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Robert Zaretsky and John T. Scott, *The Philosophers' Quarrel: Rousseau, Hume, and the Limits of Human Understanding*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009. x + 247 pp. Illustrations, endnotes, index. \$18.00 (pb). ISBN 978-0300164282.

Review by Charles Walton, Yale University.

Though he was most beloved writer of the eighteenth century, Jean-Jacques Rousseau hated many people. He hated Voltaire and famously told him so in a letter of 1759, turning the mordant patriarch of the high Enlightenment into a mortal enemy. He hated his former *philosophe* friends, especially Diderot and d'Alembert, who became the targets of his critical ire. He snapped at patrons and snubbed potential ones, including monarchs. Rousseau's chronic antipathy stretched beyond individuals. It encompassed society itself. From his prize-winning *First Discourse* [1750] to his posthumously published reflections, *Rêveries du promeneur solitaire* [1782], he exposed the corrupting dynamics of society. In producing inequality, artificial desires, and self-consciousness, society alienated individuals from their natural virtue and independence, turning them into anxious egoists and sycophantic slaves.

Whether it was society that alienated Rousseau or vice-versa has been debated ever since his time. In *The Philosophers' Quarrel: Rousseau, Hume, and the Limits of Human Understanding*, Robert Zaretsky and John T. Scott explore this issue by analyzing Rousseau's relations with another person whom he hated, Scottish philosopher David Hume. The authors seek to explain how the two men's philosophies shaped their mutual perceptions of each other, or rather, misperceptions. Although their study offers a well written account of this colorful episode of the high Enlightenment, it is unfortunately marred by factual errors and an unconvincing interpretative approach.

Hume, whose diplomatic mission in Paris was coming to an end in the fall of 1765, befriended Rousseau and invited him to return to Britain with him. Despite warnings about Rousseau's misanthropic pride and unpredictable rancor, Hume undertook to secure for the persecuted exile a pension and a comfortable place to live. Their friendship fell apart shortly after their arrival in London. Tensions began when Hume "colluded" with a friend who arranged a free carriage ride for Rousseau to the countryside. Aware of Rousseau's prickly pride, the two men tried to conceal the charitable nature of the service, but Rousseau saw through the subterfuge. The study opens with the dramatic scene of Rousseau blasting Hume for treating him like a child before jumping into the Scot's lap to shower him with apologetic kisses and tears. (Apparently, Hume cried too.) The reconciliation did not endure. No sooner had Rousseau settled in at an estate in northern England than he began suspecting Hume of meddling with his private correspondence. When a phony letter in the name of Frederick II appeared in the British press, mocking Rousseau for not accepting the Prussian king's protection, Rousseau suspected Hume's complicity in a plot to dishonor him. (Rousseau may not have been entirely wrong on both counts.[1]) In July 1766, Rousseau sent Hume a brilliantly crafted missive laying out his accusations and declaring an end to their friendship.

Worried that Rousseau would have the letter published (it read like a pamphlet), Hume took preemptive action. Despite Rousseau's assurances that he would not go public with the matter, Hume had all his correspondence with Rousseau published, with annotations and an introduction by Jean-Baptiste-

Antoine Suard, a well known Parisian literary critic. True to his word, Rousseau kept silent, which had the effect of making Hume look ridiculous, even malicious, to some of Rousseau's more ardent fans. The collection of letters appeared in France and England, generating a storm of controversy in both countries.

The episode reveals much about the psychology of the two men and Enlightenment culture more generally, and it has received scholarly attention in recent decades.<sup>[2]</sup> Although Zaretsky and Scott cite some of this work, they do not engage with it. Instead, they adopt a straightforward "ideas to action" approach. According to them, the great tragedy of the Hume-Rousseau affair was that each understood the other in philosophical terms that were mutually incompatible. The two men's respective epistemologies colored the way they saw the situation and hindered their ability to comprehend each other: Whereas Hume grasped the world through "reason" and "experience," Rousseau, rejecting both, consulted only the truth found in his own heart. General readers may find this walk through the lives and minds of two great eighteenth-century philosophers illuminating. Specialists, however, will find the analysis flawed.

The connections the authors draw between the two men's ideas and their actions are often strained. For example, they devote a chapter to explaining Rousseau's peculiar behavior at the theater in London, when he leaned so far over the balcony that he had to be held back for risk of falling over (pp. 114-127). The incident drew much attention at the time, not least because King George III and Queen Charlotte, also in attendance, were apparently more fascinated with Rousseau than they were with the stage.

Contemporaries chalked up the incident to Rousseau's hypocritical grandiosity. Despite his reclusive image, which he carefully cultivated, he often made himself conspicuous in public. Zaretsky and Scott advance a different interpretation. It is tortuous. The play was a translation and major reworking of Voltaire's *Zaïre* [1732]. The script had been altered in light of Rousseau's damning criticism of it in his *Lettre à d'Alembert sur les spectacles* [1758]. After analyzing the significance of these changes, the authors inform us that Rousseau would not have grasped them in any case since he scarcely understood English. They then take us on a four-page detour through Diderot's theories of drama and Rousseau's posthumous *Essai sur l'origine des langues* [1781]. Their conclusion: Rousseau hung his ostentatious, Armenian fur-capped head over the balcony because he was moved by the sound of the play's dialogue. It was the music of the words, not their meaning, which drew him toward the stage. The interpretation is speculative and, to my mind, unconvincing. The "hypocritical grandiosity" thesis of contemporaries, though banal, strikes me as more persuasive.

At times, the connections made between the men's philosophies and their actions border on the absurd. When Mme Boufflers, a leading *salonnière* close to Hume and Rousseau, confided to the Scot her hopes that the Prince de Conti, her lover, would marry her now that her husband had just died, Hume "urged her to be reasonable." The Prince would never marry someone so low on the social ladder as she (pp. 88-89). The authors see Hume's advice as "consistent with both his feelings and his philosophy." Their demonstration runs as follows: "Hume was reminding Boufflers that reason, though a slave to the passions, nevertheless served an invaluable function. In this case, reason revealed that Boufflers was the victim of a false assumption: that the Prince de Conti, one of the most important men of the realm, was free to marry her." Do we really need Humean epistemology to explain what amounted to common sense?

More troubling, Zaretsky and Scott often distort the complexity of Hume's and Rousseau's overall philosophies by cherry-picking the ideas that appear to be consonant with the men's actions. They explain that once the friendship began to fray, Hume criticized Rousseau for "feeling" rather than "reflecting." (The authors seem to side with Hume and adopt his perspective on matters both mundane and philosophical.) They conclude, "Hume's description of what is lacking in his friend reveals much of what he himself believed was true philosophy. It was the act of reflection 'properly speaking': reflection

upon experience, whether the experience was gleaned from books, such as the histories he himself wrote, or from personal observation" (p. 136). Aside from the fact that history books and direct observation represent two very different registers of experience, it is worth stressing that Rousseau rejected neither experience nor reflection. His *Confessions*, which he began during the affair, constituted a two-tome expression of his commitment to both. Moreover, in *Émile*, he called for exposing children to experience before exposing them to abstract thought, so that once they would begin employing reason, it would be tempered by practical experience.

In any case, shortly after informing readers of Rousseau's supposed aversion to experience, the authors describe his aversion to reason (pp. 150, 152). We are told that he rejected Hume's reasoned consideration of documented facts. Faithful to the ideas he had laid out in the *First Discourse*, Rousseau trusted only the knowledge found in his heart, and his *intime conviction* told him that Hume was a liar. Yet, Rousseau's stance on reason, like his stance on experience, was more complex than the authors acknowledge. While he was skeptical that reason alone could bring mankind closer to moral perfection, he considered reason to be inescapable and necessary. Indeed, the aim of much of his philosophy was to find a way to reconcile reason — a social construct — with the sentiments and moral autonomy of the individual. The best chance of bringing all of these elements into alignment — and he doubted that they could ever be perfectly aligned — was to enhance one's exposure to, and hence *experience* of, nature.

The study contains numerous errors. Some are minor. According to the authors, the Academy of Dijon was founded during the reign of Louis XIV, but it was founded in 1725, during the reign of Louis XV (p. 20). In discussing Voltaire's career, they have him accepted into the Académie française before being appointed royal historiographer, but the inverse was the case (p. 61). They locate the Prince of Conti's residence of the Temple at "the far eastern edge of the Marais" (where the Bastille was) rather than at its northern edge (p. 107). And they mistranslate Voltaire's *Sermon des cinquante* as *The Oath of Fifty*, rather than *The Sermon of Fifty* (pp. 67-71).

Other errors are more significant. Zaretsky and Scott give an outdated description of Parisian salons. They claim that "salons began to displace the academy and university as the city's centers of learning" — an extravagant claim (p. 80). Salon goers are said to have been committed to "the life of the mind" and "a common moral and intellectual purpose." As Antoine Lilti has shown, salons were not inclusive centers of disinterested, egalitarian learning. They were highly exclusive bastions of aristocratic sociability, *divertissements*, and patronage.[3] The authors mischaracterize Voltaire's mission to "*écraser l'infâme*" as a campaign against absolutism, and they cite his war against the Parlement of Toulouse over the Calas Affair as evidence of this (pp. 62-63). (After a sham trial, the Parlement ordered the execution of the Huguenot Jean Calas, wrongly accused of murdering his son.) Thus, they confuse the magistracy's fanaticism and abuse of power, which Voltaire condemned, with absolutism, which, in its enlightened form, he favored. Indeed, he supported the monarchy's heavy-handed treatment of the parlements over new taxes around mid-century and applauded Maupeou's judicial reforms of the early 1770s, which abolished the parlements entirely. Hardly a critic of absolutism, this fan of Louis XIV championed it.[4]

*The Philosophers' Quarrel* is nicely written and offers some compelling portraits of key Enlightenment figures. It is more concise than the belabored and meandering study of the Hume-Rousseau affair by David Edmonds and John Eidinow, *Rousseau's Dog*. [5] But its factual errors and strained analysis may deter its use in history courses on the Enlightenment.

## NOTES

[1] Hume did sort through Rousseau's mail, but his intentions appear to have been innocent. In the eighteenth century, the recipients of correspondence paid for postage, and since Rousseau had been

complaining about all the fan mail he was receiving, Hume, who was managing Rousseau's affairs, took the liberty of sorting through it, forwarding only important letters. See Leo Damrosch, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Restless Genius* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2005), pp. 418-419. Hume's involvement in drafting the phony letter by Frederic the Great is not clear. According to another recent book-length study of the affair, Hume was present at the salon where the letter was drafted, principally by Horace Walpole. Hume may even have penned its stinging last line. See David Edmonds and John Eidinow, *Rousseau's Dog: Two Great Thinkers at War in the Age of Enlightenment* (New York: Ecco, 2006), pp. 197-199. Zaretsky and Scott are skeptical of Edmonds and Eidinow's interpretation.

[2] For how the Hume-Rousseau affair played out in the realm of public opinion, see Dena Goodman, "The Hume-Rousseau Affair: From Private *Querelle* to Public *Procès*," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 25, no. 2 (Winter 1991-92): 171-201. For a psychoanalytical approach to interpreting Rousseau's actions in the affair, see Jean Starobinski, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: La transparence et l'obstacle* (Paris: Gallimard, 1994 [orig. 1971]), esp. pp. 161-165. For how reputation and *mondanité* figured in the affair, see Antoine Lilti, *Le monde des salons: la sociabilité et mondanité à Paris au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris: Fayard, 2005), pp. 342-355.

[3] Lilti, *Le monde des salons*.

[4] Peter Gay, *Voltaire's Politics: the Poet as Realist* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959).

[5] David Edmonds and John Eidinow, *Rousseau's Dog: Two Great Thinkers at War in the Age of Enlightenment* (New York: Ecco, 2006).

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