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Rousseau and the Dialogue of Identity

Rousseau's *Rousseau Judge of Jean-Jacques Dialogues* is a strange and disturbing work. The schizophrenic character of an individual discussing himself as a third-person with a hostile interlocutor of his own imagining invites a diagnosis of paranoia. Rousseau's true identity is at issue in the work, and through the dialogic interchange he wishes not merely to justify himself and his works, but to establish his true self. I want to argue here that Rousseau's *Dialogues* is not an idiosyncratic work, but that it reveals the essentially dialogic form of his philosophic method and teaching in general and his understanding of the nature and formation of human identity in particular, including his own identity.

Autobiographical Self-Inquiry

Rousseau's autobiographical self-inquiry is a form of his philosophical inquiry. Rousseau's autobiographical writings are philosophical, and his philosophical works are in an important sense autobiographical. In both genres, Rousseau asks about human nature and identity. In both these inquiries he emphasizes the difficulty of getting beneath appearances. We are not what we appear to be both because it is human nature to change and because we become beings who are concerned with appearances. Rousseau claims to have seen through appearances to the nature of things, to have stripped away the "rust" that hides our true selves. His method of inquiry is a form of frank self-interrogation in which the interrogating self is wary of its own malleability and of its propensity for appearing, even to itself, as other than it is. Rousseau's autobiographical and philosophic works are dialogic in method.

The essentially dialogic form of Rousseau's inquiry into human nature and identity is revealed most explicitly in the *Dialogues*. Rousseau discusses the form of his work in a special introductory section that prefaces his work, but his consciousness of the relationship of the form of the work and its content can be seen in all of his works. The playful dialogues with which Rousseau prefaces his *Julie* and in which he discusses the novel's form, content and audience is perhaps the most obvious parallel to the *Dialogues*. Yet the *Discourse on Inequality* is a

particularly useful example to look at before turning to the *Dialogues* because Rousseau shows there not only that he is aware of the relationship between form and content, but also the connection of that relationship to the problem of human identity.

The very form of the *Discourse on Inequality* reflects its content the question of human nature or identity. Rousseau takes the oral sense of a discourse quite literally, so to speak. He imagines himself speaking in the Lyceum of Athens with the ancient philosophers for judges and the human race for an audience "O man, whatever country you may come from, whatever your opinions may be here is your history as I believed it to read, not in the Books of your fellow-men, who are liars, but in nature, which never lies."¹ Rousseau emphasizes the potentially oral form of his discourse and its audience - "man" - in order to contrast it to its literal form and audience - "men." "It is of man that I am to speak; and the question I examine informs me that I am going to speak to men."² The question Rousseau examines regards the origin of inequality among "men." He addresses a question that could only be asked by men who have become unequal and who would dare ask if such inequality is "authorized by natural law."³ Rousseau writes of "man" to "men" who have changed their original nature. The change in human nature or identity is the subject of the *Discourse*. "The most useful and least advanced of all human knowledge seems to me to be that of man," Rousseau begins the Preface to his work, "and I dare say that the inscription on the Temple of Delphi alone contained a precept more important and more difficult than all the thick volumes of the moralists." But knowing thyself is difficult because the human soul, like the statue of Glaucus, is disfigured over time, "altered in the bosom of society, "so that it has "changed its appearance to the point of being nearly unrecog-

¹The author would like to thank the National Endowment for the Humanities for their generous support for this chapter through a 1997 Summer Research Stipend. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on Inequality*, in *First and Second Discourses*, ed. Roger D. Masters, trans. Roger D. Masters and Judith R. Masters, New York, St. Martin's, 1964, p. 103 and 104.

² *Discourse on Inequality*, p. 101.

³ *Discourse on Inequality*, p. 99. Rousseau changes the question asked by the Academy of Dijon ("What is the origin of inequality among men; and is it authorized by natural law?") and reprinted by Rousseau just before his own version of the question in the title he gives to the work "Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality Among Men (page 101)". See Roger D. Masters, *The Political Philosophy of Rousseau*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1968, p. 112.

nizable."⁴ Rousseau radicalizes the difficulty of self-knowledge by making the "self" itself a changing object of inquiry and the inquiring "self" an altered and necessarily prejudiced knower.

The *Dialogues* contain a more personal form of self-inquiry, but one which suffers from the same problems of self-knowledge Rousseau reveals in the *Discourse on Inequality*. As in the *Discourse*, his meditations in the *Dialogues* on the relationship of the form and content of the work bear on the problem of identity. Rousseau reflects on the relationship between form and content in the special preface to the *Dialogues* entitled "On the Subject and Form of This Writing." He explains there that he has chosen the dialogue form in order to "discuss the pros and cons" of the public's view of him. He therefore adopts the form of a dialogue between himself - Rousseau - and a representative of the nation at the forefront in accusing him - a Frenchman. He explains that as an interlocutor in the work he has resumed the family name of which he has been deprived, as the public has "reduced" him to his Christian name alone - the infamous Jean-Jacques, about whom he speaks as the accused "third party (4 and 5 [662 and 663])." By thus splitting himself in two, Rousseau already indicates that his true identity is at issue in his work.

The true Jean-Jacques must be identified before he - and his works - can be judged. As the title of the work indicates, Rousseau judges Jean-Jacques, or is his judge.⁵ By reassuming his patrinome, Rousseau attempts to correct the false image of Jean-Jacques to which he has been reduced. By splitting himself in two, he will nonetheless become whole again Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Yet he explains that his work is not simply a self-defense "The humiliating role of my own defense is too much beneath me, too unworthy of the feelings that inspire me for me to enjoy undertaking it. Nor, as it will soon be felt, is that the role I wanted to assume here (5 [664])." He takes the "role" of judge seriously. He explains that judging himself is his very "purpose" in writing the *Dialogues* "I had necessarily to say how, if I were someone else, I would view a man such as myself (6 [665])." He views himself as another, or as another would view him. He must split himself into "self" and "other" in order to attain objectivity. But that "other" is still himself. His reflections on the difficulties of being a truly equitable judge who can "assure himself that he has weighed the cons and the pros (57 [733])" are surely meant to apply to himself as judge in his own cause.

⁴. *Discourse on Inequality*, p. 91.

⁵. It is unclear from the title of the work - *Rousseau juge de Jean-Jacques* - whether "juge" is a noun or verb. See Masters' and Kelly's discussion of the title, p. xxix to xxxi.

Judging oneself requires equitable objectivity as well as intimate self-knowledge; it requires seeing oneself as another would and yet revealing oneself as another cannot. In the *Dialogues*, Rousseau is the author of a work in which he is both subject and object, self and other. The unclear relationship between the authorial "I," the interlocutor "me," and the "third-party" "myself" (putting aside for a moment the imagined other, the "Frenchman") indicates that Rousseau is aware that his very identity is in question in the work and is cognizant of the difficulty of determining that identity. The unstable play between "self" and "other" in Rousseau's *Dialogues* is the key to understanding the work and its meditation on identity.

Rousseau's meditation on his own identity in the *Dialogues* necessarily includes the question of human nature or identity generally because Rousseau himself is in a sense the subject of all of his philosophical writings. The connection between Rousseau himself and his writing is a theme of the *Dialogues*. A premise of the entire conversation of the *Dialogues* is that Rousseau's writings are a reflection of their author, that they must be condemned or exonerated together. "Where could the painter and apologist of nature, so disfigured and calumniated now, have found his model if not in his own heart (214 [936]; see 52 [72])." Note that it is *nature* that is disfigured and calumniated. By justifying himself and his thought, Rousseau justifies nature itself. The *Dialogues* is an "apology" for nature and the natural goodness of man. Rousseau even makes his system of the natural goodness of man and of nature depend upon the accuracy of his self-portrayal "His system may be false, but in developing it, he portrayed himself truthfully (212 [933 and 994])." Rousseau's philosophy of human nature rests on his inquiry into his own identity.

Rousseau claims that he has been able to discover true human nature within himself because he is both unique and exemplary. He alone has accurately portrayed "natural man" in himself because he is different from his fellowmen. "The prejudices that did not subjugate him, the factitious passions to which he was not prey did not hide from his eyes as they did from others those original traits so generally forgotten or misjudged (214 [936])." By being other he has seen the true self.

The dialogue between "self" and "other" that structures Rousseau's judgment of himself as though he were another in the *Dialogues* can also be seen in his *Confessions*. At the outset of that work, he explains his "undertaking" "I wish to show my fellows a man in all the truth of nature; and this man will be myself. Myself alone. I feel my heart and I know men. I am not made like any of the ones I have seen;

I dare to believe that I am not made like any that exist."⁶ Rousseau is at once alone and unique and "natural" or universal; he knows "men" because he has glimpsed "man" in himself. "Here is the only portrait of a man, painted exactly according to nature and in all its truth, that exists and that will probably ever exist."⁷ Rousseau's writings as a whole are a portrait of man according to nature, and the dialogic form of his self-inquiry also underlies his philosophical inquiry.

Philosophical Self-Inquiry

The more specifically philosophic form of Rousseau's method of dialogic self-inquiry can be seen in his *Discourse on Inequality*. As I noted above, Rousseau consciously moves in the work between the terms "man" and "men" in order to indicate the subject of his work - human nature and identity and a change in that nature or identity over time - as well as the difficulty of his addressing that subject, in terms both of his own inquiry and his audience. He emphasizes the change in human identity from the very outset of the work. The most useful and least advanced knowledge is that of "man," he begins the Preface, and yet the source of inequality among "men" cannot be known unless one begins by knowing "men themselves." That self-knowledge would appear to be impossible because of a change in human nature. "Man" has "altered in the bosom of society," and the "being" endowed with "heavenly and majestic simplicity" has been transformed, so that "original man vanishing by degrees, society no longer offers the wise man anything except an assemblage of artificial men and factitious relations"⁸ that are the work of social relations. Yet this alteration is precisely the means for knowing ourselves. We can know "man" by coming to know "men." An understanding of the potential for alteration in human nature that produces variety on the level of both the species and the individual is the key to knowing our nature.

Rousseau describes the uniquely human potential for alteration as the "faculty of self-perfection" or "perfectibility," and claims that this "faculty"⁹ distinguishes humans from the other animals. To know "man" is to comprehend the human capacity for changing nature in society. In

⁶. *Confessions*, p. 5 (my translation).

⁷. *Confessions*, p. 3 (my translation).

⁸. *Discourse on Inequality*, p. 91.

⁹. *Discourse on Inequality*, p. 114 and 115.

a note Rousseau adds to his discussion of perfectibility in the *Discourse*, he writes of the importance of recognizing the variety of human nature "Among the men we know, whether by ourselves, from historians, or from travelers, some are black, others white, others red. [...] All these facts [...] can surprise only those who are accustomed to look solely at the objects surrounding them."¹⁰ Yet further on in this same note Rousseau criticizes observers of human diversity for not appreciating the cause underlying this diversity that distinguishes humans from the other animals the faculty of perfectibility.¹¹ Rousseau describes the distinguishing faculty of perfectibility as "a faculty which, with the aid of circumstances, successively develops all the others, and resides among us as much in the species as in the individual."¹² Again, the juxtaposition of the individual ("man") and the species ("men"). The faculty of perfectibility resides both on the species level and the individual level because it is the sustained interaction among malleable individuals that instigates the process of change in the species. The specific characteristic of human is to be able to thus change from indistinguishable "man" to distinguishable "men."

Rousseau certainly appeals to the variety in the human species for evidence of his claims in the *Discourse on Inequality* and other works about human nature, but his most important method and evidence involves a form of self-inquiry. The importance of the individual level of his analysis can be seen in the *Discourse* just before he discloses that perfectibility is the indisputable defining difference between man and animal where he discusses the possibility that freedom may so distinguish him, a possibility he puts aside as disputable. He argues first that being a free agent distinguishes man among the animals, and that it is "above all in the consciousness of this freedom that the spirituality of his soul is shown."¹³ Humans alone are - or rather can become - conscious of their own malleable needs, of their malleable nature, of their unique perfectibility. Knowing oneself means being fully conscious of one's "self" as a being whose identity is in principle indeterminate yet in practice shaped or determined by "circumstances," especially by social relations or by "men." The formation of human identity is a dialectical process of the "self" encountering the "other," and the method for understanding that

¹⁰. *Discourse on Inequality*, note j, p. 203.

¹¹. See *Discourse on Inequality*, note j, p. 207.

¹². *Discourse on Inequality*, p. 114.

¹³. *Discourse on Inequality*, p. 114.

identity is likewise dialectical.

Rousseau explores the development of human self-consciousness in the *Discourse* and other works. In the *Discourse* he describes savage man "His soul, agitated by nothing, is given over to the sole sentiment of its present existence without any idea of the future, however near it may be."¹⁴ Savage men so lack self-consciousness that "they die without it being perceived that they cease to be, and almost without perceiving it themselves." Rousseau therefore asserts against Hobbes that "knowledge of death and its terrors is one of the first acquisitions that man has made in moving away from the animal condition."¹⁵ The development of self-consciousness thus marks the point where humans are distinguished from the other animals. Self-consciousness requires seeing oneself as like others yet distinct from them. Rousseau describes the birth of conscious reflection in the *Discourse on Inequality* as savage man comes to recognize similarities between himself and "fellows" - "*semblables*," a term suggesting similarity. "The conformities that time could make him perceive among them, his female, and himself led him to judge of those which he could not perceive; and [...] he concluded that their way of thinking and feeling conformed entirely to his own."¹⁶ The human mind comes to recognize what is its "own" and yet how what belongs to it is shared by others.

Rousseau gives a more dynamic example of the development of human self-consciousness in the *Essay on the Origin of Languages*. He imagines a human being encountering another "His fright will make him see those men as taller and stronger than himself. He will give them the name *giants*." After many experiences, however, the savage man will realize that these supposed taller and stronger creatures are actually similar to himself "He will therefore invent another name common to them and him, such as the word *man* for example, and will leave that of *giant* for the false object that had struck him during his illusion."¹⁷ Once the initial force of the passion for self-preservation wanes, the man is able to recognize the "other" as being like himself. A recognition that the "other" is like one's self is needed before man will try to communicate with his fellows "As soon as one man was recognized by another as a sentient Being, thinking and similar to himself, the desire or the need to

¹⁴. *Discourse on Inequality*, p. 117.

¹⁵. *Discourse on Inequality*, p. 109 and 116.

¹⁶. *Discourse on Inequality*, p. 144.

¹⁷. *Essai sur l'origine des langues*, p. 381 and 382 (my translation).

communicate his feelings and thoughts to him made him seek the means for doing so."¹⁸ As Paul De Man explains, "the paradigmatic linguistic model is that of an entity that confronts itself."¹⁹ The linguistic model is also the paradigmatic model of self-consciousness.

Human self-consciousness and therefore identity is by its nature dialogic. Self-consciousness arises as the individual identifies with another but retains a sense of difference. Rousseau argues that humans identify with their fellows through pity. We identify with other "sensible beings" because we can identify with their sensations, and especially their misery - hence "com-miseration."²⁰ Pity tempers our desire for self-preservation by permitting us to share in another's suffering, and Rousseau claims that other sensitive beings give perceptible signs of sharing pity with humans.²¹ However, pity in humans further serves a constructive function. The ability to identify with others is the basis for human identity or self-consciousness. With the development of the heart and mind, pity develops beyond a spontaneous reaction into an imaginative faculty of identification.

Rousseau discusses the development of self-consciousness in connection with pity in the *Essay on the Origin of Languages*. He writes there "Social affections develop in us only with our enlightenment. Pity, although natural to the heart of man, would remain eternally inactive without the imagination that puts it into play. How do we let ourselves be moved to pity? By transporting ourselves outside of ourselves; by identifying ourselves with the suffering being. We suffer only as much as we judge he suffers; it is not in ourselves, it is in him that we suffer. [...] How would I suffer in seeing someone else suffer if I do not even know that he is suffering, if I do not know what he and I have in common?"²²

Knowing what oneself has in common with another requires reflection. Rousseau explains that reflection is born of comparison "Reflection is born of compared ideas [...]. He who sees only a single object has no comparison to make." Primitive man makes no such

¹⁸. *Essai sur l'origine des langues*, p. 375 (my translation).

¹⁹. Paul De Man, "Rousseau's Theory of Metaphor," *Studies in Romanticism*, 38, 1978, p. 492.

²⁰. See *Discourse on Inequality*, p. 96; see p. 132.

²¹. See *Discourse on Inequality*, p. 130.

²². *Essai sur l'origine des langues*, p. 395 (my translation).

comparison "Apply these ideas to the first men, and you will see the reason for their barbarousness. Never having seen anything but what was around them, they did not know even that; they did not know themselves. They had the idea of a Father, of a son, of a brother, and not of a man."²³ The most important comparison for understanding oneself, or even having a true "self," is the comparison of oneself with another.

With the development of self-consciousness, humans also develop a conscience. The link between the two concepts is indicated by the fact that in French the same word - *conscience* - is used for both self-consciousness and conscience. Rousseau finds a natural basis for conscience and therefore human morality in developed pity. In the *Discourse on Inequality*, Rousseau claims that from pity "alone flow all the social virtues."²⁴ His project in the *Émile* is to guide the development of pity to produce the reflective voice of nature conscience. I cannot develop Rousseau's analysis here, but a common-sense explanation will suffice. Self-consciousness is awareness of oneself as distinct from others and conscience is the ability to judge oneself as though one were another. Rousseau's multiple personality in the *Dialogues* is a disturbing version of the structure of human identity and the dynamic of human self-consciousness and conscience.

Conclusion The Identity of Dialogue and Monologue

The form of the strangest of Rousseau's autobiographical inquiries reflects his concern with human identity, his method for inquiring into that identity, and the structure of the identity he uncovers. He confronts the self with its own other in order to analyze the identity that has been synthesized by the dialectical encounter of the self with what is other.

Yet isn't a dialogue with oneself ultimately a form of monologue? Has Rousseau ever gotten beyond himself and his potential idiosyncrasy in his autobiographical inquiry or, indeed, in his philosophy? Rousseau claims that through their style and content his writings transmit an accurate portrait of himself, his thought, and nature itself. His books must be like himself an undistorted medium. "His heart, transparent like crystal, can hide nothing of what happens within it (155 [860])." The character Rousseau has such a reaction to reading the

²³. *Essai sur l'origine des langues*, p. 395 (my translation).

²⁴. *Discourse on Inequality*, p. 131.

writings of Jean-Jacques "alone among all the authors I have read, he was for me the portrayer of nature and the historian of the human heart. I recognized in his writings the man I found in myself (52 [728])." Rousseau is his own reader and other readers are to be judged according to whether they find themselves to be like him. The *Dialogues* are a form of dialogue in which Rousseau soliloquizes to himself.

Let me conclude, then, by suggesting that the dialogue and monologue forms are ultimately inextricably related in Rousseau's thought because of his understanding of the shifting nature of human identity. Rousseau's understanding of the relationship between dialogue and monologue in connection with the problem of human identity can be gleaned from his *Rêveries*. Rousseau claims that the *Rêveries* is a form of monologue "I write my reveries only for myself." He explains that he will set in writing his reveries as a form of self-examination that will, he says, "make myself aware of the modifications of my soul and of their sequence." He says that he will enjoy his account of his reveries anew when he rereads them, and thereby "double my existence."²⁵ The written form of the *Rêveries* is an intermediary between Rousseau and himself, a mirror of himself. Yet, because of the changing identity, this mirror can never truly represent the self. Rousseau cannot carry on a stable monologue with himself because he himself changes. Even the monologue of the *Rêveries* is a form of dialogue.

The *Dialogues* has a structure that is the mirror-image of the *Rêveries*. Within the dialogue in the work, Rousseau reports to the Frenchman on his visit to Jean-Jacques and describes a book on which Jean-Jacques is working "he wrote a kind of judgment of [his persecutors] and of himself in the form of a Dialogue, rather like the one that may result from our conversations (136 [836])." As in the *Rêveries*, the written form of the *Dialogues* is itself a sort of intermediary between Rousseau and his audience - whether that audience be the public, the characters Rousseau and the Frenchman, or Rousseau himself. A final parallel can be noted in a most unexpected place. When Rousseau goes to visit Jean-Jacques, he finds him engaged in another pursuit copying music. We are told that Jean-Jacques enjoys his trade because when practicing it "he is himself and on his own (145 [847])." When we turn to Rousseau's article "Copyist" in his *Dictionary of Music* we find a similar dynamic as in his autobiographical works. Concluding his discussion of the role of the copyist, he writes "There are many intermediaries between what the Composer imagines and what the Listeners

²⁵. Rousseau, *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, trans. Charles E. Butterworth, New York, New York University Press, 1979, p. 6 and 7.

hear. It is for the *Copyist* to bring these two end points as close together as possible, to indicate clearly everything that should be done so that the performed Music renders to the Composer's ear exactly what he depicted in his head when composing it."²⁶ Note that the composer is himself the audience. Again, we find the self as author and as audience with a potentially distorting intermediary. The shifting self aims at monologic self-understanding but can only comprehend itself in the dialogue form that is at once necessary for self-knowledge and that makes such self-knowledge impossible.

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²⁶. *Dictionnaire de la musique*, "Copiste", p. 742 (my translation).