

Ever thus

When Jean-Jacques Rousseau and David Hume first met, in late 1765, they were both already well-known figures in European intellectual circles. Hume's great *Treatise of Human Nature* (1739–40) had been published a quarter of a century earlier, and had been followed by several other major works, including his highly successful *History of England* – which was the source of much of his contemporary fame. Rousseau's reputation was no less secure. In addition to his two *Discourses on the Sciences and Arts* (1750) and on *Inequality* (1755), he had also brought out, in rapid succession, his novel *Julie; or, the New Heloise* (1761) along with the *Social Contract* (1762) and *Émile* (1762). Although Rousseau's popularity derived primarily from the reception given to *Julie*, it was *Émile* that he regarded as his most important work. Unfortunately for him, the authorities in France did not share his enthusiasm. It was condemned by the Archbishop of Paris and an order for Rousseau's arrest was issued. As the authors of *The Philosophers' Quarrel* explain, in their lively and entertaining account of this episode, it was not in Rousseau's nature to hide, but "he could at least learn to run". It was during the long-drawn-out process of fleeing his persecutors that Rousseau eventually fell into the open arms of the amiable David Hume.

When Rousseau escaped from Paris in 1762 he first settled in Môtiers (near Geneva), under the protection of King Frederick II of Prussia and Frederick's appointed governor of this region, the exiled Scotsman Lord Marischal George Keith. However, as a result of his participation in a rather vitriolic literary brawl involving Voltaire, Rousseau managed to alienate and antagonize the locals in Môtiers and was required, once again, to flee from his persecutors. In 1765 he left Môtiers and returned to Paris, where Hume was now employed as the secretary to the British embassy. Through the efforts and interventions of Lord Keith and the Comtesse de Boufflers, Hume was persuaded to offer help to Rousseau. The two met for the first time in December 1765 and during the weeks that followed the two philosophers seem to have formed a considerable bond. Although Hume was aware that Rousseau had a reputation as a difficult and unpredictable personality, he described him in a letter to a friend as "mild, gentle and modest" – an assessment that would not stand the test of time. It was Hume's plan to accompany Rousseau to England, where, in a climate of relative tolerance and liberty, the celebrated thinker from Geneva could escape his persecutors. At the same time, Hume made efforts to secure a royal pension for Rousseau. Before Hume departed for England, his good friend Baron D'Holbach warned him that he would come to regret his efforts on Rousseau's behalf. "I tell you", warned D'Holbach, "you are nursing a viper in your bosom."

Not long after Hume and Rousseau arrived in England, in January 1766, Rousseau's "blacker" side came to the fore. The origins of his intense distrust of Hume are, in fact, not easy to account for. Trivial dispositions,

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such as Hume's well-known "vacant stare", seem to have disturbed Rousseau and triggered his suspicions. He was also offended that Hume, along with one of his friends, had misled him about the way in which a carriage had been arranged (and paid for) to take Rousseau – and his mistress Thérèse La Vasseur – to a country retreat in northern England. This subterfuge was, bizarrely, interpreted by Rousseau as an effort to insult and humiliate him, as showing no proper regard for his (proclaimed) independence and dignity. Rousseau also came to believe that Hume was tampering with his correspondence. Most damaging of all, however, was an episode involving a mock letter, ridiculing Rousseau's evident need to "find glory in being persecuted". This "letter", which was circulating among the *philosophes* in France, purported to be written by Rousseau's patron and protector King Frederick II of Prussia. Its real author was Horace Walpole, a talented but cruel wit; but when Rousseau learnt of it he took it into his head that Hume was involved, and was in league with others – primarily Rousseau's mortal enemies back in France – to humiliate him and destroy his reputation in England. It was no longer possible to persuade Rousseau that Hume was anything other than "the blackest of men".

Hume, needless to say, was shocked by this general turn of events and by the various (baseless) charges that Rousseau directed against him. His initial response was to be conciliatory and to seek some further explanation for the claims being made, so they could be effectively refuted and discredited. Rousseau's response to Hume's overtures, after some delay and silence, was to write back and accuse him directly of aiming to dishonour and humiliate him. With this Rousseau served notice of his intention to cut off all further contact. By this time it was evident to Hume that Rousseau was "an arrant madman", "the blackest and most atrocious villain that ever disgraced human nature", and after further intrigue and deliberation, and with their dispute increasingly turning into a public scandal, Hume reluctantly decided to publish his own account of the "quarrel". A French version appeared in Paris in October 1766 and an English translation, *A Concise Account of the Dispute between Mr. Hume and Mr. Rousseau*, was published in London the following month. With the publication of Hume's *Concise Account*, Voltaire, who detested Rousseau, added his own assessment, saying that Rousseau's charges against Hume constituted "the proceeding of ingratitude against generosity". For his own part, Rousseau never responded publicly to Hume's *Concise Account* – fully confident, as he was, of the



Jean-Jacques Rousseau, left, and David Hume, right, by Allan Ramsay (1713–84)

justice of his accusation of "treachery".

In most respects the Rousseau–Hume quarrel is a depressing and dreary affair. While the manoeuvres and commentaries are complex and multifaceted, the real substance of the quarrel turns largely on issues and claims that were either trivial or preposterous. The lessons we learn about the character of the two principals are fairly straightforward, and, in the case of Rousseau, as obvious as they are unflattering. With regard to Hume, it is evident, from his way of handling these events as they began to unfold (and from other episodes in his life), that while he was certainly mild and kind by disposition he was, nevertheless, ready and willing to bite back when forced into a corner. In general, the image of *le bon David* is overdrawn and exaggerated. The tale of his dispute with Rousseau serves to show, in some measure, another side to his character – a side which is both tougher and more brittle than the one that his admirers usually focus on. What is perhaps most disappointing about the exchanges between Hume and Rousseau is that they almost entirely lack intellectual substance. At least on the surface, it is all a matter of Hume trying to fend off the groundless smears and slanders advanced by Rousseau, in face of his own considerable efforts to act as Rousseau's friend and protector (keeping in mind that Rousseau was subject to some genuine persecution).

Robert Zaretsky and John T. Scott are aware of these limitations in *The Philosophers' Quarrel*, and in order to give their "story of the brief and dramatic friendship between Hume and Rousseau" more depth and interest, they "point to the implications it may have for the Enlightenment's conception of reason and understanding". Unfortunately, no substantial or careful discussion survives by either Rousseau or Hume of each other's work. The evidence suggests that Rousseau was generally unfamiliar with Hume's philosophical writings and that Hume found Rousseau's writings extravagant in style and rather shallow in substance. Nevertheless, Zaretsky and Scott make a game effort at comparing the two philosophical "friends", and offering some conjectures about why their friendship collapsed so suddenly and dramatically. The contrast that they draw between the two characters turns on the conclusion that they both "never fully understood each other, or themselves". The

two-way failure is due, according to Zaretsky and Scott, to their rival and opposing conceptions of reason and passion and the role that they play in human life.

Hume and Rousseau both expressed a degree of scepticism about the pretensions of philosophy and reason in human life, and both emphasized the considerable role of sentiment and feeling, but there remain significant differences in their accounts. Rousseau's philosophical dispositions took him strongly in the direction of Romanticism, with its emphasis on authenticity and intensity of feeling. Hume's rather dry observation on this side of Rousseau's character and philosophy was that Rousseau "had studied very little; and has not indeed much knowledge. He has only felt during the whole course of his life; and in this respect, his sensibility rises to a pitch beyond what I have seen any example of". According to Hume, Rousseau is a man "stripped not only of his clothes but also of his skin". In contrast to this, Zaretsky and Scott portray Hume as, like Voltaire, attracted to the classical values of clarity, balance and moderation. Perhaps this divide between Rousseau and Hume is most apparent in their (divergent) attitudes to religion. Underneath Rousseau's lack of orthodoxy and opposition to clerical authority he was, as Hume saw it, as "devout" as he was persecuted. "He has", said Hume shortly after Rousseau arrived in England (before their quarrel had erupted), "a hankering after the Bible, and is indeed little better than Christian in a Way of his own". It is no surprise, therefore, that the superficial points of shared understanding between these two thinkers rapidly disintegrated under the strain of close contact.

The Philosophers' Quarrel is an enjoyable tour through the salons, great cities and country retreats of the Enlightenment, in the company of some of its brightest stars. Although much of the tale turns on some tedious details of the various intrigues of Hume and Rousseau, together with their friends and collaborators, Zaretsky and Scott manage to provide their account with a number of interesting and valuable insights into the character of the thinkers involved and the social and cultural life of Enlightenment Europe at this time. I particularly recommend this book to academics, who may be comforted and reassured to see that prickly, neurotic and insecure dispositions are not the invention of contemporary academic life.

Russell, Paul. "Ever thus." *The Times Literary Supplement*, no. 5616, 19 Nov. 2010, p. 29. *The Times Literary Supplement Historical Archive*, link.gale.com/apps/doc/EX1200554915/TLSH?u=tlisacc&sid=bookmark-TLSH&xid=06fc55dd. Accessed 5 Apr. 2022.