Hume vs. Rousseau: The Limits of Human Reason


Zaretsky and Scott’s book is fascinating as a narration of the clash between two of the most influential philosophers of the Enlightenment, set in a time when all of Europe—including politicians and monarchs—was actually paying attention to what philosophers were saying or doing. Rousseau was publicly and harshly criticized by the very father of the Enlightenment, Voltaire, and he was persecuted by the authorities in both France (his adoptive country) and Switzerland (his native land). It is in this context that Hume offered the fugitive philosopher shelter in England, whose monarchy was going to play along just to spite the French.

But Rousseau was paranoid and prone to irrational outbursts, and he soon became convinced (without cause, as it turns out) that Hume was secretly plotting against him. When Rousseau went public with his accusations, Hume was taken aback and felt compelled to respond. All of Europe’s intelligentsia joined the fray on behalf of one or the other philosopher, and the two remained on nonspeaking terms until the ends of their lives.

However, my interests lay in the intellectual differences and similarities between Hume and Rousseau about the very nature and import of human reason. Despite both philosophers being considered major players in the Enlightenment, Rousseau was actually a radical critic of the movement (hence Voltaire’s vitriol against him), which helped usher in the Romantic reaction to the Age of Reason. Hume was less radical in his rejection of rationality, and yet in some sense his criticisms of it were more powerful and lasting than those of his Swiss counterpart.

To simplify a bit, Rousseau’s problem was with rationality as the harbinger of modernity, as well as the philosophers’ attitude that reason ought to bridle emotions. In Zaretsky and Scott’s book we find the Genevan repeatedly writing to Hume and to his friends in what sounds like a postmodern vein, where “truth” is not something interpersonal and subject to empirical inquiry but something one “feels,” therefore it cannot be questioned by others. He would have driven any modern skeptic positively insane. (I hasten to add that his broader critique of the social contract, as well as his writings about education, are well worth the effort, but they are of course more tangential to the theme of this column.)

Hume, too, was interested in a radical (for the time) reevaluation of emotions and a corresponding cutting down to size of reason. One of his most famous quotes is that “reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions,” by which he meant that reason tells us how to achieve our goals, but we want to achieve one goal or another because we have “passions.” (Before you dismiss this, stop and think about why you are reading this magazine; the answer, at bottom, is that you care about critical thinking—because you have a passion for reason and rationality. It isn’t entirely clear that such passion can be defended on logical grounds, and certainly not on those alone.)

Indeed, one of Hume’s greatest contributions to philosophy of science was his famous problem of induction, which essentially leads to the conclusion that science itself does not have logical foundations. The argument goes something like this: scientific reasoning is inductive (that is, based on generalizations from empirical evidence, as well as on the assumption of the continuity of nature—meaning that the laws of nature do not change). But how can we justify induction itself? The only defensible answer seems to be “because it has (largely) worked in the past.” That answer is itself inductive, so now we find ourselves inside either an infinite regress or an instance of circular reasoning—not good places to be, philosophically speaking.

Nobody has so far discovered an adequate answer to Hume’s problem of induction (and many have tried, including most famously Karl Popper), but Hume himself would have advised us not to panic. The realization should simply instill some humility when we talk about the power of reason and science; it is not a motive to abandon either. We use whatever tools we have in the best way we can, even though we have no idea why they seem to work so well—a very pragmatic, as well as humbling, attitude for the philosopher who was so congenial as a human being that his French colleagues called him “le bon David.”

So while Rousseau arguably opened the door to the sort of rejection of reason and embracing of emotion that still plagues our post-Romantic and postmodern world, Hume simply reminded us that emotions are just as defining of the human condition as reason is, and appreciating the limits of the latter is, well, the reasonable thing to do for scientists and philosophers alike.