

## Telling Stories: The Role of Conjecture in Rousseau's *Second Discourse*

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At the beginning of his *Second Discourse* Rousseau writes “let us therefore begin by setting aside all the facts, for they do not affect the question. The Inquiries that may be pursued regarding this Subject ought not be taken for historical truths, but only for hypothetical and conditional reasonings” (SD, Exordium 6). It doesn't seem that Rousseau is telling us to disregard his hypothetical reasoning—he wants us to take it very seriously, as well as the conclusions that he reaches through that reasoning. It also doesn't seem like a philosopher should be asking us to disregard facts when we are attempting to discover something true. In this paper I will attempt to explain what Rousseau means in this passage and the effects it should have on how we understand the rest of the *Discourse*. I will also attempt to explain how, in light of this passage, one could go about refuting Rousseau's position.

Rousseau's goal in this *Discourse* is to paint a picture of what human nature is like, “what Mankind might have become if it had remained abandoned to itself.” (SD, Exordium 6) If he is going to set aside the facts, that means that he is not interested in historical accuracy. His goal is not to correctly describe how human society came into being, since no one could possibly know what actually happened in the past. Rousseau's goal is to accurately depict human nature and how it would have manifested itself in the state of nature. Rousseau's 'conditional reasonings' must be used, then, to attempt to illustrate human nature in a plain and simple manner. If indeed human nature is as he envisions it, events may have come about as he conjectures but it makes no difference to his argument if they did. All that matters is that he is correct in his assessment of human nature.

Another concern that Rousseau may have had when writing this passage was offending the many religious people who would be reading his work. He says that “religion commands us to believe that . . . God himself drew Men out of the state of Nature immediately after the creation,” (SD, Exordium 6) but we can still imagine how people would have acted had they not been assisted in leaving the state of nature. It seems to me that here Rousseau is trying to keep from being labeled a heretic. He is assuaging religious people by saying that we don't have to claim that these things actually happened to talk about how they may have happened. His direct appeal to the religious leads me to believe that he may have had something to fear from them had he disregarded them entirely. Regardless, his statement on religion boils down to a simple “forget about what you think you know and tell me if what I say sounds right.”

If Rousseau wants us to understand that he is not claiming that the things he speaks of actually happened, the question must arise: How should we take what he says in the rest of the *Discourse*? Instead of presenting an argument of how things were, he is instead trying to describe human nature—as he says, the hypothetical and conditional reasonings he relies on are “better suited to elucidate the Nature of things than to show their genuine origin.” (SD, Exordium 6) Readers of the *Discourse* must keep this in mind while piecing together Rousseau's argument. We must understand that what Rousseau says reflects his theory of human nature and not the true history of things. We can continue believing what we like about what actually happened in the past—whether we are religious and believe in a supreme being or whether we are secular and feel that events came to pass a different way from what Rousseau thinks—these things make no difference as long as we can agree that what he describes in the *Discourse* accurately depicts human nature.

Since Rousseau doesn't actually claim that anything that he says is true

outside his description of human nature, the task of refuting him becomes a different one from the task of arguing against other philosophers. We cannot simply attack the historical statements in the *Discourse*, since whether or not they are true makes no difference to his argument—they are merely there to describe how things may have happened. All that truly matters is whether or not Rousseau was correct in his assessment of human nature. Thus I can see only one possible route one could take to refute Rousseau.

The argument in the *Second Discourse* is meant to illustrate Rousseau's interpretation of human nature. Attacks on this argument, then, must take the shape of alternate interpretations of human nature. Someone arguing against Rousseau must come up with an alternate interpretation of human nature that better explains how we act (or explains how we act equally well in a different way). This argument could be presented in the same fashion as Rousseau and Hobbes, that is, humans acting out their nature in a historical, pre-societal setting. The arguments could simply take the form of a denial that Rousseau is correct. Alternatively, a person who had accurate knowledge of what happened in the past could derive an interpretation of human nature from that knowledge and use that to refute Rousseau. Whatever form the argument comes in, it must attack the interpretation of human nature that Rousseau presents in the *Second Discourse*, not merely the historical facts that he presents as conjecture to support his interpretation.