a higher truth. When philosophy is defined as an inquiry of the higher truths in the frame of the distinction between subject and object, appearance and reality, substance and accident so on, the image of the thought is jammed in a closed system in which it is impossible to create

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another image for thinking which can make an open network of relations. A network is consist of unlimited relations that affects each other asymmetrically. Let’s remember Ludwig Wittgenstein’s analogy between language and city. For him just like a city, language is made up of the blind alleys, channels, streets, squares and so on. It is clear that this way of thinking sees language as a multiplicity which has the channel, street and the other parts of the city as an immanent element. On the other hand Wittgenstein’s concept of the language-game demonstrates his attempt to thinking language beyond the traditional question type of ‘what is x?’ and invents a network which is knitted with differential relations. Language-game is not an abstract concept that makes a response to the traditional question type but a game which can be played with words, expressions and senses. Wittgenstein seems to propose other types of question like ‘which relations can form the x?’ or ‘which relations may turn x into the y or z?’ This leads to the problem of method in an indispensible manner.

More than three hundred and fifty years have passed away since Descartes taught us that we need an exact method of thinking in order to acquire a clear and distinct knowledge. But that was a disputable argument at the moment of its birth. One of the problems related to the method is following: when we insist on the exact method in fact what we have been doing other than producing a bipolar frame for thinking? If we differ method from its objects, then we encounter a dichotomic mechanism inside the dualist way of thinking. Here, to describe our approach to concept of method in Rousseau’s language theory, we shall use the difference between concept of allopoietic machine and of autopoietic machine which had been framed in Felix Guattari’s Chaosmosis (Guattari, 1992: 39-40). For the first type of machines called allopoietic machines, there is a rigid and unmovable principle separation between the production and the product or subject and object. For example the band machines which have been used to increase the amount of production in factories are the allopoietic machines because of that the product can be separated from the process belongs to machine. Unlike allopoietic machines, there must be a more immediate way of production in the process of auto-productive (autopoietic) machines, that is to say, they are self-productive machines. A car as a machine which produces the speed cannot be separated from its product. In the first type of machines there is a lineer process and the logic of production is bound to a dichotomy between the opposed poles. However, the self-productive machines are not based on the dichotomies because there is only one and the same process of production inside the viewpoint of them. Product cannot be separated from the process of production, it is an immanent element of production (Guattari 1992: 42).

In traditional model of thinking it is impossible to create a network of the differential relations for image of thought because each relation that works in the system are left to the dichotomies. Another problem of using the first type of method causes a time-problem in which all particular processes of products are preceded by method and it governs the all process of thinking. For example it is generally conceived that cause precedes its effects and the relationship between them is due to lineer succession of before and after. But we have to consider whether there is a cause which is the effect of a previous cause and an effect which is the cause of a next effect. Even if we maintain that all effects have causes, it is clear that the lineer models of thinking and the traditional logic of method have restricted the capacity of another ways of thinking as if it cannot be conceived that there is a cause without effect and an effect without cause. In reality, there are no strict boundaries between the things nor dichotomies but asymmetrical relations, transitions, synthesis of the forces and so on. Therefore, the familiar insistence on the traditional model of method must be given up in order to enrich our approach to Rousseau’s theory of first language. Then, we try to introduce the problem of method in a self-productive context, in so doing, we seek the arguments in Essay on Origin of Language in the terms of immanence.

In Essay Rousseau doesn’t use a strict methodology which determines the all process of thinking from a higher position, instead he constitutes an open frame that includes some key concepts called “difference” and “origin”. In his second discourse titled Discourse On the Origin and Foundations of Inequality, Rousseau distinguishes two kinds of inequality; one of them is natural or physical and other is moral or political. Now, the problem for Rousseau is how the latter has derived from the former. In
Rousseau’s reasoning, although we don’t discover a systematic method, we can infer the signs of a minor method which is immanent to it. For instance, Rousseau uses a hypothetical method in order to distinguish between the state of nature and the state of society. Especially ‘the pure state of nature’ is a conjectural concept that is necessary for Rousseau’s project. As long as it remains an inquiry of “origin” Rousseau’s Discourse can be conceived as a conditional study on human nature but it also develops a project of difference. Therefore, Discourse can be considered both in the terms of origin and of difference. This hypothetical method and the project of difference pave the way for improving a criticism of the civilization which is supposed as an enlightened entity.

In the second part of Essay we can realize the two inclination mentioned above— inquiry of origin and the project of difference— in the context of immanent method. The title of second chapter is that the first invention of speech is due not to the needs but to the passions (Rousseau: 1996:11). According to Rousseau it is a crucial task for a philosopher to make a struggle with the prejudices of his/her era. In relation to the origin of language there was a prejudice had maintained that the source of language must be derived from an omnipotent, universal Reason which is prior to all languages. However, Rousseau would object this idea because it fails to comprehend the real succession and the order of things in their nature. Rousseau says:

“One does not begin by reasoning but by feeling. It is suggested that men invented speech to express their needs: an opinion which seems to me untenable (Rousseau 1996: 11)”

For Rousseau, language, especially first language, consists of the gestures and the voices. As gestures are controlled by needs, the basic impulse of voices is the passions. Rousseau’s strategy of seeking difference is at work here. Needs are distinguished by their tendency in which human beings steer away from each other in order to find the necessary things to keep alive themselves whereas the passions assemble them and give the primary sources for their voices. Rousseau continues:

“all the passions tend to bring people together again, but the necessity of seeking livelihood forces them to apart. It is neither hunger nor thirst, but love, hatred, pity, anger which drew from them the their first words. (Rousseau: 1996: 12)”

Here, we don’t ask ‘what is a passion’ but the question of ‘which forces or relations can create a passion’? or ‘what kind of relations may form a passion?’ It is clear that passion bears an impulse or force that can assemble humans together. And the first words consist of the differential relations between peoples in the state of nature and their emotions. Passion is a multiplicity that makes connections between voices and senses. It is a material force at the heart of the human being.

In Essay, first language is considered as a figurative one. At this moment we have to ask what the meaning of “figurative” for Rousseau is. He compares the term of figurative with methodical, precise reasoning so as to enable the series of difference that would spread to the relationships between poetry and prose. Then, Rousseau assumes that first languages are poetic not prose. They don’t signify anything because the ideas and signs have not been decomposed yet in the state of nature. Rousseau exemplifies it in an amazing way:

“upon meeting others, a savage man initially be frightened. Because of his fear he sees the others as bigger and stronger than himself. He calls them Giant. After many experiences, he recognizes that these so-called giants are neither bigger nor stronger than he. Their stature does not approach the idea he had initially attached the word Giant. So he
invents another name common to them and to him, such as the name Man, for example, and leaves Giant to the fictitious object that had impressed him during allusion. That is how the figurative word is born before literal word, when our gaze is held in passionate fascination. (Rousseau, 1996: 13)

The crucial point here is that the word of Giant is moved by a passion, more precisely, by fear. It is very important to emphasise that the first voices of human beings had been prompted by passions not by needs and they had not been derived from an universal Reason, after, Rousseau would say us that passions are prior to the all reasoning.

“The first tales, the first speech, the first laws were in verse; Poetry was devised before prose; that was bound to be, since the passions spoke before reason.” (Rousseau, 1996: 51)

Rousseau wasn’t an irrationalist who denies all intervention of Reason but he was an antithetical voice in 18th century in which most of the theories about the origin of language was depended upon the supremacy of the universal and necessary Reason.

Now, we are face to face a greater problem at the heart of the inquiry: What kind of relations and components can distinguish passions? What is the source of the passions which had animated the poetic, figurative, melodic languages.

Self-love should not be confused with egoism or selfishness; it is an affirmative impulse that accompanies the compassion for the fellow-creatures. In the pure state of nature it is impossible that egoism may govern the heart of savage because of that self-love doesn’t permit to making a comparison with other savages but provides a simple passion for pity and self-protection. Therefore, there is no source of passion other than itself, self-love is the passion of the passions. Unlike Hobbes’ opinion about human nature it signifies that there is no evil in human nature from its birth and human beings are naturally good.

Rousseau uses the term perfectibility in order to compare the capacities of human beings with the stable nature of animals. The term of perfectibility refers an unlimited openness to change which keeps the free will of human beings. But it is also the source of all misadventures of them at the same time because the separation between human and nature occurs at the hands of that capacity. This is to say, perfectibility leads to the disjunction which is the main reason for the conversion of self-love (amour de soi) to the vanity (amour-propre). On the other hand, perfectibility has an affirmative role in order to enhance capacity of human such as thinking, invention, speaking, language and so on.

Vanity isn’t an ordinary concept for Rousseau because it marks a crucial transformation about the human self-consciousness. In the pure state of nature, a savage acquires her own consciousness through the observation of her behaviours. It means that she doesn’t apply to the others’ opinion in order to form her awareness. That is to say, Rousseau draws a state of isolation as Gilles Deleuze pointed out in his short writing on Rousseau (Deleuze 2004:53). Additionally, this state of isolation has a difficulty for thinking relationships between nature and language.

It is clear that the vanity can not characterize the pure state of nature rather it belongs another kind of consciousness. Vanity refers the relative self-consciousness of human being which poses herself according to the others’ position and leads a comparison between the capacities of the individuals. Furthermore it causes the political and moral inequalities between humans. Then it accompanies the birth of property which is the last moment of the state of nature. Rousseau compares these two kinds of passion-self-love and vanity- on the condition that acquiring consciousness related to the perfectibility. Therefore, Rousseau concludes that the source of the inequalities depend upon that the human in the state of society acquires her consciousness with respect to the eyes and opinion of others whereas a savage forms her self-consciousness through her relations with the order of nature.
Passions are social nucleus in the state of nature, they make it possible that to assemble human beings around their huts and they seek their expression in rituals and languages. Inasmuch as the first languages were depended upon the passions they have a powerful accent instead of a refined articulation. For Rousseau, the first voices of human beings were inarticulate and the sounds were melodic.

In the fifth chapter of *Essay*, Rousseau distinguishes three kinds of writing; first way of writing belongs to the Egyptians. Their sculpture describes not to the sounds but to the objects and this is proceed from its passionate nature in which it is impossible to separate sounds in order to represent it. The second kind of writing represents not the objects nor sounds but the words and propositions which had been accepted in a conventional meaning, Rousseau gives Chinese as an example. The last and less passionate way of writing is our writing—centred and alphabetic language.

Rousseau’s theory of language and his theory of music are intertwined in the context of relationships between the melody and harmony. Rousseau says that it is a common prejudice that harmony is the only source of the musical expression. In fact, for Rousseau harmony alone puts down the melodic effects of music and as long as language has been lost its melodic part it will be forced to reduce its passions to the grammar. There is a parallelism between music and language from the point of view of melody and of passion. The more language develops its systematic and grammatical aspects the more it will lost its melody. The more music posits harmony as a source over the melody and rhythm the more it will be less passionate. On the other hand Rousseau informs us that song and speech have derived from the one and the same source.

“All voices speak under the influence of passion, which adorns them with all their eclat. Thus verse, singing, and speech have a common origin.”(Rousseau, 1996: 50)

Harmony is a machine which overcodes the all musical fluxes into the laws of sound. It is the grammar of the music just like the grammar is the harmony of language. On the other side when we consider harmony in the terms of machines which Guattari described, it must be conceived as an allopoietic machine because of that it produces only the laws of the series between the sounds(Guattari 1992: 38). But melody seeks its own expression in a passionate way outside the harmonic laws. However, melody cannot be contrasted with harmony because it has its own harmony, but it resists to submit the laws which is ordered by a hierarchical position. In fact passions cannot be left even though the language has been evolving to a more systematic degree, melody cannot be abandoned completely to the laws of harmony of sounds and accent to the articulation and to the grammar.

There is an inner relationship between melodic, passionate language and the freedom of human beings. In *Second Discourse*, Rousseau’s approach related to the problem of freedom is presented at the heart of the state of nature. Savages are free because they haven’t got the institutions which restrict human freedom and bounds peoples in the chains of the command and obedience. Savage doesn’t know how to command others just like she doesn’t know how to obey the rules of others. There is no vanity at the heart of her.

To be free human needs an immediate, passionate and melodic language.

“There are some tongues favorable to liberty. They are the sonorous, prosodic, harmonious tongues in which discourse can be understood from a great distance.”(Rousseau, 1996: 72-73)

And,

“But I say that any tongue with which one cannot make oneself understood to the people assembled is a slavish language. It is
impossible for a people to remain free and speak that
tongue.” (Rousseau, 1996; 73)

When the passions are forced to be abandoned to the grammar and harmony, the experience of freedom are exhausted in an abstract language in which it is impossible for emotions to find their expressions in an immediate and non-representational way. In fact, Rousseau draws a language of freedom towards the society of passion. Finally, the passions can never be bracketed in the closed frames of the grammar, just like the body can not be in the terms of abstract and absolute soul. Rousseau opens up a new way of thinking in a radical empiricist world. In this world, people are right to speak their language as if they sing their best song.

For me the immanent elements of the language actualize its own power both in the expression and the creation of the passions. Passions, melodies, accents are immanent just like the language games and they have a powerful tendency to create a language of freedom here and now.

Perhaps a stencil from May 68 shows an example for the language of freedom: “a desire to the reality is beautiful but actualizing desire is more beautiful, my desires are reality”.

References


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