

QUOTATION

JEAN-JACQUES ROUSSEAU ON PRIMITIVE MANDS AND TACTS

Man's first language, the most universal and energetic language, and the only one he needed before it was necessary to make persuasive speeches to assemblies of men, is the cry of nature. As this cry was uttered by a sort of instinct in times of pressing urgency, to beg for help in great danger or for relief in intense suffering, it was not much use in the course of ordinary life, where more moderate feelings prevailed. When the thoughts of men began to extend and to multiply, and more intimate communication was established among them, they looked for a greater number of signs and a more extensive language. They multiplied the inflections of the voice, and combined them with gestures, which are by nature more expressive, and which depend less for their meaning on any prior agreement. Thus visible and movable objects were expressed by gesture, and audible ones by imitative sounds; but since gestures can serve only to indicate objects which are actually present or are easily described and actions which are visible, and since gestures are not universally effective, being rendered useless by darkness or the interposition of a screening body, and require people's attention rather than excite it, man must eventually have thought of using instead articulations of the voice, which, without having the same direct relationship with certain ideas, are better suited to represent ideas as words or conventional signs.

Each object was given at first a particular name, without regard to genus or species, which those first founders of language were incapable of distinguishing; and each individual thing presented itself in isolation to men's minds as it did in the panorama of nature. If one oak was called A and another oak was called B, it follows that the more limited the knowledge the more extensive the dictionary. The troublesomeness of all this nomenclature could not easily be relieved, for in order to arrange things under common and generic denominators, one must know their properties and the differences between them; one must have observations and definitions; that is to say, one must have more natural history and metaphysics than men of those times could possibly have had. (pp. 93-95)

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