Interpretation
A Journal of Political Philosophy

Interpretation
A JOURNAL OF POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

Adam Smith on Rousseau and the Origin of Languages[*]

Nelson Lund

Antonin Scalia Law School, George Mason University

nlund@gmu.edu

Abstract: Adam Smith's major works are widely thought to constitute a deliberate though implicit rebuttal to the critique of life in modern commercial societies that Rousseau presented in the *Discourse on Inequality*. This article examines Smith's few explicit references to Rousseau, all of which denigrate him in ways that Smith must have known are unsupported at best and insupportable at worst. The analysis focuses on the only topic that elicited a specific substantive criticism of Rousseau: the origin of languages. Both authors seriously investigated this topic, but in strikingly different ways. Rousseau's analysis of the evolution of language is deeper and more philosophically ambitious than Smith's. This may help to explain why Smith mocked Rousseau's proto-Darwinian account of human evolution, but never tried to refute it. The article concludes by suggesting that Smith may have shared Rousseau's understanding of human nature to a greater extent than he wished to acknowledge, and that he may have hinted at this agreement through the traditional technique of esoteric writing.

One can hardly read Rousseau and Adam Smith without being struck by similarities in some of their central interests, as well as by seemingly profound differences in several of their most important conclusions. The differences are especially prominent with respect to the nature of human sociability and the costs and benefits of modern commercial societies. One of Smith's earliest publications included disparaging comments about Rousseau's account of human nature and civilized life in the *Discourse on the Origin and the Foundations of Inequality among Men* (hereafter *Discourse on Inequality* or *Discourse*).[1] Much

1 All citations to Rousseau refer to *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Bernard Gagnebin and Marcel Raymond, 5 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1959–1995), abbreviated as *OC*. Quotations follow the orthography in this edition.

of Smith's later work is now widely treated as a powerful response to what he saw as Rousseau's challenging critique of commercial society.[2]

This consensus has not gone unchallenged. Paul Sagar, for example, maintains that Smith did not take Rousseau seriously, primarily because "Smith was able to read and absorb Hume's revolutionary contributions [to the debates over human sociability] in the light of which Rousseau's *Discourse* must have paled."[3] From a different perspective, Mark Hulliung emphasizes the paucity of direct evidence that Smith wrote in response to Rousseau, and rejects the verdict, common among Smith scholars, that Rousseau lost a debate in which he did not participate.[4]

This article examines Smith's few explicit comments about Rousseau, focusing on the only topic on which he published a specific substantive criticism of Rousseau's work: the origin of human languages.[5] This criticism appeared in "Considerations concerning the First Formation of Languages" (hereafter "First Formation").[6] Rousseau, who was almost certainly unaware of this essay, composed an extended treatment of the same subject: the *Essay on the Origin of Languages, Where Melody and Musical Imitation Are Discussed* (hereafter *Essay*). This work appeared after Rousseau's death and twenty years after Smith published "First Formation."[7]

---

[2] Prominent examples include Dennis C. Rasmussen, *The Problems and Promise of Commercial Society: Adam Smith's Response to Rousseau* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2008); Ryan Patrick Hanley, "Commerce and Corruption: Rousseau's Diagnosis and Adam Smith's Cure," *European Journal of Political Theory* 7 (2008): 137–58; Ryan Patrick Hanley, *Adam Smith and the Character of Virtue* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 26–52; Istvan Hont, *Politics in a Commercial Society: Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Adam Smith*, ed. Béla Kapossy and Michael Sonenscher (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015); Nicholas Phillipson, *Adam Smith: An Enlightened Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 145–58. For additional references, see Paul Sagar, *The Opinion of Mankind: Sociability and the Theory of the State from Hobbes to Smith* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018), 166n2; Pierre Force, "Rousseau and Smith: On Sympathy as a First Principle," in *Thinking with Rousseau: From Machiavelli to Schmitt*, ed. Helena Rosenblatt and Paul Schweigert (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 115–18; Rasmussen, *Problems and Promise*, 6n8.

[3] Paul Sagar, "Smith and Rousseau after Hume and Mandeville," *Political Theory* 46, no. 1 (2018): 50.

[4] Mark Hulliung, "Rousseau and the Scottish Enlightenment: Connections and Disconnections," in *Adam Smith and Rousseau: Ethics, Politics, Economics*, ed. Maria Pia Paganelli, Dennis C. Rasmussen, and Craig Smith (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 32.

[5] All the works cited in this article were either published by Smith or authorized by him for posthumous publication.

[6] Adam Smith, *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*, ed. J. G. Bryce (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1985), 203–26.

[7] Although the *Essay* was published posthumously, Rousseau had planned to publish it before his death. See *Emile*, *OC*, 4:672n.

Although their thoughts matured independently, Smith and Rousseau probably began from a common starting point in the work of the Abbé de Condillac. In the *Discourse*, Rousseau expressly ties his discussion of the origin of languages to Condillac's *Essay on the Origin of Human Knowledge* (hereafter *Human Knowledge*). This book, which was published a decade before Rousseau's *Discourse*, presents a hypothetical history of the development of language that has much in common with Smith's "First Formation." Smith obviously knew Rousseau's *Discourse* well, and he owned a copy of *Human Knowledge*.[8] Smith likely took careful account of Condillac's work,[9] as Rousseau certainly did. These three thinkers put similarly conjectural histories to markedly different uses, in ways that illuminate how Smith and Rousseau approached philosophy.

This article analyzes the relevant parts of six texts: Condillac's *Human Knowledge*, Rousseau's *Discourse on Inequality*, Smith's letter to the *Edinburgh Review* (hereafter "Letter"), Smith's "First Formation," Rousseau's *Essay*, and an essay by Smith on the imitative arts. I will show that Smith was never willing to come to grips with Rousseau's arguments, and that his comments about Rousseau were at best unsupported and at worst insupportable. I will also present evidence that Smith knew that his criticisms of Rousseau were seriously defective.

These conclusions are consistent with the view that Smith's defense of commercial society constitutes an implicit response to Rousseau, but they also present us with a genuine puzzle. However uneasy Smith may have been with Rousseau's fiery eloquence, he was more than sufficiently perceptive to know that he had not even attempted to refute his arguments. I tentatively suggest that Smith may have regarded Rousseau's radical account of human nature as much more plausible than he considered it prudent to acknowledge. Or to put it differently, perhaps Smith believed that his own efforts to promote virtue through moral education were threatened by both the substance and the style of Rousseau's writings. This hypothesis might usefully be tested through a detailed study of the two authors' greatest works on education, *Emile* and *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (hereafter *Moral Sentiments* or *TMS*).

---

[8]   Hiroshi Mizuta, *Adam Smith's Library: A Catalogue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 61–62.

[9]   See Phillipson, *Adam Smith*, 94–95, 165–66.

Condillac's Ambitious Epistemology

Condillac's speculations about the development of languages are at once incidental and central to the purpose of *Human Knowledge*. The book aims to do something that its author claims had never been done, namely, to present a reliable method of acquiring truth, applicable to any matter into which we may inquire. The languages we learn as children constitute a prime source of the infinity of errors to which we are prone, and a reliable method of escaping those errors requires an understanding of how they arise. In Condillac's view, our languages should be analyzed and reconstructed from the ground up in a way that furthers the search for truth rather than obstructing it. His model is mathematics, and specifically arithmetic. *Human Knowledge* offers little concrete detail about the use of this model in reforming nonmathematical languages, but it seeks to make progress toward such a reform.

Condillac admires the revolution that Descartes effected with his demand that we reject all the knowledge we believe we possess and begin again with the simplest ideas we have (2.2.3 §§33–41, 112–15).[10] But whereas Descartes taught that these simplest ideas are innate, Condillac contends that John Locke proved for the first time that innate ideas do not exist. Locke saw that all knowledge originates in sensation, but he fell short because he did not sufficiently explain the fundamental significance of the use of signs in developing the seeds of knowledge (Introduction, 5). Condillac expressly identifies his own goal with Francis Bacon's, namely, the renewal and advancement of the sciences (Introduction, 5; 2.2.3 §44, 115). He expects his speculative history of language to contribute to Bacon's project because this history "will show the circumstances in which signs are imagined; will make known their true sense, and teach us how to prevent their abuse; and it will not leave, I think, any doubt about the origin of our ideas" (Introduction, 4).

Condillac assumes that our ancestors must have begun with what he calls the language of action: cries and gestures naturally or instinctively stimulated by a certain passion. An observer could understand this language because the observer had experienced the same passion accompanied by his own instinctive response. Frequent repetition of such encounters would enable people to use these same cries and gestures in a deliberate way to communicate the sentiments they reflected, as in giving a warning by making sounds or gestures naturally produced by the passion of fear.

---

[10] All citations refer to *Œuvres philosophiques de Condillac*, ed. Georges Le Roy, vol. 1 (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1947).

Condillac's conjectural history of progress in the use of instituted signs, which leads to conventional languages, begins with two hypothetical children, born after the biblical deluge and separated from their parents before they learned the use of any signs. He stresses that until they began living together, their souls could have had only the most limited operations, scarcely extending beyond perception and very short-lived memories. Once they did begin living together, natural signs would have enabled some communication, and thus served as models for additional signs that they agreed to institute (2.1, 60).

This story is obviously not meant as a serious hypothesis about what must or may have happened in fact. In a footnote, Condillac alludes to a more realistic suggestion found in pagan writers, namely, that the first people were scattered in the forests, remained inarticulate like beasts until some of them joined together for mutual assistance, and only gradually agreed to the use of arbitrary signs to communicate their ideas (ibid., note 1). He refrains from asking how the race would have survived before they began joining together, or how they could have joined together for mutual assistance without a means of making agreements to do so, or why they would eventually have agreed to the institution of arbitrary signs. As we will see, Rousseau addresses all these questions, and Smith apparently does not believe that they need to be raised.

Condillac proceeds by examining and comparing fully developed languages in an effort to imagine how natural signs, the language of action, and the first arbitrary signs might have developed and interacted with one another as groups of people sought to satisfy their needs and wants. This exposition is an example of what Condillac regards as the proper method of pursuing the truth, namely, analysis and reconstruction. It is a particularly important example because it enables us to see that the language we acquire before we can reason carries with it ideas and maxims that we mistakenly take for innate ideas or self-evident truths (2.2.1).

This feature of language is the first cause of our errors, one that has made mankind's current state of knowledge, as Francis Bacon put it, "a hodgepodge built up from many beliefs and many stray events as well as from childish notions that we absorbed in our earliest years" (2.2.3 §44, 115n2, quoting Bacon's *Novum Organum*, book 1, aphorism 97). Mathematics provides a model for reasoning on the basis of clear ideas whose connections have been established by analysis and reconstruction. An effort to think with comparably methodical care more generally, even in the fields of metaphysics and morals, could lead to what Bacon called "a regeneration of science, i.e.,

that it may be raised up in a sure order from experience and founded anew" (ibid., also quoting aphorism 97). In later works, Condillac contributed to the development of modern scientific method.[11] The important point here is that facilitating progress in methodical thinking is the overarching goal of *Human Knowledge*. As we will see, Rousseau and Smith chose different goals for their own works on the evolution of language.

Rousseau's Radical Anthropology

Rousseau's *Discourse on Inequality* opens a discussion of the origin of languages with a seemingly modest tribute: "Permit me to briefly consider the obstacles to the origin of Languages. I could content myself here with citing or quoting the Abbé de Condillac's study of this subject, all of which fully confirms my sentiment, and which perhaps gave me the first idea of it" (*OC*, 3:146). The next sentence, however, qualifies this testimonial by noting that Condillac assumed what Rousseau questions, namely, "a sort of society already established among the inventors of language" (ibid.). This is not a small difference. Condillac's hypothesis—that two children so young that they had learned nothing about the use of signs could survive alone and invent a language—is utterly unrealistic. The immediate context of Rousseau's own discussion in the *Discourse* is a sustained argument that the "pagan" story mentioned in Condillac's footnote may actually be true.

Rousseau's brief discussion of the origin of languages tracks Condillac's story in several particulars. Both of them, for example, contend that the most primitive form of communication must have arisen from instinctive expressions of distress or alarm, and that the next steps would have been to communicate with simple gestures and imitative sounds. Similarly, both emphasize that progress toward the expression of abstract ideas must have been both gradual and filled with false starts and mistaken generalizations. Rousseau's account is much more condensed than Condillac's, but that is less significant than the differences in their reasons for taking up the subject.

Condillac is primarily interested in the process through which speech must have evolved because it will throw light on how our languages have incorporated errors from which we can free ourselves through an orderly rethinking of the

---

[11] For discussions of Condillac's influence, see Lissa Roberts, "Condillac, Lavoisier, and the Instrumentalization of Science," *The Eighteenth Century* 33, no. 3 (1992): 252–71; Léon Rosenfeld, "Condillac's Influence on French Scientific Thought," in *Selected Papers of Léon Rosenfeld* (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1997), 655–65; M. P. Crosland, *Historical Studies in the Language of Chemistry* (New York: Dover, 1978), 170–71.

matters into which we inquire. Rousseau agrees that our languages are quite defective even with respect to simple nouns such as those used to define biological species. For him, however, the more pressing issue is the relation between the development of languages and the development of societies. Rousseau agrees that our ancestors did not always have speech. He also assumes that our kind may once have lived scattered in the forests, without speech because it was neither necessary nor possible under such circumstances. How, then, can one explain the change from this state of animality to the highly social and intellectual world into which we are all now born?

Like Aristotle, Rousseau recognizes that man alone among the animals possesses speech, or *logos*, through which we can formulate and communicate general ideas in the form of propositions (*OC*, 3:149–50). But speech and general ideas seem to presuppose each other.

> If Men needed speech in order to learn how to think, they needed even more to know how to think in order to discover the art of speech; and even if it were understood how the sounds of the voice came to be taken for the conventional interpreters of our ideas, one would still have to figure out what could have been the interpreters of this convention for ideas that, having no perceptible object, could not be indicated by gesture or by voice, so that it is barely possible to form tenable conjectures about the birth of this Art of communicating one's thoughts, and of establishing intercourse [*un commerce*] between Minds. (147–48)

The problem is that "general ideas can be introduced into the Mind only with the help of words, and the understanding grasps them only by means of propositions.…Therefore one has to state propositions, therefore one has to speak in order to have general ideas" (149–50). How could our ancestors have invented the words needed to grasp general ideas before they grasped those ideas?

Perhaps because he cannot answer this question, Rousseau doubts that Condillac has discovered the key to achieving Bacon's goal of placing all human knowledge on a secure foundation.[12] Rousseau calls the art of communicating one's thoughts, and of establishing intercourse between minds, "a sublime Art which is already so far from its Origin, but which the Philosopher still sees at so prodigious a distance from its perfection that no man is daring enough to guarantee that it will ever be reached" (*OC*, 3:148).

---

[12] This is not only an epistemological disagreement. As Mark Hulliung puts it: "Reworked by Jean-Jacques, Condillac's [*Human Knowledge*] becomes the last thing its author intended, a searing indictment of the culture and politics of modernity." *The Autocritique of Enlightenment: Rousseau and the Philosophes*, rev. ed. (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 2014), 63.

Rousseau concludes this discussion by inviting others to discuss a different chicken-and-egg problem: "Which was more necessary, Society already united for the institution of Languages, or Languages already invented for the establishment of Society?" (*OC*, 3:151). Rousseau does not try to solve that problem here, but his invitation suggests that this question is more tractable than the puzzle about the interdependence of speech and general ideas. He will answer the question about speech and society in his *Essay*, but the conclusion he draws in the *Discourse* is that neither human speech nor human sociability is simply natural. "Whatever may be the case regarding [the origins of speech and of society], it is at least clear, from how little care Nature has taken to bring Men together through mutual needs and to facilitate their use of speech, how little she prepared their Sociability, and how little of her own she has put into everything they have done to establish social bonds" (ibid.).

Smith on Rousseau's *Discourse*

Shortly after the *Discourse on Inequality* was published in 1755, Smith wrote to the new *Edinburgh Review*, which published his letter in the second issue.[13] He urged the journal's contributors not to confine their attention to books published in Great Britain, and he treated the *Encyclopédie*, five volumes of which had by then appeared under the editorship of Diderot and d'Alembert, as an especially important undertaking. Smith mentioned Rousseau among those who had already contributed "valuable works" to that project ("Letter," 246),[14] but his comments about Rousseau focus on the *Discourse*.

According to Smith, this work should be classified with those by a group of English writers in "the contentious and unprosperous" branch of philosophy that includes morals and metaphysics: Hobbes, Locke, Mandeville, Shaftsbury, Butler, Clarke, and Hutcheson ("Letter," 249–50). Smith contends that Rousseau's ideas derived specifically from Mandeville, with this difference: in Rousseau "the principles of [Mandeville] are softened, improved, and embellished, and stript of all that tendency to corruption and licentiousness which has disgraced them in their original author" (250). Rousseau's style, he

---

[13] Adam Smith, "Letter to the Authors of the *Edinburgh Review*," in *Essays on Philosophical Subjects*, ed. W. P. D. Wightman and J. C. Bryce (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1982), 242–54.

[14] Almost all of Rousseau's contributions to the *Encyclopédie* dealt with musical topics. The fifth volume, first published in November 1755, contained his entry dealing with political economy, and Smith's "Letter" was published in March 1756. It is therefore possible that Smith was referring to this entry, rather than to Rousseau's numerous entries on music. Scholars, however, have not ascertained when Smith would have read this entry or indeed any specific volume. See Ryan Patrick Hanley, "Adam Smith and the *Encyclopédie*," *Adam Smith Review* 9 (2017): 219.

says, "tho' laboured and studiously elegant, is every where sufficiently nervous [i.e., vigorous or powerful], and sometimes even sublime and pathetic [i.e., stirring or affecting]." Thanks to this style, "together with a little philosophical chemistry,…the principles and ideas of the profligate Mandeville *seem* in [Rousseau] to have all the purity and sublimity of Plato, and to be only the true spirit of a republican carried a little too far" (251, emphasis added).

Fully a third of the "Letter" is devoted to Rousseau's *Discourse*, which dwarfs the attention given to any other author. Yet Smith refuses to analyze the work because, he falsely claims, it "consists almost entirely of rhetoric and description" (*OC*, 3:251).[15] Instead of addressing Rousseau's analysis, he provides English translations of three passages that celebrate the pleasures and independence of primitive tribal life, and lament the falseness, unhappiness, and lack of true freedom found in modern societies. Smith's own brief commentary in the "Letter" is the entire textual basis for the claim that Smith later sought to refute Rousseau's evaluation of commercial society. Oddly, *Moral Sentiments* includes a lengthy critique of Mandeville, without so much as a word about Rousseau.[16] Why would Smith try to refute or correct Rousseau, as so many modern scholars think he did, without ever confronting Rousseau's arguments directly? This is a serious question that does not have an obvious answer.[17]

Smith's comments in the "Letter" conclude with the following remark: "I shall only add, that the [*Discourse on Inequality*'s] dedication to the republic of Geneva, of which Mr. Rousseau has the honour of being a citizen, is an agreeable, animated, and I believe too, a just panegyric; and expresses that ardent and passionate esteem which it becomes a good citizen to entertain for the government of his country and the character of his countrymen"

---

[15] This claim is patently outlandish, as anyone can confirm by reading the *Discourse* in its entirety. Jeffrey Lomonaco argues that the "Letter" was meant to provoke a sense of rivalry and emulation in Scotland that could lead to the systematization and adequate presentation of a science of man derived from Hume, whom the "Letter" never mentions. "Adam Smith's 'Letter to the Authors of the *Edinburgh Review*,'" *Journal of the History of Ideas* 63 (2002): 659–76. If he is right, might Rousseau be Hume's (and Smith's) most serious rival? Rousseau has plausibly been called the founder of the science of man by the eminent anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss. See "Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Fondateur des sciences de l'homme," in *Jean-Jacques Rousseau* (Neuchatel: La Baconnière, 1962). This encomium would surprise anyone familiar only with what Smith says about the *Discourse on Inequality*.

[16] Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. D. D. Raphael and A. L. Macfie (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1982), 308–14.

[17] Dennis Rasmussen explains the silence about Rousseau in *TMS* by noting that Smith frequently refers to other authors with epithets such as "an agreeable philosopher," rather than by name (*Problems and Promise*, 58–59). *TMS* contains no such references to Rousseau, but it does respond at length and by name to some other authors, including Mandeville (as Rasmussen acknowledges).

(*OC*, 3:254). Thus, Smith treats the *Discourse* itself as an analytically empty rhetorical performance, and concludes, somewhat patronizingly perhaps, by praising Rousseau's rhetorically extravagant expression of patriotism.[18]

Rousseau's enthusiastically hyperbolic dedication is indeed, as Smith says, a "panegyric," unlike the *Discourse* itself, which advances a bold and transgressive philosophic analysis that challenges the traditional view that human beings are political or social animals by nature. Nevertheless, the criteria by which Rousseau purports to evaluate Geneva in the dedication are quite consistent with the political principles he set forth in the *Encyclopédie* (which Smith may have read before composing the "Letter") and in the *Social Contract* several years later.[19] Smith says nothing about those criteria, none of which implies that commercial societies should be rejected in favor of some alternative form of social organization.[20] Indeed, Rousseau repeatedly treated the commercial city of Geneva as a model that approximates the best form of civic life that can be achieved in modern Europe. Nor was he averse to actively promoting commercial development as part of an effort to establish healthy political institutions.[21] Rousseau certainly does insist that all modern commercial societies, including Geneva, compare unfavorably in some important respects with prepolitical tribes, and with Sparta and republican Rome. But

---

[18] Rousseau anticipated that the dedication might be seen by wealthy and powerful people in Geneva as an effort to stir up trouble for the government, rather than as a pious and innocuous expression of patriotic sentiment. See Rousseau to Pastor Jean Perdriau, Nov. 28, 1754, in *Correspondance complète*, ed. R. A. Leigh (Geneva: Institut et Musée Voltaire, 1965–1989), 3:55–60; *Confessions*, book 8, *OC*, 1:395. The dedication can more charitably be read as a friendly admonishment addressed to Rousseau's countrymen, as Rousseau suggested it should be read, but Smith does not consider the possibility that he was subtly pointing to some serious shortcomings in Genevan politics.

[19] For analyses of Rousseau's entry in the *Encyclopédie*, see Clifford Orwin, "Rousseau on the Problem of Invisible Government: The *Discours sur l'économie politique*," in *Educating the Prince: Essays in Honor of Harvey Mansfield*, ed. Mark Blitz and William Kristol (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000) (focusing on the intractable conflict of interest between the government and the governed), and Ryan Patrick Hanley, "Political Economy and Individual Liberty," in *The Challenge of Rousseau*, ed. Eve Grace and Christopher Kelly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 34–56 (focusing on the entry's promotion of individual freedom, especially through the preservation of private property with a minimum degree of government interference). For a discussion of the *Social Contract*'s analysis of the inherent dangers and beneficent potential of government, see Nelson Lund, *Rousseau's Rejuvenation of Political Philosophy: A New Introduction* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 225–37, 242–57.

[20] In the *Social Contract*, Rousseau stresses that the best form of government varies with the circumstances in which a people finds itself. Bk. 3, chaps. 3, 9, *OC*, 3:403, 419.

[21] See *Considerations on the Government of Poland and Its Projected Reformation* (hereafter *Government of Poland*), chap. 13, *OC*, 3:1027 (recommending that Poland give political preferences to cities where competent administration had led to the flourishing of "commerce, industry, and the arts").

he never suggests that any of these lost ways of life could be reestablished in modern Europe.

Rather than investigate the relation between Rousseau's florid dedicatory celebration of Geneva and his pointed critique of civilization itself in the text, Smith stresses what he seems to regard as Rousseau's tarted-up rendition of Mandeville's licentious system. Smith never explains what he means by the "philosophical chemistry" that supposedly helps Rousseau to conjure an illusion of Platonic purity and sublimity from the ideas of the immoral Mandeville.[22] Nor does he explain what he means by the reference, at once ambiguous and vague, to "the true spirit of a republican carried a little too far."[23] One might justly say of Smith's commentary on Rousseau what he falsely says about the *Discourse on Inequality*: that it "consists almost entirely of rhetoric and description" ("Letter," 251).

Ironically, Smith's own juxtaposition of Rousseau and Mandeville appears to involve some dubious *rhetorical* chemistry. He points out that both authors deny that there is in man a powerful instinct that drives him to seek society with other humans for its own sake. He also says that Mandeville imagines that the misery of man's original state drove people into society, whereas Rousseau maintains that "some unfortunate accidents having given birth to the unnatural passions of ambition and the vain desire of superiority, to which he had before been a stranger, produced the same fatal effect" ("Letter," 250). Although this characterization does not capture the complexity of Rousseau's account of the long road to civil society, Smith has identified an important difference between the accounts of nature in Rousseau and Mandeville. But Rousseau's claim about the unnatural basis of the need for political rule is not a mere cosmetic difference produced by a seductive blend of philosophical chemistry and edifying rhetorical devices.

---

[22] Dennis Rasmussen argues that Rousseau's theory of humanity's natural goodness is the philosophical chemistry to which Smith refers. "Rousseau's 'Philosophical Chemistry' and the Foundations of Adam Smith's Thought," *History of Political Thought* 27, no. 1 (2006): 632–33. Similarly, Charles L. Griswold suggests that in Rousseau "one sense of self-love (*amour de soi*) is purified, so to speak, of Mandevillian associations." *Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Adam Smith: A Philosophical Encounter* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 35. These suggestions are not implausible, but Smith unquestionably left his readers guessing.

[23] Rasmussen interprets this phrase as an expression of Smith's sympathy with Rousseau's critique of commercial society. Dennis C. Rasmussen, "Smith, Rousseau and the True Spirit of a Republican," in Paganelli, Rasmussen, and Smith, *Adam Smith and Rousseau*, 241–59. That is a possible interpretation, but Rasmussen himself acknowledges that it is not obviously correct (ibid., 241–42). I would add that Smith discouraged this interpretation when he suggested that the appeal of the passages he quotes from the *Discourse* arises from Rousseau's misleadingly beautiful picture of savage life, rather than from a recognition of the truth in his bleak description of civilized life.

A century before Darwin, Rousseau argued that we are descended from speechless animals that may have resembled the great apes about which traveling Europeans had reported: we are manifestly distinguished by nature from other animals by our capacity to acquire speech, and thus to become civilized. But our cultural evolution, stimulated by chance events in our environment, has given us a constellation of needs and desires that conflict in many ways with our fundamental ape nature. Human social institutions can manage those conflicts more or less well, but can never eliminate them. All these institutions are fundamentally artificial and forever imperfect. Whatever the strengths and weaknesses of Rousseau's proto-Darwinian account may be, it is not Mandeville dressed up to look like Plato.

Rather than respond seriously to Rousseau's prescient account of human evolution, Smith attributes its appeal to a childish taste for imagining the indolent pleasures of pastoral life ("Letter," 251).[24] Perhaps he did not think a letter about the editorial policies of an obscure new journal was an appropriate forum for a philosophic debate with Rousseau (or with any of the other thinkers on whom the "Letter" passes summary judgment). Fair enough. But we should at least wonder whether Smith genuinely believed that Rousseau is little more than a silver-tongued Mandeville.

Smith on the Origin of Languages

In 1761, two years after *Moral Sentiments* appeared, a short-lived journal called *The Philological Miscellany* published Smith's "First Formation." Beginning in 1767, Smith appended the essay, without explanation and with slightly different titles, to the third and every subsequent edition of *TMS*.

Smith's essay has three parts. First, a conjectural history of the order in which the parts of speech would have been invented. Second, an account of the transitions that grammatically inflected languages have undergone when large numbers of people needed to communicate on a regular basis in tongues they did not acquire in childhood. Third, an assessment of what is lost from the richness of a language when it makes such a transition.

The first section of "First Formation" contains the following reference to Rousseau's discussion of the origin of languages in the *Discourse on Inequality*:

---

[24] On Rousseau's prescience, see, e.g., Robert Wokler, "Perfectible Apes in Decadent Cultures: Rousseau's Anthropology Revisited," *Dædalus* 107, no. 3 (1978): 107–34; Lund, *Rousseau's Rejuvenation*, 39–40, 52–60.

> It is this application of the name of an individual to a great multitude of objects, whose resemblance *naturally* recalls the idea of that individual, and of the name which expresses it, that seems originally to have given occasion to the formation of those classes and assortments, which, in the schools, are called genera and species, and of which the ingenious and eloquent M. Rousseau of Geneva* finds himself so much at a loss to account for the origin. What constitutes a species is merely a number of objects, bearing a certain degree of resemblance to one another, and on that account denominated by a single appellation, which may be applied to express any one of them. (204–5, emphasis added)

The footnote corresponding to the asterisk cites a specific passage in the *Discourse*. In that passage, Rousseau makes the same point with which Smith opens "First Formation": that the first substantive words must have been proper names. Rousseau then says:

> But when, by means that I do not understand [*conçois*], our new Grammarians began to extend their ideas, and to generalize their words, the ignorance of the Inventors must have [page break here in the edition cited by Smith] subjected this method to very narrow limits; and as they had at first multiplied the names of individuals too much, for lack of knowing the genera and species, they afterward made too few species and genera, for lack of having considered the Beings in all their differences. (*OC*, 3:150)

Smith does not explain how people first began to generalize their words; he just assumes that they did it "naturally." How, exactly, did people who lacked speech identify the shared and distinguishing characteristics of objects and then determine which were relevant to the task of giving them shared or different names? This is a very hard question, which Smith makes no effort to address,[25] although (or perhaps because) he was well aware of its difficulty.[26] The use of the word "naturally" as an explanation is pervasive in "First Formation," reflecting Smith's assumption that human beings have always been fundamentally similar to the people of our own time, even before they had conventional languages. This is the most important assumption that

---

[25] See James Otteson, "Adam Smith's First Market: The Development of Language," *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 19 (2002): 75–77; James Otteson, *Adam Smith's Marketplace of Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 272–73; Stephen K. Land, "Adam Smith's 'Considerations concerning the First Formation of Languages,'" *Journal of the History of Ideas* 38 (1977): 680.

[26] Elsewhere, Smith acknowledges that "to explain the nature, and to account for the origin of general Ideas, is, even to this day, the greatest difficulty in abstract philosophy." "The Principles which Lead and Direct Philosophical Enquiries; Illustrated by the History of the Ancient Logics and Metaphysics" (hereafter "Ancient Logics"), in *Essays on Philosophical Subjects*, 124.

Rousseau refuses to make in the *Discourse*, and Smith does not attempt (here or in the "Letter") to defend the assumption he makes.

Smith's supercilious comment obscures Rousseau's main point, namely, that the process of generalization must have been one of trial and error because it is extremely difficult to ascertain the boundaries that should *appropriately* be assigned between the various classes of beings. The obscurity Smith creates is heightened by the fact that the specific pages from Rousseau that he cites stop part way through the paragraph I quoted above (after "the ignorance of the Inventors must have"). This would discourage a reader who looks up the reference from discovering why Smith's answer does not respond to Rousseau's question.

In the next paragraph, Smith assumes without explanation that most objects came to be "arranged under their proper classes and assortments" ("First Formation," 205). By "proper," perhaps he means nothing more than "particular" or "distinctive," rather than "appropriate." But the ambiguity once again draws the reader's attention away from what Rousseau stresses, and what Smith acknowledges elsewhere: that even the basic task of sorting natural beings, such as living organisms, into their appropriate classes is a task that has never been accomplished.[27] Smith's assumption that prelinguistic humans recognized "natural kinds" begs the question posed by Rousseau.[28]

Smith's allusion to the *Discourse* also conceals the aporia toward which Rousseau's argument is building: "Which was more necessary, Society already united for the institution of Languages, or Languages already invented for the establishment of Society?" (*OC*, 3:151). Nowhere does Smith address that question. He appears to maintain that speech originates outside society, as when two prelinguistic individuals try to make their mutual wants intelligible ("First Formation," 203–4), but he does not explain how such a pair could either reenter society or found their own.[29] Instead, Smith is content to assume that once both speech and society exist, they develop alongside each other. That is virtually self-evident, but it does not answer Rousseau's question about their origins. It is very hard to believe that Smith was unaware

[27] See "The Principles Which Lead and Direct Philosophical Enquiries; Illustrated by the History of Astronomy" (hereafter "History of Astronomy"), in *Essays on Philosophical Subjects*, 38.

[28] See Marcelo Dascal, "Adam Smith's Theory of Language," in *The Cambridge Companion to Adam Smith*, ed. Knud Haakonssen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 89.

[29] See Eric Schliesser, *Adam Smith: Systematic Philosopher and Public Thinker* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 43.

of this fact, or of the fact that he was evading Rousseau's aporia about the genesis of general ideas.

Smith's seemingly incidental comment about the *Discourse on Inequality* reflects a fundamental difference between his reasons for investigating the origin of languages and Rousseau's. Condillac, we recall, was primarily interested in finding a general method for establishing the truth, which would advance the Baconian project of mastering nature for the relief of man's estate. Rousseau is primarily interested in raising radical questions about human nature and human history, questions that do not presuppose the worthiness of the Baconian project. Smith's own goal is harder to pin down, but it is manifestly much more modest than Condillac's or Rousseau's.

The first section of "First Formation" argues that language would have developed through a process of abstraction. Thus, proper nouns would have been among the first words invented, and then naturally extended to similar objects, just as very young children are apt to call any adult Father or Mother. Adjectives would have undergone a similar process. Adjectives are inherently more abstract than nouns, and would have been adopted only after people recognized that green trees and green grass share a common characteristic, as do a dead tree and a dead animal. Smith elaborates this logic all the way through the most abstract or metaphysical words, such as prepositions, numerals, and the first-person singular pronoun. Similarly, he argues that the earliest verbs would have been impersonal, like *pluit* (it rains), while later usages, like *imber decidit* (the rain falls), resulted from artificially abstracting two parts from what is in fact a single event. In an arresting remark, Smith says that this division of the event "is the effect of the imperfection of language" ("First Formation," 216).

An important causal claim in this section of "First Formation" is that the development of languages would have been shaped by a natural love of analogy and similarity of sound. Thus, for example, declensions would have arisen before prepositions were invented, and adjectives would have been given endings copied from the nouns that they modified, "chiefly for the sake of a certain similarity of sound, of a certain species of rhyme, which is *naturally* so very agreeable to the human ear" (208–9, emphasis added). He offers the same kind of explanation for the conjugations of verbs, and for "by far the greater part of the rules of grammar" (211).

These remarks about the imperfection of language and about the putatively natural love for certain kinds of rhyme and analogy may help to explain

why Smith says so little about the very earliest steps toward the establishment of conventional languages. Condillac had gone into great detail about the shift from the natural languages of gesture and instinctive sounds to conventional speech. For his part, Rousseau emphasized the extreme difficulty of accounting for that shift. Smith, however, does not distinguish between natural and conventional languages. The significance of this omission is suggested when Smith says that verbs must have been coeval with the first attempts toward the formation of language. Why? "No affirmation can be expressed without the assistance of some verb. We never speak but in order to express our opinion that something either is or is not" ("First Formation," 215).

Smith may be right about the order in which various parts of speech came to be used, but is his explanation sound? It is not. On the contrary, it is plainly mistaken, as he well knew. He no doubt puts his finger on the distinctively human ability to state propositions through the use of compositional language. But expressing opinions is not the only reason we speak, as Smith himself explained in the very book to which "First Formation" was appended.[30] Consider just two examples: "Stay away from me!" and "Won't you join me?" Commands, requests, and questions are not expressions of opinion, and they are frequently easy to convey without the use of conventional language. Infants and nonhuman animals do it all the time. But they can also be expressed verbally, using compositional language. By falsely asserting that speech *only* does what only speech can do, Smith draws our attention away from questions about the nature of prelinguistic communication and about its relation to what he calls the first attempts toward the formation of language.

In the second section of his essay, Smith considers the changes that fully developed languages undergo when linguistically differentiated groups mingle through migration or conquest. He notes that highly inflected tongues, which most or all ancient languages seem to be, are very difficult to master unless one learns them as a child. Faced with a need to communicate across linguistic cultures, people will have strong incentives to use a few prepositions and auxiliary verbs in place of a multitude of inflected forms.[31] Thus, there is an inverse relationship between the complexity of a language's declensions and conjugations on one hand, and the complexity of its composition, on the

---

[30] See *TMS*, 7.4.25, 336. This blatant contradiction may explain why there is no reference to "First Formation" in the editions of *TMS* in which it was included. This is contrary to the standard practice, followed by Smith himself in the *Wealth of Nations*, of referring to an appendix at the appropriate point in the text.

[31] Subsequent research in linguistics has produced evidence consistent with Smith's analysis. See David M. Levy, "Adam Smith's Rational Choice Linguistics," *Economic Inquiry* 35 (1997): 672–78.

other ("First Formation," 221–22). Smith analogizes the process of linguistic simplification to the process by which mechanical engines are improved as people figure out how to use fewer wheels (223–24).

Increasing the efficiency of machines in this way constitutes an unqualified gain. One might think the same about language, for simplifying the elements of a language makes it easier for adults to learn, and thus more useful to native and nonnative speakers alike. On the contrary, Smith says, the loss of inflections renders a tongue "more and more imperfect, and less proper for many of the purposes of language" (224). But Smith does not deny that the simplification of its elements enhances the efficiency of a language in serving its primary purpose, as it does in the case of a machine.[32]

In the final section of "First Formation," Smith elaborates on his claim that language has multiple and conflicting purposes. First, the need to rely on prepositions and auxiliary verbs renders discourse more prolix, and thus less elegant. Second, the loss of grammatical inflections renders speech less agreeable to the ear. Third, the absence of inflection makes the meaning of a sentence depend on word order, creating a straitjacket that limits the beauty that can be achieved in speech or writing.

Thus, Smith's concluding thoughts about the evolution of languages are entirely devoted to considerations of what might be called aesthetic utility. Unfortunately, he does not explain exactly why or to what extent such a loss of beauty and elegance is important. Nor does he suggest that we would on balance be better off if the changes he describes had not occurred. Instead, he ends with another reference to efficiency, pointing out that versification and the creation of agreeable prose structures "must to [the ancients] have been acquirable with much more ease, and to much greater perfection, than it can be to those whose expression is constantly confined by the prolixness, constraint, and monotony of modern languages" (226).

In the book to which Smith appended "First Formation," he suggests that a natural desire to persuade and direct other people may be "the instinct upon which is founded the faculty of speech" (*TMS*, 7.4.25, 336). That explanation for

---

[32] Elsewhere, Smith proposes the same analogy between machines and another kind of human invention, namely, scientific systems, without identifying any losses stemming from the simplification of such systems ("History of Astronomy," 66). To the extent that one takes these analogies seriously, one begins to suspect that Smith thinks the practical effects of language and science are more important than their contribution to the pursuit of the truth. Might he think the same about what he calls the "contentious and unprosperous" branch of philosophy that investigates morals and metaphysics? See "Letter," 249.

the origin of languages is fundamentally different from the account in "First Formation," and it is one that he conspicuously does not consider here (and does not pursue in *TMS*). Nor does he suggest that the evolution of modern languages has made them less useful for the purposes of directing and persuading. As we will see, Rousseau vigorously investigated both possibilities.

Rousseau's *Essay on the Origin of Languages*

Rousseau's brief and conspicuously inconclusive discussion of the origin of languages in the *Discourse on Inequality* is part of an unsettling argument that civilization has imposed costs on mankind that outweigh the gains. But he never suggests that the acquisition of speech has been a similarly bad bargain. On the contrary, the form of tribal society in which he sees the optimal combination of advantages and disadvantages is populated by people with fully developed languages (*OC*, 3:171). The *Discourse* does not discuss the evolution of languages after different linguistic communities began to interact with one another (the focus of "First Formation"), but Rousseau does take up that topic in his *Essay on the Origin of Languages*.[33] There we find an analysis that could almost have been an elaboration of the cryptic comment in *Moral Sentiments* about the instinct to direct and persuade other people.

Unlike the *Discourse*, the *Essay* does not defend the provocative thesis that human beings are asocial by nature in the sense that they could and may have lived for eons without durable social bonds.[34] Instead, it begins with

---

[33] The *Essay* appears to have originated from a draft note meant for inclusion in the *Discourse on Inequality*, combined with a fragment on the origin of melody. See John T. Scott, "Rousseau and the Melodious Language of Music," *Journal of Politics* 59, no. 3 (1997): 805n3.

[34] Rousseau does not assert that our ancestors ever did live this way, and he acknowledges that they may not have done so. But he claims that they could and may have done so. See Lund, *Rousseau's Rejuvenation*, 15 and n9, 56 and n32, 74n62; Christopher Kelly, "Discourse on the Origin of Inequality," in *The Rousseauian Mind*, ed. Eve Grace and Christopher Kelly (London: Routledge, 2019), 166–69. Our cousins the orangutans can and in some places do live without durable social bonds, although they easily develop complex social relations with their own kind and with human beings when they have an occasion to do so. Some of them can also learn and make use of fairly large human vocabularies, though none has proved able to learn a human language. The possibility that some of our human ancestors lived much like orangutans has not been ruled out by modern science. See Lund, *Rousseau's Rejuvenation*, 52–60.

I disagree with Victor Gourevitch's conclusion that "the isolated, self-sufficient, and speechless beings of Part I of the *Discourse* are perhaps most accurately characterized as premises. On the premise of such beings, it is utterly impossible to conceive of how language could have arisen." "Rousseau's Pure State of Nature," *Interpretation* 16, no. 1 (1988): 53. I think he is right to argue that Rousseau does not believe that speech (i.e., the kind of compositional language that requires an understanding of general ideas) could be invented or instituted in a way that would constitute an "absolute beginning" (ibid., 53–55). But the *Discourse* and the *Essay*, taken together, suggest how speech might have gradually "arisen" after isolated and therefore speechless beings, who were nonetheless capable of speech,

the traditional and intuitive assumption that humans are distinguished from other animals by the faculty of speech, which is the first social institution (chap. 1, *OC*, 5:375). "Provided only that there is some means of communication between himself and his kind by which one [man] can act and the other sense, they will succeed eventually in communicating to one another all the ideas they have" (379). This is consistent with the *Discourse*, which acknowledged that nature made an indispensable contribution to human sociability and the establishment of social bonds (*OC*, 3:142, 151). Responding to a critic of the *Discourse*, Rousseau explained that the state of society "follows from the nature of the human race, not immediately as you say, but solely, as I have proved, with the help of certain external circumstances which could have existed or not existed, or could at least have arisen sooner or later, and consequently accelerated or retarded the progression."[35]

Much of what Rousseau says in the *Essay* about the origin of languages tracks elements of Condillac's conjectural history. Both agree that the most primitive forms of communication must have arisen from the kind of natural languages we observe in human infants and many other animals. Gestures and imitative sounds would have provided the natural basis for conventional signs, which must have somehow progressed from concrete expressions, such as proper nouns and impersonal verbs, to increasingly abstract concepts.[36] From the beginning, conventional languages would have reflected mistaken assumptions about the world, which were and are often difficult to correct.

Nevertheless, Rousseau announces that he has something new to contribute. "It would then seem that the needs dictated the first gestures and

---

developed social relations that called forth the exercise of this faculty. Even in the *Discourse*, Rousseau says only that it is "barely" possible to form tenable conjectures about the birth of speech and that the impossibility of languages having "arisen and been established" by purely human means had "almost" been demonstrated. *OC*, 3:147–48, 151.

I also disagree with Marc F. Plattner, who argues that Rousseau "regarded the state of nature described in the [*Discourse on Inequality*] as approximating a factual, historical account." *Rousseau's State of Nature: An Interpretation of the Discourse on Inequality* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1979), 25. Although Rousseau never made such an assertion, Plattner believes that Rousseau's speculation that there might still be speechless, ape-like people living in the primitive state of nature provides "decisive evidence" for this interpretation (ibid.). This inference is mistaken. The possibility that speechless humans *might* today be living in the condition described by Rousseau as the primitive state of nature implies only that he thought such a description *might* approximate "a factual, historical account."

35   "Letter to Philopolis," *OC*, 3:232.

36   Marcelo Dascal judges the *Essay* a failure, on Rousseau's own terms, because it bypasses the *Discourse*'s puzzle about the precise relation between the origins of speech and general ideas. "*Aporia* and *Theoria*: Rousseau on Language and Thought," *Revue internationale de philosophie*, no. 124/125 (1978): 229–33. This judgment would be easier to accept if Rousseau had purported to present what Dascal would consider an adequate theory, or if Dascal had shown how Rousseau could have done so.

the passions drew forth the first articulate vocalizations [*les prémiéres voix*]. Following the track of the facts with these distinctions in mind, perhaps one should reason about the origin of languages quite otherwise than has been done until now" (chap. 2, *OC*, 5:380).[37] These distinctions—between physical needs and moral needs (or passions) and between gestures and articulate vocalizations—provide one of the organizing principles of the *Essay*. The other principal element in the analysis is the interaction between needs and passions on one hand and the physical environment on the other.

Rousseau begins with the assumption, subsequently confirmed by modern science, that mankind originated in a warm climate, and he argues that people would have been dispersed into isolated family groups so long as they remained where such groups could independently gather enough food to get along.[38] External forces, such as a changing climate, which drove people into more straitened circumstances, would have forced them to find new ways of subsisting. The acquisition of new knowledge would have served as both a precondition and an incentive for new kinds of human interaction in which conventional languages would be useful. Thus, Rousseau presents what we can call an economic explanation for the origin of conventional languages, which parallels at a deeper level Smith's account of the transformation of inflected languages. Commerce is both a cause and an effect of the uniquely powerful human ability to learn and to communicate what one knows.[39]

---

[37] On Rousseau's originality and foresight, see Edouard Claparède, "Rousseau et l'origine du langage," *Annales de la Société Jean-Jacques Rousseau* 24 (1935): 95–119. In what might be taken as a response to Dascal's claim (see previous footnote) that the *Essay* is a failure on Rousseau's own terms, Thomas Robert argues that Rousseau departed fundamentally from Condillac by rejecting the applicability of his analytic method to linguistics. Rousseau does indeed "bypass" the apparently insoluble aporia of the *Discourse* by attributing the source of articulate vocalizations to moral passions, thus avoiding the assumption that general ideas preceded language. Like Darwin and unlike Condillac, Robert suggests, Rousseau in effect treats linguistics as a social science rather than as a natural science. See "L'origine du langage de l'animal humain: Rousseau, Darwin, Saussure," *Cahiers Ferdinand de Saussure* 67 (2014): 203–12.

[38] Although Rousseau could not have known it, the extant gorillas of central Africa (where modern science tells us that the family of human animals originated) show that this would have been possible. For a discussion of the three stages of Rousseau's conjectural state of nature, which draws on modern discoveries about our primate cousins, see Lund, *Rousseau's Rejuvenation*, 52–60.

[39] The *Discourse* calls this faculty "perfectibility," using a term that Rousseau seems to have introduced into discussions of human nature (see *OC*, 3:142; Wokler, "Perfectible Apes in Decadent Cultures," 127). Victor Gourevitch argues, and I agree, that this describes the state of human beings, from the beginning to the present, as one of "determinate potentialities": faculties that were once dormant develop in the same order everywhere, not by nature to be sure, but according to nature. Gourevitch, "On Strauss on Rousseau," in Grace and Kelly, *The Challenge of Rousseau*, 153–54. In Jean Starobinski's formulation: "Like the establishment of society, language is a late effect of a primitive faculty: it is the result of a delayed blossoming. Natural in its origin, it becomes an anti-nature. The dangerous privilege of man is to have in his own nature the source of powers by which he will

Rousseau's account differs significantly from Smith's (and Condillac's). He begins with a distinction between two different kinds of passion. Everyone has physical needs that must be satisfied in order to survive. In the terminology of the *Discourse*, the fundamental natural passion of self-love (*amour de soi*) serves these needs by leading us to seek food, drink, and protection from threats in the environment. But there are also passions for goods that individuals do not need for survival, which he calls moral needs. These are the social passions, which are ultimately rooted in both self-love and in what the *Discourse* calls natural pity or commiseration. Whereas the *Discourse* argued that self-love would have been the overwhelmingly dominant passion in "nascent man" at the very earliest stage of the state of nature, Rousseau gives the emergent social passions a more prominent place in the *Essay*'s conjectural history.

To see why, consider what might have happened if physical needs had been the only stimulus for communication. Where there was sufficient food easily available, people would naturally have dispersed in order to gather it, without requiring contact with other people in order to survive. Faced with scarcity, it would be rational to pursue survival through cooperation, and it would be possible in principle to make use of conventional languages consisting entirely of visible signs, starting with simple gestures, progressing through something like the sign languages designed for the deaf, and culminating with writing. Rousseau maintains that such languages could have been used to establish laws, rulers, arts, commercial relations, and almost everything else that we do with the help of speech (*Essay*, chap. 1, *OC*, 5:378). This did not happen because human beings began by feeling (*sentir*) rather than by reasoning (*Essay*, chap. 2, 5:380; *Discourse*, *OC*, 3:142–43).[40] It must have been moral needs—such as the desire to "move a young heart or repulse an unjust aggressor"—that led people to transform instinctive cries into rudimentary conventions from which languages could develop (*Essay*, chap. 2, *OC*, 5:380–81). Physical needs are pretty much the same for all people at all times, but different social passions become prominent in different circumstances, a fact that Rousseau thinks had significant effects on the origin of languages.

---

oppose his nature and Nature itself." Starobinski, "Rousseau et l'origine des langues," in *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: La transparence et l'obstacle* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), 357–58. See also Thomas Robert, "L'anthropologie rousseauiste et l'origine du langage," *Annales de la Société Jean-Jacques Rousseau* 53 (2018): 292–93 (arguing that human perfectibility is "always already in action").

40 Although the most primitive feelings would have been (and are) sensations or perceptions, languages developed from the expression of sentiments. For a brief discussion, see Terence Marshall, "Epistemology and Political Perception in the Case of Rousseau," in Grace and Kelly, *The Challenge of Rousseau*, 92.

Rousseau distinguishes two types of physical environment, which he broadly characterizes as the South and the North.[41] By the South, he means places in which humans had reasons to congregate but in which it would not be especially difficult to survive. An example would be semi-arid climes in which people had regular contact with significant numbers of other people at water sources. These meetings would not provide much fuel for economic competition in the narrow sense of the term. But they would provoke a desire to attract a specific mate in circumstances where multiple potential mates, and potential rivals, were close at hand. This is the precondition for sexual jealousy, and it is a short step from that passion to the desire to attract admiration and respect more generally. This desire, which the *Discourse* calls *amour-propre*, ultimately drives much of civilized life. Early languages in the South would have been shaped in large part by the need to persuade.

The North comprised environments where the climate was harsher and the earth more niggardly. In these places, economic incentives would have been more important, and early languages would have been marked more by clarity than by charm. Clarity is what one needs above all to conduct the kind of business in which your material interests are at stake, such as cooperating to stave off starvation or warning someone not to touch the food you have acquired. Only in a farce would someone use the same terms to attempt a seduction and to negotiate a prenuptial agreement. Rousseau memorably conveys his central point when he says that the first word in the South would have been *aimez-moi* (love me), and in the North *aidez-moi* (assist me) (*Essay*, chap. 10, 408).[42] Both

---

[41] These are not precise geographical terms, let alone references to the Northern and Southern Hemispheres, as Mira Morgenstern mistakenly asserts. See *Rousseau and the Politics of Ambiguity: Self, Culture, and Society* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), 17–20. For a discussion of the subtlety with which Rousseau distinguishes the North and the South, and qualifies that distinction, see Michael Davis, *The Music of Reason: Rousseau, Nietzsche, Plato* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020), 26–31, 46–47.

[42] In the *Discourse on Inequality*, Rousseau says that men "at first gave to each word the sense of an entire proposition [*proposition*]" (*OC*, 3:149). Richard L. Velkley notes that this implies that humans were thinking "propositionally" before they had words for propositions, and seems to argue that this "completely undercuts" what Rousseau says shortly thereafter about the necessary relationship between speech and general ideas. *Being after Rousseau: Philosophy and Culture in Question* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 47, 166n36. It is true that the *Discourse* leaves the reader wondering how one could think "propositionally" without general ideas. The *Essay*'s examples of *aidez-moi* and *aimez-moi* help to clarify the matter by calling attention to a kind of proposition that does not presuppose general ideas. Although we can and frequently do use the highly abstract first-person pronoun when articulating such proposals (or "propositions" as we often call them in both French and English), the thoughts they express do not presuppose general ideas. In fact, we can convey the same propositions by saying in a certain tone of voice: "Help!" or "Kiss?" Rousseau's point in the passages to which Velkley refers is that even the considerable "exertion of genius" (*OC*, 3:149) by which humans must have first distinguished nouns and verbs does not by itself explain how general ideas and

propositions, or proposals, may be in the imperative mood grammatically, but the human moods they reflect have very different sources.[43]

Rousseau sees residual effects of these different origins in modern languages. Like Smith, he recognizes that languages change when linguistically distinct populations come into sustained contact with each other (*Essay*, chap. 5, 384). But despite such changes, he maintains, modern languages still reflect their disparate origins: "French, English, German are the private languages of men who assist one another, who reason with one another in cold blood, or of quick-tempered people who get angry; but the ministers of the Gods proclaiming the sacred mysteries, sages giving laws to peoples, chiefs leading the multitude, must speak Arabic or Persian" (*Essay*, chap. 11, 409, footnote omitted). These are obviously differences of degree, since all languages can be used both to reason and to persuade without reasoning. But they can help us understand Rousseau's most fundamental divergence from the mode of analysis undertaken by Smith.

Rousseau contends that speech, poetry, and music were originally the same thing, especially in the South where the earliest spoken languages would probably have arisen. Evidence from modern science is consistent with this claim,[44] and we can observe a legacy of that phenomenon in the tonally inflected languages that are still spoken by many people. As a language became increasingly well adapted to reasoning with complex and abstract ideas, the importance of the musical and persuasive elements in speech would have receded. Over a long period of time, and especially in the North, speech and music would eventually have become separated (*Essay*, chap. 19). Once this happens, it becomes easy to assume, as Smith does, that it would be unnatural to sing in order to persuade or to express any very serious purpose.[45] But it was not always so, Rousseau believes.

---

abstract thought eventually emerged. The *Discourse* does not answer that question, but I think Velkey is mistaken to say that the paragraph at *OC*, 3:150–51 depicts the earliest humans as "simply subhuman" (*Being after Rousseau*, 166n36). Rather, Rousseau treats these animals as undeveloped men, which he confirms a few pages later when he says that even after "the species was already old,…man still remained a child" (*OC*, 3:160), and again when he refers to the budding development of "nascent man" (164–65).

[43] Although Rousseau appears to give the South a privileged place in his account, this is largely a matter of tone and emphasis. This point is made in somewhat different ways in Victor Gourevitch, "'The First Times' in Rousseau's *Essay on the Origin of Languages*," *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* 11, no. 2 (2014): 132–36, and in Lund, *Rousseau's Rejuvenation*, 74–77.

[44] For evidence from modern science supporting Rousseau's thesis, see Lund, *Rousseau's Rejuvenation*, 79–88.

[45] "Of the Nature of that Imitation Which Takes Place in What Are Called the Imitative Arts,"

According to the *Discourse*, primitive tribal life presents a healthy mean between the indolence of the most ancient way of life and the petulant activity of civilized man's *amour-propre* (*OC*, 3:171). The *Essay* identifies a stage of linguistic development, which occurs at a different point in social development, marked by an optimal blend of intellectual power and persuasive musicality. In Europe, that blend can be found in Homer.[46] Ancient Greek is a Southern language in Rousseau's terminology, and he doubts that Homer knew how to write. Even after writing came to the Greeks, probably through trade with the Phoenicians, Greek remained much more musical and expressive than Northern languages. But it had already begun to lose those qualities: "It was when Greece began to abound in books and written poetry that all the charm of Homer's came to be felt by comparison. The other Poets wrote, Homer alone had sung, and these divine songs ceased to be listened to with rapture only when Europe was covered with barbarians who presumed to judge what they could not experience [*sentir*]" (*Essay*, chap. 6, *OC*, 5:390). Rousseau is well aware that this loss resulted from an important gain in the power of the language. The progress of reasoning led to the perfection of grammatical rules and concomitantly to musical rules involving the calculation of intervals.[47] Gradually, delicacy of inflection gave way to increased clarity of expression. "Once Greece was filled with Sophists and Philosophers it no longer had celebrated poets or musicians. In cultivating the art of convincing, that of stirring [an audience] was lost. Plato himself, jealous of Homer and Euripides, decried the one and could not imitate the other" (chap. 19, 425). This may be hyperbole,[48] but only Homer has become known, almost universally and beginning no later than with Plato, as the preeminent teacher of the Greeks. Rousseau's serious point is that Homer's unmatched cultural influence depended on a linguistic tool that was simultaneously musical and capable of intellectual depth and subtlety.

Rousseau does not imagine that we could recreate for ourselves the linguistic peak of Homer's Greek, any more than we can return to the tribal form of society found in what he calls "the World in the prime of its youth" (*Discourse*, *OC*, 3:171). Rousseau gives less attention than Smith to the

---

(hereafter "Imitative Arts"), in *Essays on Philosophical Subjects*, 190–91.

[46] Neither Homer nor the characters in his epics lived in the kind of prepolitical tribal societies that the *Discourse* treats as the optimal stage of social development.

[47] Like language, music depends for its effects on conventions that vary among societies. See, e.g., Julia Simon, "Listening in Rousseau's Auditory World," in *Rousseau and the Dilemmas of Modernity*, ed. Mark Hulliung (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 2016), 121–42.

[48] See Lund, *Rousseau's Rejuvenation*, 79 and n68.

improvements, in terms of linguistic efficiency, that have come about after the separation of music and speech. Instead, we find an air of sad resignation in the *Essay*, as in the *Discourse*. For example, just after concluding that the separation of music and speech eventually deprived music of the moral effects it had produced when it "was doubly the voice of nature" (*Essay*, chap. 19, *OC*, 5:427), Rousseau cautions: "These progressions are neither fortuitous nor arbitrary, they are due to the vicissitudes of things. Languages are naturally formed according to men's needs; they change and deteriorate as these same needs change" (chap. 20, *OC*, 5:428). What follows is another provocative claim: that the deterioration of European societies is reflected in languages that are not conducive to political freedom because they are ill-suited to effective public oratory. But Rousseau was not quite as fatalistic as he sometimes sounds. If one were familiar only with his *Essay*, one might not guess that Rousseau published the most popular novel of the eighteenth century, a work so beautiful and influential that it transformed him from a celebrated author into the object of a cult.[49] Or that he accepted a request to help promote political freedom in the rather unpromising setting of eighteenth-century Poland.[50] Or that he passionately (and successfully) fought to stop Geneva from establishing a theater, which he thought would prove to be a dangerously attractive engine of corruption.[51]

Rousseau's most philosophic works, which include the *Discourse on Inequality* and the *Essay*, do not propose political reformations, let alone political revolutions. But we know that he was deeply interested in performing the most important function of a legislator: promoting the health of "*mœurs*, of customs, and above all of opinion," on which the success of all other laws depends.[52] Rousseau's reflections on the origin of languages are

---

[49] See Maurice Cranston, *The Noble Savage: Jean-Jacques Rousseau, 1754–1762* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 247; Christopher Kelly, *Rousseau as Author: Consecrating One's Life to the Truth* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 140; Nelson Lund, "A Woman's Laws and a Man's: Eros and Thumos in Rousseau's *Julie, or The New Heloise* (1761) and *The Deer Hunter* (1978)," *Interpretation* 42, no. 3 (2016): 367–436.

[50] See Rousseau, *Government of Poland*; Maurice Cranston, *The Solitary Self: Jean-Jacques Rousseau in Exile and Adversity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 177; Lund, *Rousseau's Rejuvenation*, 253–57.

[51] See Cranston, *The Noble Savage*, 137, 148; Kelly, *Rousseau as Author*, 127–33; Lund, *Rousseau's Rejuvenation*, 115–17. Smith was probably familiar with the arguments Rousseau made against those who urged Geneva to introduce this form of entertainment into the city. For an analysis that stresses the similarities between Rousseau's views and those later adopted by Smith, see Ryan Patrick Hanley, "From Geneva to Glasgow: Rousseau and Adam Smith on the Theater and Commercial Society," *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture* 35 (2006): 177–202.

[52] *Social Contract*, bk. 2, chap. 12, *OC*, 3:394. The word *mœurs* refers to customs or habits that have

linked to that goal because they illuminate the tensions between our uniquely human capacity for abstract reasoning and the moral sentiments on which human social life depends.[53] Misunderstanding that tension, he seems to suggest, will handicap an author who aims to improve the moral sentiments that we all inevitably experience.

Smith and Rousseau on Musical Imitation

In Smith's account, languages evolve as individuals cooperate in satisfying their desires by inventing increasingly abstract and complex conventions, and then modify those conventions in order to increase their usefulness in such cooperation. Rousseau's analysis is consistent with this account, but his proposed explanation is deeper and more elaborate. First, Rousseau's distinction between physical and moral needs enables him to go beyond Smith's focus on communicative efficiency. Second, Rousseau's attention to differences in the relative importance of physical and moral needs in different physical environments provides a richer account of the musicality of language than Smith's assumption that the development of grammatically inflected languages would have been shaped by a putatively natural love of certain kinds of analogy and similarity of sound ("First Formation," 208–11). Third, Rousseau tries to explain how speech could have arisen from a prelinguistic state, whereas Smith simply assumes that savages who had no language would "naturally" begin using sounds to assign names to objects in their environment (203).

To be sure, Rousseau's greater ambition does not necessarily imply that his analysis is more accurate or more useful. Smith, moreover, must have deliberately chosen to take a less ambitious approach. Although he almost certainly knew that Condillac had speculated about the role of music and dance in linguistic evolution, for example, "First Formation" ignores this possibility.

---

some kind of ethical or moral quality or effects. (Rousseau, of course, has a broad view of moral phenomena, including almost everything in human life beyond the purely physical.) For an interpretation of the *Essay* as a theoretical exploration of the physical and moral phenomena that must be understood if this special kind of legislative project is to have a chance of success, see Victor Gourevitch, "The Political Argument of Rousseau's *Essay on the Origin of Languages*," in *Pursuits of Reason: Essays in Honor of Stanley Cavell*, ed. Ted Cohen, Paul Guyer, and Hilary Putnam (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 1993), 21–35.

53 For a detailed discussion of the connection between Rousseau's views on language, music, and politics, see Scott, "Rousseau and the Melodious Language of Music."

In "Imitative Arts," however, Smith offers a very detailed and perceptive analysis of music and dance (as well as painting and sculpture).[54] In the course of his discussion of instrumental music, Smith translates an excerpt from the entry on imitation in Rousseau's *Dictionary of Music*. Smith introduces his discussion of the entry by calling Rousseau "an Author, more capable of feeling strongly than of analising accurately" ("Imitative Arts," 198). That is a gratuitous and strangely fatuous put-down of one of Europe's most prominent musical theorists, who also composed one of the most popular operas of his century.[55] At least with respect to music, Rousseau was far more capable than Smith of "analising accurately," as Smith himself must have been well aware.

Music, says Rousseau in the passage Smith quotes, depicts not only the objects of hearing, but everything that the imagination can represent, from repose to a violent storm or the horror of a frightful desert. Smith objects that instrumental music can have this effect only when accompanied by other indicators of what is being imitated, such as the scenery and poetry provided in operas: "With that accompaniment, indeed, though it cannot always even then, perhaps, be said properly to imitate, yet by supporting the imitation of some other art, it may produce all the same effects upon us as if itself had imitated in the finest and most perfect manner" ("Imitative Arts," 199).

Smith is certainly right that instrumental music by itself rarely imitates an identifiable kind of object.[56] And his explanation of how it works together with other arts to do so is perfectly plausible. *But Smith's explanation of music's imitative power is virtually indistinguishable from Rousseau's.* Instead of producing an imperceptible image of an object, Rousseau says, the art of the musician substitutes an image of "the movements which its presence would arouse in the mind [Smith's mistranslation of Rousseau's *le cœur*] of the spectator" ("Imitative Arts," 199). As Rousseau's reference to the "spectator" (*Contemplateur*) suggests, he is discussing the way in which instrumental music combines with visual or verbal cues to produce these effects. Smith omits from his quotation the immediately preceding context, where Rousseau states that music acts on us by "arousing through one sense affections similar to those that can be aroused by another" (*OC*, 5:861). In addition, the

---

[54] In *Essays on Philosophical Subjects*, 176–209.

[55] On the deep connection between Rousseau's theories of music and language, see Robert Wokler, "Rameau, Rousseau, and the *Essai sur l'origine des langues*," *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century* 117 (1974): 179–238; Scott, "Rousseau and the Melodious Language of Music."

[56] Having elsewhere analogized languages and scientific systems to machines ("First Formation," 223–24; "History of Astronomy," 66), Smith now analogizes instrumental musical compositions to scientific systems ("Imitative Arts," 204–5).

very first sentence of the dictionary entry, which Smith also omits, indicates that Rousseau is specifically concerned here with "dramatic or theatrical Music" (860). What is more, as Smith presumably knew, Rousseau repeats much of this passage in the *Dictionary*'s entry on opera (*OC*, 5:958–59), where he also says that "*as an essential part of the lyric Scene*, whose principal object is imitation, Music becomes one of the fine Arts, capable of painting every picture, of arousing all the sentiments" (948–49, emphasis added).

After giving several vivid descriptions of the objects that music can help us imagine, Rousseau stresses that the musician "will not directly imitate any of these objects, but he will excite in the mind [Smith's mistranslation of Rousseau's *l'ame*] the same movements which it would feel from seeing them" ("Imitative Arts," 199).[57] Smith is quick to acknowledge that Rousseau's description of the effects of music is "very eloquent," but he does not acknowledge that he has himself adopted Rousseau's own explanation of those effects. It could not have been Rousseau's eloquence that caused Smith's glaring failure to "analis[e] accurately" what Rousseau wrote in the *Dictionary*. He must have known that he agreed with Rousseau, and he must have deliberately obscured that agreement. It is hard to avoid suspecting that this is part of a pattern that unites all of Smith's snide comments about Rousseau.

Conclusion

Adam Smith is widely regarded as the father of modern economics. His two great books, *Moral Sentiments* and the *Wealth of Nations*, display the best qualities of the best works in that discipline: focused attention on the pervasive trade-offs inherent in social life and a determination to help human decision-makers make better choices in the face of those trade-offs. His treatment of the origin of languages exhibits these same qualities on a smaller scale. He plausibly explains why a kind of linguistic marketplace would have reduced the use of grammatical inflections, thereby increasing the efficiency with which adults can learn and use new languages. Smith recognizes that this way of facilitating communication caused these languages to become less efficient in a different sense: inflected languages are inherently better tools for the purpose of ornamenting human life with beautiful poetry and prose. Smith's analysis offers us, his readers, the pleasure of learning something

---

[57] Smith's substitution of "the mind" for Rousseau's *le cœur* (the heart) and *l'ame* (the soul) cannot plausibly be attributed to a defective knowledge of the French language. The substitution is strikingly consistent with his neglect in "First Formation" of the musical and persuasive elements in human speech.

interesting and plausible about the evolution of languages. That analysis can also assist us in making well-informed decisions about whether and to what extent to invest in the study of an inflected language like ancient Greek, to whose "sweetness" Smith alludes ("First Formation," 224).[58] In both ways, Smith illustrates the value of economic analysis in a broad sense of that term.

Nobody will mistake Rousseau for a modern economist. But he was even more exquisitely sensitive than Smith to the trade-offs inherent in social life. If one had to identify a single central preoccupation in his works, it might be these trade-offs. Perhaps in part because of this sensitivity, Rousseau is less enthusiastic than Smith about the beneficent potential of market processes, in both the commercial and moral realms. Rousseau is also more philosophically relentless. Unlike Smith, he is intent on rousing at least some of his readers from the slumber, whether dogmatic or just oblivious, in which we so frequently assume that what is merely familiar must be natural. This may help explain why Smith's principal work on education, *Moral Sentiments*, is a treatise, whereas Rousseau's treatise on education, the *Emile*, is largely framed as a novel.[59] Their different approaches to education may also help to explain why *The Wealth of Nations* was the eighteenth century's most influential economic treatise, while Rousseau's *New Heloise* was the most popular and influential novel of their era.

Smith's consistently dismissive and misleading treatment of Rousseau is genuinely perplexing. Perhaps it is related to his uncharacteristically vehement denunciation of the claim that Plato's writings "were intended to seem to mean one thing, while at bottom they meant a very different [thing]." According to Smith, the use of such irony or indirection is something "which the writings of no man in his senses ever were, or ever could be intended to do" ("Ancient Logics," 122 note *). It is almost impossible to believe that someone as erudite and perceptive as Smith could have believed this extravagant pronouncement, which disregards centuries of well-attested evidence about the philosophic practice of esoteric writing.[60] And it is impossible to believe that he could have thought David Hume was out of his senses when Hume told a correspondent: "It is putting too great a Respect on the Vulgar, and on their

---

[58] Unlike Rousseau, Smith does not attribute any significance to the *tonal* inflections in ancient Greek, which may have contributed more to the sweetness of the language than grammatical inflections did.

[59] For a discussion of various ways in which the novelistic form enabled Rousseau to introduce subtleties that advanced his educational purposes, see John T. Scott, "Do You See What I See? The Education of the Reader in Rousseau's *Emile*," *Review of Politics* 74, no. 3 (2012): 443–64.

[60] See Arthur M. Melzer, *Philosophy between the Lines: The Lost History of Esoteric Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014).

Superstitions, to pique oneself on Sincerity with regard to them. Did ever one make a point of honor to speak truth to Children or Madmen?"[61] Nor is it easy to imagine that Smith naively assumed, as he purports to do, that statements by characters in Plato's fictional dramas necessarily reflect Plato's considered philosophic views ("Ancient Logics," 124–25). Could Smith's allusion to "the purity and sublimity of the morals of Plato" ("Letter," 251) possibly refer to the proposals in the *Republic* for political reforms consisting of the expulsion from the city of all residents over the age of ten (540d1–541a7) and for selectively breeding those who remain like livestock (458c6–461b7)?

Such ignorance and naivete is highly implausible. Perhaps Smith deliberately obscured a fundamental kinship with Rousseau, just as he maintained that Rousseau obscured his own kinship with Mandeville. According to one report, Smith *privately* spoke about Rousseau "with a kind of religious respect," even going so far as to say that his powerful rhetoric "drew the reader into the heart of reason."[62] This single unverified anecdote can obviously be tantalizing at most. One might test the hypothesis of a Smithian esoteric teaching through a close reading of the *Emile* and *Moral Sentiments*, which most comprehensively set forth the authors' views on moral education. Whatever the results of such a comparative study might prove to be, it would require a more accurate and insightful reading of Rousseau than Smith ever offered to the public.

---

[61] Quoted in ibid., 123. For more detail on Hume's dissimulations, see ibid., 372n45. See also Peter Minowitz, *Profits, Priests, and Princes: Adam Smith's Emancipation of Economics from Politics and Religion* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 5–9 (cautiously suggesting that Smith himself may have engaged in esoteric writing, at least with respect to religion).

[62] B. Faujas de Saint Fond, *A Journey through England and Scotland to the Hebrides*, trans. Archibald Geikie (Glasgow: Hugh Hopkins, 1907), 2:246.