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History Gone Wrong: Rousseau on Corruption

Abstract *It can be said that Rousseau is one of the most acute thinkers of the corruption of civilisation. In fact, the Second Discourse and the Essay on the Origins of Languages could be read as elaborate analyses of advancing social and cultural decline inasmuch as mankind is continually moving away from the original state of natural innocence. But Rousseau's idea of corruption is not straightforward. I try to show that in the Essay, Rousseau emphasizes the natural causes for corruption. I argue that an opposition between necessity and contingency, which more accurately represents the two modes operating in Rousseau's doctrine, should replace the standard nature/culture divide. The contingency of natural catastrophes is found to be ultimately responsible for the corruption in the social realm, which is therefore largely driven by natural causes.*

Keywords *Jean-Jacques Rousseau, corruption, nature, society, contingency, catastrophes.*

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Rousseau and the Enlightenment

Jean-Jacques Rousseau's attitude towards one of the cornerstones of the Enlightenment thought, the idea of progress, had secured him a special place among the philosophers of the eighteenth century. In the time when a group of *philosophes*, gathered around the grand project of the *Encyclopédie*, was paving the way for the French Revolution in the intellectual domain, Rousseau's negative stance on the supposed ever-progressing emancipation of mankind had earned him a reputation of being a maverick of the group, although a very influential one. While being a fierce critic of the current state of affairs in politics and morals, Rousseau did not endorse the historical optimism of those who saw man as finally stepping on the path of reason. A comparison of his views on the progress of civilized societies with some of the more pronounced examples of the confident view of humanity in the 18th century – such as the *Tableau philosophique des progrès successifs de l'esprit humain* (1750) by the economist Anne-Robert-Jacques Turgot, or the *Esquisse d'un tableau historique des progrès de l'esprit humain* (1793) by Marquis de Condorcet – would reveal striking differences.

6 However, Rousseau's writings share one significant feature with the bulk of the theoretical works of his contemporaries, especially in France and Scotland, namely, the utilization of the method of so-called "conjectural history".¹ The term was coined by Dugald Stewart (Stewart 1982: 293) to denote a genre, or rather a general methodological framework in which philosophical and social theories were articulated in the eighteenth century. The approach can be described, in short, as employing speculations and hypothetical reasoning in trying to discover the probable historical origins of all things human – from money and government to knowledge and language. While historical facts were utilised where available or appropriate, the intention was not to find truth in the *accuracy* of the description of events, but in the *logical plausibility* of historical narratives, which took historical facts only as auxiliary evidence. All "treatises on the origins" are therefore full of assumptions about the events one had no evidence of whatsoever. Apart from the stadialist views of human progress first proposed by Turgot and Adam Smith, we see conjectural history (*l'histoire raisonné* or *l'histoire philosophique*, as it was sometimes called in France) at work in writings by such thinkers as abbé Condillac, Jean le Rond d'Alembert or David Hume.

In the vivid narrations of the *Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité parmi les hommes* (sometimes referred to as the *Second Discourse*) and the *Essai sur l'origine des langues*, Rousseau is one of the most skilful proponents of this genre. It is therefore not the *method* of the philosophical inquiry that sets him apart from his contemporaries; on the contrary, what Rousseau has in common with them is the very idea that true philosophical enquiry of any present state must unveil the origins of that state in the distant and often undocumented past by way of hypotheses, which are often very questionable historically. Rousseau expresses the incidental character of historical facts frankly in the *Second Discourse*:

For it is no light undertaking to disentangle what is original from what is artificial in Man's present Nature, and to know accurately a state which no longer exists, which perhaps never did exist, which probably never will exist, and about which it is nevertheless necessary to have exact Notions in order accurately to judge of our present state. (Rousseau 1997: 125 / 1964: 123)²

¹ I have outlined a broad overview of this method, which can be traced back to Descartes' *Discourse on the Method* in: Kroupa 2011.

² When citing the works of Rousseau, I use the English translation in Rousseau 1997. I also refer to the standard edition of *Oeuvres complètes* (Rousseau 1964 and 1995 for the *Second Discourse* and the *Essay*, respectively).

To account for our artificial presence, the story of the development of the human mind and civilization must be deduced philosophically from the original state of nature. Here Rousseau was in line with the general spirit of Enlightenment theory in that only the study of the *origins* of any given phenomenon deserved to be called philosophy. However, Rousseau stands out from this crowd in that wherever other thinkers saw gradual progress, he only found progressing degeneration and corruption.

I shall try to explore this image of Rousseau as an irremediable pessimist in the context of his *Essay on the Origin of Languages*, complemented by some relevant passages in the *Discourse on Inequality*. As Jean Starobinski nicely put it, these works can be read as two versions of the same story: while in the *Discourse* the discussion of language is only an episode in the general history of society, in the *Essay* the emergence of societies is treated only as far as it supports his views on the origins of language (Starobinski 1971: 356). It might be said that the former provides a more appropriate terrain for the study of the problem of the progress and corruption of societies (and has therefore more often been studied in this context). However, I believe that the somewhat emphasized naturalistic tone of the latter enables us to see Rousseau's views on corruption in a different perspective. In short, rather than pessimism, I would like to stress the naturalism of Rousseau's doctrine. If it is evident that history has taken some wrong turns, it is not entirely clear that we are to blame.

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Natural causes

A careful reader of the opening paragraphs of the *Essay* will notice that in the heart of its undertaking there seems to be a strange premise, which Rousseau introduces by stating: "since speech is the first social institution, it owes its form to natural causes alone" (Rousseau 1997: 248 / 1995: 375). Given that the opposition between the natural and the social realm is widely understood as occupying a central place in Rousseau's doctrine, the statement may at first seem curious. How are we to make sense of these two regimes, supposedly radically different or even contrary to one another, if the latter is simply identified as the result of the former? Derrida, a close reader of Rousseau's *Essay*, labels this paradox as "a break in the field of natural causality" whereby nature is playing against herself as it were, to "*naturally* inaugurate an order radically *heterogeneous* to the natural order" (Derrida 1982: 143). Language, specifically speech, is a privileged example of this conflict, it is a weird

8 amalgam inasmuch as it represents the transition from nature to society, or, from necessity to arbitrariness. It is governed by the arbitrary laws of humans, because it is conventional (Rousseau 1997: 252 / 1995: 379), yet the very existence of speech, or rather its *form*, as Rousseau points out, is enabled by *natural* or necessary causes, and nothing else. Further, the transition from the blind innocence of the natural state to corrupt civilization, of which speech is the first institution, belongs exclusively to man. But sociality as such does not rest in any special innate faculty he would be endowed with, but is rather a result of an outer force of nature drawing him towards it. The step of man into the realm of arbitrary speech is neither deliberate nor predestined, but something he has been manipulated into. As Rousseau says in an important passage on language in the *Second Discourse*, the departure from the state of nature “would be an Indictment of Nature, not of him whom nature had so constituted” (Rousseau 1997: 150 / 1964: 152).

If nature herself is the one to have given birth to her opposite, that is the arbitrary, artificial or unnatural order, anyone could quickly point out that this polarity must necessarily collapse into one. If the emergence of society through language (or vice versa, as we shall see) had natural causes, does it not make the social conventions only an extension of the necessary laws of nature? Rousseau seems to imply that, instead of being a radically *heterogeneous* order (in Derrida’s words), the arbitrary realm of society and language, since it arises from natural causes, can only be a subclass of, and be reduced to, the natural order. The general paradox of the causal relation between nature and society seems to be (I shall explore this using some examples later) that the social realm is an unnatural effect of a natural cause. Consequently, corruption occurring in society, as it is perceived by Rousseau as some kind of regrettable departure from the original state, turns out to be an unavoidable outcome of natural causes.

I propose to take this sort of naturalism in Rousseau seriously, but in order to do so, we must first make sense of the well-known nature/culture divide. As we shall see, the polarisation of man’s goodness by nature and corruption by society and free will is not something that should be taken as a dichotomy. The two realms overlap significantly because there are no two separate sets of attributes belonging exclusively to one or the other. For instance, nature cannot be identified with necessity as opposed to arbitrariness and chance, while, on the other hand, society is not merely conventional as opposed to necessary.

The reading of Rousseau revolving around the divide between nature and culture has been made popular by Claude Lévi-Strauss (e.g., 1964: 99–100 and 1983: 33–43) and consequent Derrida’s discussion (2001: 351–370) of his views, and is based primarily on the *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality*. In the *Essay on the Origin of Languages*, on the other hand, while still present, this divide is less pronounced, to the point where it cannot be viewed as a strict dichotomy. Let us begin by distinguishing between *the state of nature* (i.e., the time of solitary savage individuals with no permanent social bonds), which was irrecoverably lost once first societies were formed, and *the natural causes*, which of course continue to regulate human affairs even after speech as the first social institution has emerged. While making the step outside of the state of nature, man never escapes the natural forces and causes. While there is a more or less clear distinction between the state of nature and the artificial state of society, natural causes continue to dominate the latter no less than the former. The two states are not governed by two different types of causes, either natural and necessary or arbitrary and contingent, but rather represent two different types of effects. Everything that happened in the original state (populated by solitary savages) had natural and largely beneficial effects on man. With the gradual emerging of communication and social interactions, however, the effects of natural causality were slowly differentiated into a variety of cultural forms, which were corrupt by definition, since variety always marks a departure from the original universality.

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While the *state of nature* is a proper subject of the *Second Discourse*, I think we need to interpret the *Essay* as an exploration primarily of the idea of *natural causes*, in which the role of human freedom and spontaneity is concealed. In fact, Rousseau puts a lot of effort into showing that everything artificial, social and therefore unnatural is a result of natural necessities. In the *Essay*, this is demonstrated in the frequent attempts to underline the natural elements in conventional languages. Before opening his “long digression” on the differences between the languages of the north and the south, for instance, Rousseau explicitly avoids the discussion of the variety of forms of speech in terms of free-will conventions with the words: “Let us try to follow the order of nature itself in our inquiries” (Rousseau 1997: 267 / 1995: 394). What follows is a long explanation of how these differences are a consequence of natural migrations and settlements of people in different climates. It is important to note here that it is not only the emergence of language

as *such* which is due to external forces of nature, but also the *variety* or *form* of languages, in other words, that which has always been interpreted in terms of arbitrary culture. Cultural and linguistic differences are thus not arbitrary and spontaneous according to Rousseau, but are guided by local climatic and geographical necessities.

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In another passage, Rousseau states that the first language must have been based on the unarticulated cries of nature. The basic claim underlying the whole argument of the *Essay* is that speech has not emerged among people because of their needs, but because of their emotions. “Not hunger nor thirst, but love, hatred, pity, anger wrung their first voices from them” (Rousseau 1997: 253 / 1995: 380). The hypothetical first spoken language must have been therefore onomatopoeic. Either it expressed ideas of things and beings with an imitational sound of perceived objects themselves and the effects they had on other objects and beings, or with an accent of an accompanying emotion. Because it expressed not only things but also different emotions connected with them, this language must have been rich with synonyms, irregularities, and accentuated vowels expressing the feelings of the heart. It probably had no grammar, abstract words and almost no articulated sounds, since the cries of emotions had little need for consonants. It was very figurative and was sung rather than spoken (Rousseau 1997: 254–256 / 1995: 382–384). Modern languages, on the other hand, are simple and methodical, precise and articulated. They make use of many abstract terms instead of synonyms. Ideas have taken the place of emotions. The changes from primitive speech to modern languages were slow and gradual. As people were becoming more knowledgeable about the world, their speech grew colder, addressing the ideas of the mind rather than the feelings of the heart (Rousseau 1997: 262–6 and 280–1 / 1995: 390–3 and 409–10). There is no need to emphasize that, due to these alterations, modern languages are corrupt according to Rousseau. But what is more important in this context is how this description concludes. Rousseau explicitly denies that speakers have any responsibility for this corruption: “This progress seems to me entirely natural” (Rousseau 1997: 256 / 1995: 384).³

One would be hard-pressed to find any mention of arbitrary conventions even in the case of writing. While commenting on the reasons

³ Rousseau even recalls Plato’s *Cratylus* at a certain point, noting that the idea of natural language of imitation “is not so ridiculous as it appears to be” (Rousseau 1997: 256 / 1995: 383).

for our practice of writing from left to right, Rousseau reports that after adopting the direction from right to left from the Phoenicians, the Greeks decided to write in furrows (i.e., continuing, as it were, a single line alternatively from right to left and vice versa), because that facilitated reading. However, in order to enable the spreading of manuscripts, they had eventually learned to write from left to right, since that is a considerably easier way to write by hand. “This progress is altogether natural,” says Rousseau (1997: 259 / 1996: 387).

Lastly, after enumerating the effects brought by the invasion of Barbarians into Rome, which was directly responsible for the corrupt state of modern languages and music, Rousseau, again, concludes by saying: “These progresses are neither accidental nor arbitrary, they are due to the vicissitudes of things” (Rousseau 1997: 298 / 1995: 428).

It is clear from these passages that the distinction between the necessity of nature and the arbitrariness of culture cannot be central to Rousseau’s discussion of the corruption of language and music in the *Essay*. Rather, I think there are two other oppositions, hinged on one another, on which Rousseau quietly relies to convey arbitrariness into his argument.

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Avoiding theology

We must not forget that Rousseau’s references to natural causes serve a double function. They not only reveal that the development of language is largely natural as opposed to conventional, but are also intended to lay forward the ambition to avoid *supernatural* causation, a divine agent. After all, it is much easier to reconcile nature with society than with miracles. Yet this opposition between natural and theological explanations is ultimately resolved on another level: in the opposition between necessary and contingent events. As we shall see, the contingent side of the divide is designed precisely to relieve the project of the burden of various theological hypotheses.

Let us look at how Rousseau deals with the first challenge, that is, how he manages to avoid the theological account of the transition from the state of nature to society, or, more specifically, to language as the first social institution. Rousseau’s discussion in the *Discourse* closely follows the problems laid forward by Condillac in the *Essai sur l’origine des connaissances humaines*, although he fully acknowledges the complexity of this issue, apparently puzzled by a series of difficulties that seem to imply a danger of a circular argument.

The first difficulty consists in deciding whether the true originator of language is a mother or her child. If one supposes that the child has a bigger motivation to communicate his (or her) needs to the mother, then the child must have been the first inventor of a few distinct sounds endowed with meaning in the state of nature. This would imply that there would have been as many languages as there were people according to Rousseau, because there was nothing to guarantee the consistency of such a language among different individuals. After all, people led nomadic lives and maintained no permanent social bonds with one another. Alternatively, if we suppose that in this hypothetical situation it was the mother who taught her child how to express basic needs, then this begs the question, because it remains unclear how the mother herself had learned that language (Rousseau 1997: 146–6 / 1964: 147).

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Without giving an answer to this problem, Rousseau faces an even bigger and more philosophical difficulty, namely, how can the origin of language be explained when language and thought seem to presuppose one another. Apparently unsatisfied by the explanation provided by Condillac, Rousseau puts forward the following dilemma: “for if men needed speech in order to learn how to think, they needed even more to know how to think in order to find the art of speech” (Rousseau 1997: 146 / 1964: 147).

The last and most important difficulty is developed from the criticism Rousseau had addressed to Condillac a little earlier:

[T]he manner in which this Philosopher resolves the difficulties he himself raises regarding the origins of instituted signs shows that he assumed what I question, namely some sort of society already established among the inventors of language. (Rousseau 1997: 145 / 1964: 146)

This is a crucial point for Rousseau. While he has been able to establish that the first and most universal form of speech must have been a cry of nature, in the *Discourse* he fails to find a satisfying account of the transformation of this unarticulated language into any form of language in the proper sense. Clearly incapable of identifying the principle that would explain how people began communicating their needs and emotions without a stable society, Rousseau raises the seemingly unresolvable question of how language and sociability are connected. It is in this passage that he seems to leave room for theological hypotheses:

As for myself, frightened by the increasing difficulties, and convinced of the almost demonstrated impossibility that Languages could have arisen and been established by purely human means, I leave to anyone who wishes to undertake it the discussion of this difficult Problem: which is the more necessary, the already united Society for the institution of languages, or already invented Languages for the establishment of Society? Rousseau 1997: 149 / 1964: 151

This last difficulty in the *Discourse* must be read together with the climatological hypothesis in the *Essay*. Rousseau never fully allows for the supernatural cause to enter his chain of explanation, although, even in the *Essay*, he seems to not have denied it completely.⁴ In this respect, the following story about “a touch of the finger”, in which he recognizes that the differences in climate must have played a decisive role in human history, is essential for the narrative:

He who willed man to be sociable inclined the globe’s axis at an angle to the axis of the universe with a touch of the finger. With this slight motion I see the face of the earth change and the vocation of mankind settled [...] (Rousseau 1997: 273 / 1995: 401)

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From here, the whole story of the differences between northern and southern languages unfolds. Rousseau is able to demonstrate that people in the idyllic setting of moderately warm climates, where they hardly had any need to cooperate, were nevertheless forced to eventually socialize, either because of the rare need to overcome the consequences of some natural disaster, or in the case where they used the same water sources. It was on these occasions, according to Rousseau, that the first agreements, disagreements, love encounters and celebrations took place, spontaneously inducing communication based on the accentuated voices of passions (Rousseau 1997: 274–8 / 1995: 402–7). In the northern climates, on the other hand, where the winters are long and harsh, cooperation is critical for survival and becomes the main motivation of social relations. As Rousseau describes it,

in those regions where the earth yields whatever it yields only after much labor and where the source of life seems to reside more in the hands than in the heart, men, constantly involved in providing for their subsistence, hardly thought about gentler bonds, everything was confined to physical impulsion, opportunity dictated choice, ease dictated preference. (Rousseau 1997: 279 / 1995: 408)

4 For example, he sympathetically mentions Father Bernard Lamy and his claim that humans could have never transformed the cries of nature into articulated language, had God himself not taught them how to do so (Rousseau 1997: 255 / 1995: 255).

Unlike in the south, then, the first words of northern people might have been *aidez-moi* instead of *aimez-moi* (Rousseau 1997: 279 / 1995: 408), which in turn explains the general character of the northern languages: cold, articulated, noisy and unmelodic.

The importance of the story about a slight push of the finger lies less in the fact that it finally determines the missing link between the cries of nature and instituted language and between language and society than in the place it occupies in the general strategy of Rousseau's argument. While in the *Discourse*, Rousseau expresses doubts whether languages could have been established by purely human means, in the *Essay* we are faced with an answer that opens two ways of understanding these doubts. What exactly is outside the "purely human means?" In other words, to whom does the finger belong? An interpretation, which would pursue divine interference in this passage, suggests itself almost naturally. However, I think it is the second distinction between *necessity* and *contingency*, rather than the one between natural and supernatural agency, that provides the key to Rousseau's view on why language is essentially corrupt. Rousseau does not need to decide whether the differences in climates are caused by God's finger of Providence or some accidental idiosyncrasy of nature herself. After all, these two options are not necessarily incompatible. It is rather the opposition between the necessary and therefore predictable laws of nature and a series of contingent and unforeseeable events or breaches in this steady order that structure Rousseau's explanation. The theological hypothesis, should anyone want to recover it, can peacefully reside inside this larger opposition, because from now on contingency takes full responsibility, as it were, for misfortunes of people. The slight push of the finger should be understood as only the first in the series of contingent events in nature, making the possibility of a full-blown theological explanation irrelevant or secondary.

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The contingency of catastrophes

How does contingency intervene? Rousseau's conjectural history, of which his discussion of the origin of languages in the *Essay* is only a part, is full of catastrophes. It is evident that whenever he struggles to deliver an account of events that would pass as natural by his own standards, disasters take place to move things forward. In the *Discourse*, "some fatal accident which, for the sake of the common utility, should never have occurred" (Rousseau 1997: 167 / 1964: 171) ended the happiest period of man in which he resembled the savage men described by

the modern discoverers. Rousseau takes the fact that there still are savage societies as an indication of the state we would still be in had the catastrophe not occurred. In the *Essay*, Rousseau identifies floods, volcanic eruptions, earthquakes and lightning fires as prime motivators for primitive alliances of the southern people, which enabled them to overcome and restore the damages (Rousseau 1997: 274 / 1995: 402). And since it is hard to imagine how people would have come about the idea to look for iron ore and to smelt it properly, “some extraordinary event, such as a Volcano throwing up molten metal” (Rousseau 1997: 168 / 1964: 172), must have occurred to push people towards the supposedly utilitarian and harmless art of metallurgy.

However, the status of these catastrophes is somewhat peculiar, as they are both external and inherent to the order of nature – a fatal conspiracy of providence and an unfortunate combination of natural circumstances. They represent an interruption of the harmonious order of nature by a violent contingency, or as Derrida puts it, an “arbitrary and exterior causality,” which also has to “act along natural or quasi-natural lines” (Derrida 1982: 146). The contingent disasters are thus both natural and unnatural, or rather, natural, but presenting themselves as contrary to natural order and the paths it is supposed to take. Contingency, in short, is an eccentricity *in* nature’s character, as if incompatible with her usual ways. To repeat the point I have made earlier, a contingent catastrophe is a *natural cause* with potentially *unnatural effects*, such as a passage from the state of silent savages to society of articulated communication.

The *Essay on the Origin of Languages* and the *Discourse on Inequality* (and the *Discourse on the Sciences and Arts*) are concerned primarily with the question of how civilization is only ever bringing corruption and misery to people. In this sense, natural disasters are interpreted as unfortunate accidents diverting the course of human history. However, in the *Essay* Rousseau goes even further in showing that there is a corrupting force in nature herself. It is not enough that natural disasters disturb what could otherwise have been a harmonious life on earth; moreover, men even actively prevent and mitigate nature’s self-destructive tendencies. In a remarkable passage of the *Essay*, often neglected by commentators, Rousseau presents an image, which must sound utterly heretic to the ears of any present day ecologist. According to this passage, the first state of the earth, that is before humans, was one of chaos, frequent revolutions and confusion. Disasters were much more common, as if war between the natural powers had to maintain an

equilibrium, bringing about “in a few hours what a hundred thousand human hands now do in a century” (Rousseau 1997: 276 / 1995: 404). Let me quote a brief passage from this fascinating image:

The entire earth would soon have been covered with nothing but trees and ferocious beasts; eventually everything would have perished.

The water cycle which nourishes the earth would little by little have broken down. Mountains get worn down and smaller, rivers silt up, the sea rises and spreads, everything imperceptibly tends toward the same level; the hand of men slows this drift and delays this progress; without them it would proceed faster, and the earth might perhaps already be under water. (Rousseau 1997: 276 / 1995: 404–5)

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Nature makes no effort to sustain living conditions on earth, and although wars, burnings of cities, mining, cutting down trees, draining or channelling of rivers and other civilized activities bring misery to people, they are by no means corrupting Nature in Rousseau’s view. Rather they are counterbalancing her self-corrupting inclinations.

Let us return to the problem of corruption in the social realm and, more specifically, to language and music. As we have seen, it is only a distant ramification of contingent natural events. Jean Starobinski has nicely summarized the causal connection between nature and society in Rousseau: “Social institution is a delayed consequence of a primitive disposition, of which the effects are unfolded very slowly at a distance from the origin and under the influence of exceptional conditions, which have solicited the rise of virtual faculties” (Starobinski 1971: 357). Corruption and progress are not innate to man any more than language or sociability. Rather they are the result of a faculty Rousseau calls *la perfectibilité*, “perfectibility,” or *la faculté de se perfectionner*, “the faculty of perfecting oneself” (Rousseau 1997: 159, 141 / 1964: 162, 142). This ability to evolve, together with freedom, is what separates the human race from beasts, yet it remains dormant and potential until awoken by some exceptional external impulse, such as a natural disaster. Only through this excited perfectibility has man been able to leave the state of nature, and it is due to this virtual faculty that he “makes progress in good as well as in evil” (Rousseau 1997: 253 / 1995: 379).

How is it that the languages of the south, so full of natural inflections and so harmonic, did not prevail, at least not in Europe? Rousseau’s answer is pointing at another catastrophic event, but this time it is not a natural disaster, although it is a distant ramification of the slight movement of the finger. In Chapter VIII, before beginning his climatological

digression, Rousseau states that mankind was born in warm countries. From there, people migrated to the cold lands of the north and, after a long period of multiplication, spread back to the south (Rousseau 1997: 266–7 / 1995: 394). This last step of the sketchy account of migrations is in fact Rousseau’s description of the invasion of the Barbarians into Rome. The effects this historical event had on Greco-Roman culture bear all of the characteristics that Rousseau found in his analysis of the differences between the north and the south. Europe, invaded by crude and ignorant men, lost its arts and sciences and its perfected and harmonious language. The voice of these men was “harsh and accent-less”, “noisy without being sonorous” (Rousseau 1997: 296 / 1995: 425). Their articulations were grating, their voices nasal and dull. Their songs had nothing in common with the melodiousness of the Greeks and the metrics of the Romans. Since their language was born out of need rather than emotion, prose was closer to their spirit than singing or poetry. After they had accustomed the subject people to the noisiness of their speech, the fate of modern languages and music was sealed: melodic songs of inflected voices, which originated from the natural characteristics of the southern languages, were gradually replaced by harmonies, accidentally discovered in a few chords when the descendants of the barbarians were trying to make their songs more sonorous (Rousseau 1997: 296–7 / 1995: 426). Rousseau devotes the majority of the second part of the *Essay* to the opposition between melody and harmony. He sees the latter as cold, calculated and unfit to imitate emotions, as opposed to the expressive music of the Greeks, for instance, which was full of energy.

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By the end of the *Essay*, everything becomes connected with language. The corruption of language brought not only the corruption of music, poetry and drama, but also of eloquence. Modern languages, unsonorous and unmelodic, are not suitable for addressing crowds at public spaces because speech simply cannot be understood at a distance due to lack of melody and measure. That, in turn, has political implications. Rousseau concludes the *Essay* by saying: “I maintain that any language in which it is not possible to make oneself understood by the people assembled is a servile language; it is impossible for a people to remain free and speak that language” (Rousseau 1997: 299 / 1995: 429).

Conclusion

To conclude, let me add a few points on the notion of corruption in Rousseau. First, as we have seen in the case of the Barbarians, the

18 corruptions happening in the arbitrary order of culture are only distant consequences of natural causes and human perfectibility. We must not forget, however, that the inverse statement also holds, namely, that the natural order itself is not free of arbitrariness. The implication is inevitable: through catastrophic contingencies, the corruption of everything social becomes an intrinsic part of nature. But while the corruption of culture is largely natural as opposed to arbitrary, it is also true that, for Rousseau, the corruption of nature is arbitrary due to the contingency of catastrophes and coincidences. We are left with a position, which is very uncommon for a philosopher of the eighteenth century: corruption is the fate of humanity, it is natural, but it is by no means necessary. Had history not been navigated by a series of unpredictable and unnecessary disasters, the state of affairs could have been different, perhaps less corrupt. Rousseau's frequent expressions of regret over history that has gone so very wrong are ultimately a critique of nature, rather than man.

Second, an important point about the notion of corruption in Rousseau is that it demonstrates itself as differentiation. Corruption is not simply a transformation from good to evil, but it is in a way always a departure from the pure and unspoiled origin, and this departure always manifests itself as splitting up or falling apart. In the end, the corruption of language and music lies in the fact that they are no longer united. In the beginning, speech, song, poetry and eloquence were all one according to Rousseau (who is following Condillac on this point), and it is in their violent division through various stages in history that they lose their original energy and expressivity.⁵ When language was sonorous, melodic and rhythmic, the transition from speech to declamation and chant were imperceptible. Condillac (2001: 118) makes a similar statement about the original unity of dance, pantomime and gestures. This view has a long tradition in philosophy, particularly in the debates about language. Until the seventeenth century, the standard account of the problems of linguistic representation had pointed towards the fall of Adam,

5 This differentiation closely relates to what Derrida's reading (1997: 165ff) of Rousseau's *Essay* advances in the second part of his *Of Grammatology*, where he extracts a series of oppositions that appear throughout Rousseau's text, such as south/north, melody/harmony, sound/articulation, vowel/consonant, but also passions/reason, and finally, speech/writing. The second half of every such opposition is interpreted by Rousseau as some sort of corruption of the first, as a departure from the pure origin, or, in Derrida's terms, a supplement of the original presence. While Rousseau is arguing that these corruptions are due to causes external to the pure origin (such as catastrophes), Derrida is of course trying to show that what he calls *différance* is always already in the origin, that the origin has always been split, in other words, that there has never been a pure and unspoiled origin.

that is, the event after which he had lost the original unity of ideas and words and was therefore unable to reconstruct the knowledge contained in the names he had given to things and animals under the supervision of God. Without this unity, thought and speech separate, and the only connection they are able to sustain, is an insecure bond of representation, which is often deceptive.⁶ One should therefore not forget that language and music did not get corrupt simply by change and unspecified degradation, but literally by decay or decomposition. Language was spoiled by losing its musical self and music by losing the melody and rhythm of original speech. Rousseau's corruption is therefore much less passing away (in the Aristotelian sense) than it is a falling apart.

Lastly, for Rousseau, corruption is not only the opposite of progress in the sense that the majority of the philosophers of the Enlightenment understood it, but is often also disguised as progress. The dominant position of harmony as opposed to melody in modern music, for instance, was seen as a result of the advancement of music (this was defended by Jean-Philippe Rameau, a composer and music theorist, in response to whom Rousseau had written the *Essay*). The same is true about language. Rousseau was convinced that what others understood as an improvement (i.e. that language had come to be governed by the rational rules of grammar, that the semantics of words had been getting ever more precise due to lexicalisation, that it had become an object of scientific study etc.) was in fact its degradation, because it had lost its expressive powers. The implication of this Rousseauist viewpoint is an obvious one: if that which is appreciated by everybody as progress is in fact only an illusion of progress and really corruption, then the very fact of this camouflage is what is most corrupt about corruption. It prevents the detection of the real nature of corruption and encourages its perpetuation.

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⁶ Another catastrophe, which brought obstacles to communication, was found in the story of the Tower of Babel, which is a story of differentiation and loss of unity *par excellence*.

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Gregor Kroupa

Kad istorija krene po zlu: Ruso o korupciji

Apstrakt

Može se reći da je Ruso jedan od pronicljivijih mislilaca korupcije civilizacije. *Druga rasprava* i *Ogled o poreklu jezika* bi se zapravo mogli iščitati kao razrađena analiza sve većeg kulturnog nazadovanja, u tom smislu što se čovečanstvo sve više udaljava od izvornog stanja prirodne nevinosti. Međutim, Rusoova ideja korupcije civilizacije nije jednostavna. Pokušaću da pokažem da u *Ogledu* Ruso naglašava prirodne uzroke korupcije. Tvrdiću da protivstavljanje nužnosti i kontingencije – koje na tačniji način oslikava dva modusa koja su na delu unutar Rusoove doktrine – treba da zameni standardnu podelu kultura/priroda. Ispostaviće se da je kontingencija prirodnih nepogoda naposljetku odgovorna za korupciju društvenog carstva koje se, shodno tome, u velikoj meri rukovodi prirodnim uzrocima.

Cljučne reči Žan-Žak Ruso, korupcija, priroda, društvo, kontingencija, nepogoda.