

C H A P T E R   O N E

# *An Enlightenment Quarrel*

*I have the feeling that philosophy leads to sorrow.*

—*Jean-Jacques Rousseau to Mme d'Épinay*

*Since reason is incapable of dispelling these clouds, nature herself suffices to that purpose and cures me of this philosophical melancholy and delirium.*

—*David Hume, A Treatise of Human Nature*

**M**arch 18, 1766, was meant to be the day for thanks and farewells between Europe's two most celebrated philosophers. Jean-Jacques Rousseau was set to leave London, with his companion Thérèse Le Vasseur, for Wootton Hall, an estate deep in north England. David Hume had arranged for this asylum, as he had most everything since he had accompanied Rousseau from France to England more than two months before, when Hume had first come to Rousseau's rescue. Though he had never before met the Swiss thinker and novelist, Hume had been moved by his plight: Rousseau's writings had been burned and his life threatened in his adopted France as well as his native Geneva. As a

cosmopolitan freethinker in Calvinist Scotland and a Scottish Tory in Whiggish and xenophobic London, Hume had learned to sympathize with the persecuted. Learning of Rousseau's predicament, he had employed his considerable reputation and energy to resolve it.

Yet thanks, if not farewells, seemed the last thing on Rousseau's mind when he entered Hume's drawing room. Wearing his usual flowing Armenian caftan and tall fur cap, the Genevan turned on his host, blasting Hume for treating him like a child. Rousseau announced his discovery that the coach he and Thérèse were boarding the following day for Wootton Hall was offered under false pretenses. With Hume's acquiescence, Rousseau's patron and the owner of Wootton Hall, Richard Davenport, had paid for the chaise and, to spare the philosopher's abundant sensibilities and his meager pocketbook, had told the philosopher that a happy convergence of events meant that only a nominal fare would be charged.

This subterfuge, undertaken with the best of intentions, unleashed furies. While he might be poor, Rousseau told Hume that he preferred "to conform to his circumstances than live like a beggar on alms." Overwhelmed by the ferocity of his friend's attack, Hume, his round and fleshy face gone white, insisted upon his innocence—in vain. No less vain were his efforts to engage his friend in conversation. Rousseau gave curt replies, each time falling back into brooding silence.

This uneasy scene had lasted nearly an hour when, without warning, Rousseau leaped onto Hume's lap, threw his hands around his huge neck, and covered his face with tears and kisses. "Is it possible you can ever forgive me, my dear friend?" cried Rousseau. "After all the testimonies of affection I have received from you, I reward you at last with this folly and ill behavior. But I have notwithstanding a heart worthy of your friendship. I love you, I esteem you; and not an instance of your kindness is thrown away upon me."

Hume unraveled under this deluge of affection. As his friend clasped his neck, Hume too began to weep. Patting the folds of dark brown silk hanging limply along the man's back, Hume reassured Rousseau of his love and friendship. As Hume later confessed to a friend, "I think no scene of my life was ever more affecting."<sup>1</sup>

And perhaps no scene in Hume's life had ever been more drastically misunderstood. After Rousseau left for Wootton Hall the next day, he and Hume would never again see each other. Within a matter of weeks, their friendship dissolved into a passionate quarrel, played out in salvos of impassioned and recriminatory letters and pamphlets. The correspondence was quickly translated into French and English, becoming a subject of intense conversation and argument on both

sides of the Channel. Europe's traditional aristocracy, and even more so the rising aristocracy of intelligence that formed the Continent's "Republic of Letters," were riveted by the feud, taking sides with a degree of conviction that the era's dynastic wars could not command. As Hume himself ruefully noted, the rise and fall of his friendship with Rousseau had made "so great a noise."

The sheer fascination with calamities partly explains the public fixation with the noisy row between Hume and Rousseau. Although of a different order of magnitude, just a decade earlier the 1755 Lisbon earthquake thus riveted the attention of Europeans. This was to be expected of a catastrophe that involved tidal waves, great fissures, raging fires, cinder-darkened skies, and vast carnage—all in a major capital of western Europe. Morbid curiosity was not the only reason for the unprecedented preoccupation with Lisbon, however. After all, there had always been earthquakes, but until Lisbon the tremors did not outrage human understanding. As Susan Neiman argues, earlier disasters—even a scant fifty years before, when an earthquake leveled Port Royal, Jamaica—failed to spark attention largely because they did not upset the moral or conceptual order of Western man. The European worldview was still rooted in a Christian understanding of Providence, whether citing God's mysterious ways or conceiving the order of the universe as having been set in motion by a clockmaker deity. But subsequent changes, especially in the intellectual terrain, made for a perfect philosophical storm after Lisbon. The event spurred a raft of essays, poems, pamphlets, and books, including an exchange between Rousseau and Voltaire and an appearance in *Candide*. All of these works raised questions concerning God's goodness and power, and, no less important, the fundamental intelligibility of the world and the human situation. As Neiman notes, the idea that the world and life "were not mysterious was a demand of reason embodied in natural religion as in other eighteenth century discoveries."<sup>2</sup>

Although it left no decaying bodies or demolished buildings in its wake, the Hume-Rousseau affair, like Lisbon, heaved critical questions to the surface of the intellectual world. Most particularly, the rift between these remarkable men posed the problem of understanding others and our own selves. Both Hume and Rousseau had devoted their lives to contributing to the great Enlightenment project of human understanding and, at the same time, challenging it. And yet not only did they come away with very different versions of what took place that evening at Hume's lodgings: it also became painfully clear that, from the outset, they never fully understood each other, or themselves.

The nature and response to the Hume-Rousseau affair, as with the aftermath of Lisbon, make sense only when set in the Enlightenment. Yet, as a theoretical concept and historical era, the Enlightenment has long meant different things to

different scholars. For some the Enlightenment captures all that is good and great about the ideas and ideals of a liberal and liberating eighteenth century. Peter Gay memorably described the Enlightenment as the “recovery of nerve,” led by heroic thinkers committed to the progress of humankind through the application of critical reason. For others, however, the Enlightenment exposes all that is wrong and tragic about the idols and ideologies of an illiberal and repressive West. From the Frankfurt theorists Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer to postmodern critics like Michel Foucault, the absolutist emphasis on reason by Enlightenment thinkers enabled rather than challenged the hierarchical and despotic character of society and politics in Old Regime Europe. The Enlightenment, for these critics, has been a nightmare of reason from which the West has never awakened.<sup>3</sup>

For yet others, the old notion of a single, pan-European Enlightenment reduces the complexity of its history—or, more accurately, its histories. A growing number of historians have argued that there were, in fact, several national Enlightenments, ranging from the French and German to the British and Scottish, distinguished from one another by various political, social, and cultural traits. Moreover, others have identified different Enlightenments within a single country. Robert Darnton has portrayed the difficult relationship between High and Low Enlightenments in eighteenth-century France, while, most recently, Jonathan Israel has claimed that a “radical Enlightenment” led by Benedict Spinoza and Pierre Bayle in the Dutch Republic preceded the better-known, less original High Enlightenment of Montesquieu and Voltaire.<sup>4</sup> In the end, there will almost certainly never be a unified field theory of the Enlightenment. But this is not a reason for disposing of the term: it is, in every sense of the phrase, easier to live with the Enlightenment than without it. As a social, philosophical, and political legacy for all who followed, as a heuristic concept for the scholars who study it, the Enlightenment is indispensable.

As with any historical caption, *the Age of Reason* hides as much as it reveals. Certainly, enlightened men and women of the eighteenth century began to question and ultimately reject the received truths of religion and faith, church, and traditional authorities. Dissatisfied with such constraints, they turned to critical reason to realize our potential as human beings. Historians have long noted that this generation of thinkers largely distrusted overly ambitious claims for reason that they associated with seventeenth-century systematic thinkers like Descartes and Leibniz. For this new and more skeptical generation, reason divorced from experience, doubt, and experiment was as useless as church dogma in making sense of our world and our own selves. Skeptics embraced the conviction that only scientific method could penetrate the secrets of nature and lead, as the En-

glish philosopher Francis Bacon wrote in *The New Atlantis*, to “the effecting of all things possible.”<sup>5</sup>

Nevertheless, many leading figures of this movement insisted upon the great and good offices provided by scientific method and inductive reasoning. Despite doubts and hesitations, there was a widespread belief among the philosophes—the name given to the men and women, less original thinkers than brilliant pamphleteers and conversationalists, who identified with this intellectual movement—in the liberating power of reason. The declaration made by the Baron d’Holbach, who will play a critical role in our story, is telling:

Despite all the efforts of tyranny, despite the violence and trickery of the priesthood, despite the vigilant efforts of all the enemies of mankind, the human race will attain enlightenment; nations will know their true interests; a multitude of rays, assembled, will form one day a boundless mass of light that will warm all hearts, that will illuminate all minds.<sup>6</sup>

Perhaps the most famous expression of this faith in reason is the Marquis de Condorcet’s *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Human Mind*. In this credo, Condorcet declares that human reason and established fact reveal “that nature has set no term to the perfection of human faculties; that the perfectibility of man is truly indefinite; and that the progress of this perfectibility, from now onwards independent of any power that might wish to halt it, has no other limit than the duration of the globe upon which nature has cast us.”<sup>7</sup> Condorcet wrote these words while in hiding from the revolutionary Terror that would eventually claim his life—testimony to his faith in reason, and, tragically, to his blindness to reason’s excesses in the course of the Revolution.

In this book we engage many of the historical and conceptual debates surrounding the Enlightenment, but we shall not try to answer them. The book is less about the Enlightenment than about a puzzling series of events that occurred within the Enlightenment. We tell the story of the brief and dramatic friendship between Hume and Rousseau, and point to the implications it may have for the Enlightenment’s conception of human reason and understanding. In order to do so, we contextualize their thought within their own lives and the world they inhabited. We do so not on the assumption that their personalities and their time determined their thought, but in keeping with how they themselves saw philosophy: as a way of life and as a form of action in the world. The rise and fall of the friendship between Rousseau and Hume, then, was a particularly dramatic, and we think revealing, example of a collision between two individuals who struggled to understand themselves, each other, and the world they inhabited together.

It was in their attitudes toward reason, the Enlightenment's key article of faith, that Hume and Rousseau, opposites in so many other ways, became odd bedfellows. With calm and deliberation, the Scot blasted our deepest convictions concerning the reasonability of trusting in reason: though we pretend that reason rules our lives, he declared, habit and passion instead inevitably hold sway. Even for the happy few ruled by the "empire of philosophy," the reach of reason "is very weak and limited." Ultimately, reason was "the slave of our passions"—a state of affairs, paradoxically, Hume welcomed rather than regretted. As for Rousseau, reason did not even merit this reduced station. Not merely weaker than the passions, reason actually made moral, social, and individual matters worse. While Hume conceded that reason was strong enough to know its limitations, Rousseau identified reason as the disease for which it pretended to be the cure.

The two philosophers took very different consequences from their critiques of reason: Hume championed the progress of the sciences and arts (though with more modest expectations than those of his contemporaries), while Rousseau questioned progress, wondering whether it was just another word for moral decay and despair. Both men, nevertheless, were and remain our most important critics of reason. The grounds for their claims against reason are complex—neither man, we will see, was an irrationalist, much less a mystic. On the contrary, their critiques of reason are models of logic and lucidity. In this regard, their relevance for our own age is clear: religious fanatics and philosophical reactionaries hounded Hume and Rousseau throughout their lives. Both men, moreover, detested the hypocrisies and hubris of the political classes, just as they decried the ways in which greed and injustice were gussied up in noble sentiments.

No less important, the ways in which these two men lived their lives—and conducted their ill-fated friendship—pose the question of the relationship between ideas and life, thinking and living. Philosophy nowadays seems to be a profession, not a discipline. Academic philosophers write on the history of philosophy or work in analytic philosophy. But as for proposing a worldview—a coherent system by which we can understand the world and our place in it—and a reworking of our selves: this is no longer common.

Philosophy has too commonly become an occupation, where "doing" philosophy is no different from "doing" physics or psychology, literature or statistics. The contrarian historian of ancient philosophy Pierre Hadot worries that philosophy in our age has become the activity of bureaucrats, whose great task is to reproduce themselves: "to form other bureaucrats, rather than form man."<sup>8</sup> He has argued that ancient philosophy was not simply a theoretical discourse but also an art of living, a method for aligning our lives with our thought. Alexander Nehamas writes in a similar vein. The ancients, he declares, were onto criti-

cal matters that we have lost sight of in our age of hyperspecialization. “Theory and practice, discourse and life, affect one another,” he writes, “and people become philosophers because they are able and willing to be the best human type and to live as well as a human being possibly can. What one believes and how one lives have a direct bearing on one another.”<sup>9</sup> Our sensibilities are attuned to these worries about how philosophy seems to have fallen, for we are shocked when we learn that a philosopher can give aid and comfort to totalitarian regimes. In the end, we are shocked that philosophers are as thoughtless as the rest of us.

While the stance that philosophy is a way of life is usually associated with antiquity, this view remained alive and well during the Enlightenment. During the eighteenth century this view was, in a sense, resurrected as men and women came to expect great things of philosophers, with faith that they would make sense of our lives. Herein lies part of the tremendous appeal of Rousseau and Hume. The fascination that their lives, and not merely their thought, exercised on contemporaries carries across the centuries. We are historically bound and intellectually indebted to both men, and it may not be too naïve to believe that the unintended lessons of their work and lives, no less than the intended, still have something to teach us.