

ARTICLES AND ESSAYS

Philosophical Solitude: David Hume versus Jean-Jacques Rousseau

by *Barbara Taylor*

A perfect solitude is, perhaps, the greatest punishment we can suffer. Every pleasure languishes when enjoyed a-part from company, and every pain becomes more cruel and intolerable.

David Hume (1711–76), *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 1739–40¹

I bless heaven for making me... a hermit... rather than a philosopher!

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–78), ‘Letter to Mme d’Épinay’, 1757²

The philosopher meditating alone in his study is a cliché of western culture. But behind the hackneyed image lies a long history of controversy. The historian of science Steven Shapin, in a seminal essay on solitariness and early modern natural philosophy, finds ‘considerable disagreement’ about ‘where the life of the mind ought to be located’.³ It is this disagreement that I explore here. Where should a philosophical life be enacted: in solitary settings – cells or closets or garrets – or in ‘the same venues [as those] inhabited by the active citizen’?⁴ The question is very old, stretching back to ancient Greece and Rome, but in the Europe of Francis Bacon and Isaac Newton and, later, David Hume and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, it took on new significance and energy.⁵ I begin by sketching a brief history of the debate before going on to examine the contrasting perspectives of Hume and Rousseau. But first a mention of the project of which this essay is a part.

I am writing an intellectual history of solitude in Enlightenment Britain. Researching the history of solitude is challenging. Of all the human universals, solitude is probably the least-examined, the least-historicized. Birth, death, desire, pain – all have substantial historiographies, but not solitude. Why? Nietzsche may give us part of the answer. ‘Oh[!]’ he exclaimed in 1881, ‘if there were someone who could tell us the history of that subtle feeling called solitude!’⁶ Solitude is subtle, intangible; like all psychological states, it needs to be conceptualized before it can be historically analysed. What is this subtle feeling, if it *is* a feeling, that we call solitude? The commonsense reply – an emotional response to an absence of other people – clearly won’t do, since being with others is for many people the most solitary condition of all. Isolation, seclusion, inwardness, privacy: none of these are solitude, although some may be preconditions for it. Sometimes aloneness is lonely – for

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some people unbearably lonely: ‘*Solitude*’, John Donne wrote after a period of confinement with illness, ‘is a torment which is not threatened in hell itself’.⁷ For other people – especially but not exclusively religious solitaries – solitude is experienced as a privileged site of intimate connection, an always-accompanied condition. ‘Never less alone than when alone’; ‘nothing so companionable as solitude’; ‘Alone in a crowd’; ‘solitude is best society’... the famous epigrams say it all; the rhetoric of solitude is crammed with such paradoxes.

In addition, to make matters even more taxing, the language of solitude is not only paradoxical but polysemous, a semantic field rather than a unitary discourse. In the period I am studying, that is from the 1660s to the 1820s, an English-speaking person might use ‘solitude’ to mean leisure (*otium* in classical Latin), country life, religious devotion, philosophical contemplation, self-love, covertness, introspection, daydreaming, a melancholy disposition. Very often its referents were framed in oppositional terms: *otium* versus *negotium* (busy-ness); private contemplation versus public action; country versus city; self-love versus friendship; introspection versus conversation; fantasy versus reason; secrecy versus openness. During the Renaissance these antitheses became the focus of innumerable set-piece debates, to the point where Michel de Montaigne, in a 1580 essay, dismissed solitariness as an outworn topic (before launching into his own discussion of it).⁸

Most of these solitudes were not solitary in the modern sense, that is, they only rarely denoted complete aloneness. Rather, as Shapin points out, they involved withdrawal from one type of social setting – a city, a court, a cathedral – to another: a country house, a monastery, a prayer closet in a family home.⁹ These forms of withdrawal could be but were not necessarily controversial, whereas to be wholly solitary was, with some few exceptions, blameworthy: unnatural, inhuman, even monstrous. An Aristotelean epigram, ‘anyone who delights in solitude must be either a beast or a god’, was endlessly repeated, even by people who favoured the solitary life.¹⁰

Yet solitude was also associated with the highest forms of knowledge. This too had an ancient pedigree. Man may be essentially social, as Aristotle insisted – ‘one whose nature is to live with others’ – but men who devoted themselves to truth-seeking were set apart from their fellows: ‘the philosopher, even when by himself, can contemplate truth’, Aristotle wrote, ‘...he can perhaps do so better if he has fellow-workers, but still he is the most self-sufficient’.¹¹ A life dedicated to pure contemplation was permissibly solitary. With Christianity, this lone truth-seeking was sacralized: solitary places – gardens, deserts, wilderness retreats – became settings for divine communion and the receiving of holy instruction. Like pagan philosophers, these Christian isolates formed a moral elite: men, and some women, whose spiritual calling set them apart from ordinary mortals. This exceptionalism framed medieval and early Renaissance attitudes toward the contemplative life, both lay and clerical. For the god-like few – philosophers, saints, geniuses – solitude brought the noble joys of speculative wisdom, religious

inspiration, and artistic creativity; for the common herd it spelled vice and debility.¹²

In the case of scholarly recluses, the negative valuation gained ground from the late Renaissance onward as intellectual modernizers produced a steady stream of writings deprecating ‘the obscureness...of contemplative men’.¹³ The principal targets of these strictures were the scholastics or ‘schoolmen’, practitioners of what Thomas Hobbes derisively labelled ‘Aristotely’, that is the Christianized Aristotelianism, famous for its hair-splitting and metaphysical quibbling, which had dominated European philosophy since the twelfth century.¹⁴ Throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries modernists railed against what Francis Bacon described as the ‘degenerate learning’ of the scholastics whose

...wits being shut up in the cells of a few authors (chiefly Aristotle their dictator) as their persons were shut up in the cells of monasteries and colleges...did out of no great quantity of matter and infinite agitation of wit spin out unto us those laborious webs of learning... admirable for the fineness of thread and work, but of no substance or profit.¹⁵

Derisive caricatures of such men – slovenly, lazy, absent-minded, bad-mannered – proliferated across Europe, accompanied with warnings against the debilitating psychological effects of celibate seclusion (‘monkish solitude’).¹⁶ In 1621 the Oxford don Robert Burton, in his compendious *Anatomy of Melancholy*, echoed centuries-worth of medical opinion when he blamed the ‘enforced solitariness’ of scholars (along with that of ‘monks, friars, anchorites’) for the morbid condition known as melancholy, the ‘disease of the learned’ as it was widely labelled.¹⁷ ‘Fear, sorrow, suspicion...weariness of life’ were said to dog the melancholic scholar, alternating with ‘phantastical meditations’ which ‘overcome, distract and detain them.’¹⁸ Cut loose from the restraints of publicity, the lone thinker’s mind was bombarded with crazed imaginings: a susceptibility that seems to have aroused increasing disquiet over the centuries, and is still a concern in medical circles today.

For Baconian natural philosophers and other practitioners of the ‘new learning’, these warnings about the perils of philosophical seclusion were accompanied by a growing emphasis on the communality and practical utility of intellectual endeavour.¹⁹ Scientific enquiry, as Bacon counselled, was a ‘profoundly social’ enterprise devoted to ‘the relief of man’s estate’.²⁰ In 1667 the official historian of the Royal Society, Thomas Sprat, condemned scholars ‘who retire from humane things, and shut themselves up in a narrow compass’, for ‘what sorry kinds of Philosophy must they needs produce...[who] separate themselves...from the converse of mankind?’ Even ‘the excellent Monsieur des Cartes’ – famous for his solitary meditations – was slated by Sprat for having sought truth in ‘the naked *Ideas* of his

own mind': a method 'which can by no means stand with a practical and universal Inquiry'.²¹

Yet throughout the learned world there remained an alternative version of the philosophical life which legitimated solitude. Descartes's discovery of the cogito while 'shut up alone in a stove-heated room' became emblematic of heroic truth-seeking.²² 'It occurred to me', he later wrote of his epiphany, 'that there is very often less perfection in works. . .carried out by the hands of various masters, than in those on which one individual alone has worked.'²³ Isaac Newton's intellectual reclusiveness was legendary, while his fellow savant Robert Boyle publicly yearned to be left alone in his laboratory.²⁴ In 1659 Boyle's friend John Evelyn wrote to Boyle proposing the creation of a lay monastery where 'virtuous persons' of a scientific bent might retire to 'improve [their time] to the glory of God Almighty, and the benefit of others'.²⁵ Evelyn was a passionate devotee of solitude, yet even he felt compelled to acknowledge its much-heralded dangers, especially for people of weak moral fibre. 'He ought to be a wise and good man indeed that dares trust himself alone', he wrote in a pamphlet debate over solitude: 'for Ambition and Malice, Lust and Superstition are in Solitude as in their Kingdom.'²⁶

Evelyn, Boyle and Newton were men of enlightened science. For them, lone philosophizing meant open empirical enquiry, a 'redefined and relegitimated' version of solitary study which by the beginning of the eighteenth century had advocates in all fields of Enlightenment scholarship.²⁷ For Edward Gibbon, solitude was the 'school of genius', while for the enlightened divine Vicesimus Knox 'mature reflection in silence and solitude' was the mark of a true 'Christian orator'.²⁸ In 1742 David Hume recommended 'leisure and solitude' as prerequisites for those 'higher and more difficult Operations of the Mind' required by advanced learning. These intellectual retreats were only ever to be temporary, however, unlike what Hume derided as the 'moaping recluse study' of the scholastic age.²⁹ Hume's *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1751) included solitude (along with 'celibacy, fasting, self-denial. . .humility, silence') in the 'train of monkish virtues' which 'stupify the understanding and harden the heart, obscure the fancy and sour the temper'.³⁰ Intermittent withdrawal – for religious devotions or scholarly application – might be commendable, but a wholly sequestered existence was pathological. This was especially true in the case of women seeking a life of 'philosolitude' (a neologism coined by a sixteenth-century Spanish woman scholar).³¹ In 1696 the Christian Platonist Mary Astell was accused of promoting monasteries for women when she argued the merits of a retired female life dedicated to religion and 'Speculation'.³² Her predecessor Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle – natural philosopher, playwright, novelist, flamboyant dresser and self-declared 'addict' of contemplative solitude – was held up for derision by her intellectual contemporaries (although not by her fellow solitude-lover, John Evelyn, who admired her). 'Tis a sin against Nature for women to be Incloystred, Retired or restrained', Cavendish had a male character exclaim in a 1662 play,

‘[T]hose women which restrain themselves from the company and use of men, are damned.’³³ A century later Hume wrote to a friend about a Mrs Mallett who ‘seems to be going upon a strange Project of living alone in a Hermitage, in the midst of the Forrest [sic] of Fountainebleau’. ‘The Woman is Wrong in the Head’, was his correspondent’s verdict.³⁴

By Hume’s day a strong partiality for solitude, in men as well as women, was judged by many to be wrong-headed. Eighteenth-century opinion divided sharply; more sharply perhaps, my research suggests, than in any previous period. So while poets hymned the joys of pastoral solitude, or waxed melancholy in lonely graveyards, and novelists, gripped by the new fashion for intense feeling, sent their protagonists into solitary places to relieve over-charged hearts, other writers – or even the same writers, in some cases – intensified their attacks on solitariness.³⁵ The perils of the unbridled imagination were, as I’ve indicated, an accelerating concern. Dr Johnson was one of many to warn of this: ‘All power of fancy over reason is a degree of insanity. . .’, he declared; ‘This. . .is one of the [greatest] dangers of solitude.’³⁶

Solitude bred irrationality and fanaticism; it was self-indulgent, lustful (masturbation, never previously cause for much concern, became a medical obsession), and – key descriptors these – ‘barbaric’, ‘savage’, ‘bestial’, the obverse of polite civility.³⁷ This characterization of solitude as primitive was an ancient topos, stretching back at least to Aristotle, but from the mid seventeenth century it increased in significance, stimulated in part by the extended quarrel over human nature inaugurated by Hobbes’s description of the state of nature as brutish and solitary, and by the rise of philosophical histories, mostly Scottish, tracing mankind’s evolution from a ‘savage and solitary’ state to the sociable world of modern ‘civilization’ (an eighteenth-century neologism).³⁸ Hume’s treatment of the theme, in his essay ‘On the Refinement of the Arts’, was typical. As civilization advanced, Hume wrote,

the more sociable men become: nor is it possible, that, when enriched with science, and possessed of a fund of conversation, they should be contented to remain in solitude, or live with their fellow-citizens in that distant manner, which is peculiar to ignorant and barbarous nations.³⁹

For Hume it was these sociable men and women – the ‘conversible world’, as he dubbed polite society – that philosophy had now to address. Echoing the *Spectator*’s promise to bring philosophy ‘out of Closets and Libraries, Schools and Colleges’ onto the ‘tea-tables’ of the nation, Hume called for a ‘League betwixt the learned and conversible Worlds’ and offered himself as an emissary from the world of learned men who, if cut off from ‘good Company’, as in the case of the Scholastics, became ‘barbarous’ in their manners and ‘Chimerical’ in their reasoning. ‘And indeed’, as he opined, ‘what cou’d be expected from Men who never consulted Experience in any of their Reasonings, or who never search’d for that Experience, where alone it is to be found, in common Life and Conversation?’⁴⁰

Hume's tone here was light; but the point about true philosophy emerging out of 'common life and conversation' was a serious one, echoed by many Enlightenment savants. 'Meditating by one's self is like digging in a mine', Locke wrote: 'it often, perhaps, brings up maiden earth, ...but whether it contains any mettle in it, is never so well tryed as in conversation.'⁴¹ Social converse and public criticism were filtrates separating insight from error. 'Truth, it is supposed, may bear *all* lights', Lord Shaftesbury pronounced, while Dr Johnson (who was phobic about solitude) pitted the 'ready man' of conversational society against the reclusive scholar who, 'burie[d] among his manuscripts', regards his ideas as 'incontestable truths' and if forced to hear other scholars' points of view is 'amazed' and 'confounded': 'he, therefore, that has collected his knowledge in solitude, must learn its application by mixing with mankind'.⁴² 'Be a philosopher; but, amidst all your philosophy, be still a man', Hume famously exhorted himself, in that oddly self-referential style of readerly address that appears so often in his philosophizing.⁴³

Yet society was also the realm of superstition and prejudice, of eloquence masking ignorance, of false ideas taken on trust. This was not philosophy. What Locke derided as '[t]he floating of other men's opinions in our brains' was not knowledge.⁴⁴ A true philosopher must be independent-minded, detached from authority, faction, intellectual fashion. But the price of such detachment could be solitude, as it was for both Hume and Rousseau.⁴⁵ It is to Hume that I now turn.

From adolescence onward, David Hume never took any idea on trust; every proposition, no matter how sacrosanct, was met, as he later recalled, with 'an anxious search after arguments'.⁴⁶ The result was the famous Humean scepticism, as first revealed in *A Treatise of Human Nature*, a book written in the provincial seclusion of the town of La Flèche in Anjou, home to the Jesuit college in which Descartes had studied. Almost nothing is known about this period in Hume's life, except that it obviously involved a very high level of intellectual activity.⁴⁷ A few years earlier such strenuous application had resulted in a breakdown. We know this because in 1734, that is when he was twenty-three, Hume wrote to an unnamed physician – probably George Cheyne, an expert in nervous diseases – asking for help with a range of debilitating mental and bodily symptoms. The symptoms had first appeared when he was eighteen, after a period of intense philosophical study. Various remedies had been attempted, including 'fortifying myself with reflections against death, and poverty...and all the other calamities of life'. But while such Stoic ruminations might be 'exceeding useful, when joined with an active life... in solitude they serve to little other purpose, than to waste the spirits'. Other treatments had been tried, more symptoms had appeared and Hume had consulted a doctor who told him he was suffering from the 'disease of the learned'.⁴⁸ Now five years on, with the 'tedious distemper' continuing unabated, Hume was frightened: would he ever recover? he asked his correspondent. '[Will] my Spirits regain their

former Spring & Vigor, so as to endure the Fatigue of deep & abstruse thinking? . . . [Have I] taken a right way to recover?⁴⁹

We don't know whether the unnamed physician replied to this letter. But if he did, either he did not advise against further solitary study or Hume ignored his advice, since within a year – after a brief attempt to refashion himself as a businessman – he was settled in La Flèche. Two years later, still only in his late twenties, he emerged with the complete text of the *Treatise*.

It is difficult now, given the exalted philosophical standing of the *Treatise*, to imagine the young Hume, a mere tyro, ensconced in the near-Cartesian solitude of La Flèche, composing this astonishing work.⁵⁰ How did he feel? Dreadful, he tells us. Book 1 of the *Treatise* ends with a *cri de coeur*: he is, Hume writes, in a 'wretched condition', 'weak' and 'disorder[ed]' in his 'faculties', full of 'desponding reflections'. Above all he feels horribly lonely: 'affrighted and confounded' with a 'forlorn solitude' that he describes in terms strikingly reminiscent of Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*.

Methinks I am like a man, who having struck on many shoals, and having narrowly escap'd shipwreck. . . has yet the temerity to put out to sea in the same leaky weather-beaten vessel. . . The wretched condition, weakness, and disorder of the faculties. . . reduces me almost to despair, and makes me resolve to perish on the barren rock, on which I am at present, rather than venture myself upon that boundless ocean, which runs out into immensity. . . I am first affrighted and confounded with that forelorn [sic] solitude, in which I am plac'd in my philosophy, and fancy myself some strange uncouth monster, who not being able to mingle and unite in society, has been expell'd all human commerce, and left utterly abandon'd and desolate. Fain wou'd I run into the crowd for shelter and warmth; but cannot prevail myself to mix with such deformity. I call upon others to join me. . . but no-one will hearken to me. . . All the world conspires to oppose and contradict me.⁵¹

Such a strange outpouring, with its awkward blend of anguish and conceit, helplessness and heroics. All the long-rehearsed perils of philosophical solitude – melancholy, grandiosity, indolence, paranoia, dogmatism, an 'inflamed imagination' – are present, along with an account of the remedies Hume famously employs:

I dine, I play a game of backgammon, I converse, and am merry with my friends; and when after three or four hours' amusement, I would return to these speculations, they appear so cold, and strained, and ridiculous, that I cannot find in my heart to enter into them any farther.⁵²

Cheerful sociability lifts Hume out of his 'philosophical delirium', as he labels his distress.⁵³ But what sort of delirium was this? How should we interpret this 'pathos-laden description of philosophical catastrophe', as

Hume's biographer James Harris portrays it?⁵⁴ Hume himself attributes the catastrophe to his relentless scepticism which, by exposing the limitations of human reason, has led him to the insupportable recognition that 'we have no choice...but betwixt a false reason and none at all'.⁵⁵ Hume scholars have generally followed him, although their readings of this 'sceptical malady' have varied. Most have been reluctant to engage with the painful emotions expressed in these passages, despite the clear evidence of Hume's earlier breakdown, interpreting them rather as a rhetorical dramatization of reason's frailties – which they undoubtedly are.⁵⁶ But is that all they are? I want to take a slightly different tack, to consider further the 'dreary solitudes' in which the young Hume found himself.

Why philosophize at all, if philosophizing can have such dire consequences? Hume's answer was simple: despite all the risks, he enjoyed it.⁵⁷ For this intellectual Epicurean, philosophical thinking and writing were among life's chief pleasures, to be pursued 'ardently' in solitude, forgotten over backgammon, and later shared with the reading public, the 'conversible world'. His 'forlorn solitude' was a mere chimera, easily exorcized by gregariousness. Or was it? Shortly before his death Hume wrote a brief autobiography in which he portrayed himself as a man of 'open, social and cheerful humour' who faced down all of life's vicissitudes – including his rapidly-approaching demise – with unflinching equanimity.⁵⁸ But there is evidence that suggests otherwise. Letters hint at bouts of depression, along with a persistent ache of disappointment about public indifference to his philosophical works, a perception startlingly at odds with the reality.⁵⁹ And then there was the famous episode in Hume's life to which his autobiography does not allude, when his equanimity completely deserted him: his spectacular quarrel with Jean-Jacques Rousseau – an event which casts new light on Hume's intellectual solitude.

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Hume and Rousseau met in Paris in the mid 1760s. By then Rousseau was a confirmed recluse, having hidden away from real or imagined persecutors for nearly a decade.⁶⁰ By modern standards, this solitariness was far from solitary. In whatever haven Rousseau found himself – country houses large and small, foreign boltholes – he was accompanied by others; sometimes he was so surrounded by people that he ran away to avoid them. And – like most male solitaries – even at his most reclusive Rousseau was serviced by a woman, in his case the one-time chambermaid and mother of his five children, Thérèse Levasseur. Nevertheless, Rousseau's self-image as a loner ('a hermit', 'a bear', as he described himself) was very powerful, and in the final decades of his life he became a veritable apostle of solitude, limning its joys to all who would listen.⁶¹ Many heard him admiringly, among them James Boswell who after a 1764 visit to Rousseau in his 'romantick retirement' in Switzerland came away carolling his praises.⁶² Others were less impressed. In

England the *Critical Review* cast him as a modern Diogenes, ‘a recluse of the gloomy, misanthropic type’, while in France his enemies accused him of fleeing criticism.⁶³ But the sharpest reactions came from Rousseau’s own intellectual circle in Paris, where attitudes to intellectual solitude were at least as equivocal as in Enlightenment Britain.

Rousseau’s first sanctuary was a cottage called the Hermitage, on Mme d’Épinay’s estate at Montmorency, to which he moved in 1756. In the previous year he had published his *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality* with its idyllic portrait of the solitary life of man in the state of nature. The book had attracted fierce criticism, not least from Voltaire who had accused him of ‘trying to turn us into brutes’.⁶⁴ Now Rousseau’s apparent determination to live out this brutish existence in the forests of Montmorency was greeted with accusations of egoism and solipsism. All the ‘literary people’, he later recalled, ‘shouted... that a man by himself is useless to everyone and has not fulfilled his duties in society’.⁶⁵ His fellow *Encyclopédistes* were especially hostile: Grimm (Friedrich Melchior, Baron von Grimm), Mme D’Épinay’s lover, warned her that residing in the Hermitage was likely to drive Rousseau mad, while Denis Diderot mocked him for retreating into ‘brute stupidity under a bearskin mantle’.⁶⁶ Not satisfied with this jibe, in 1757 Diderot sent Rousseau a copy of his new play, *The Natural Son*, containing the line ‘Only the wicked man lives alone’. Assuming this was a reference to him – which it probably was – Rousseau shot back a reproach which elicited an apology from Diderot for derogating his friend’s lifestyle. But ‘all the same’, Diderot couldn’t resist adding, ‘a hermit is a strange sort of citizen’.⁶⁷ The exchange ended their friendship, and Rousseau brooded over it for the rest of his life. In his penultimate work, *Rousseau, Judge of Jean-Jacques*, or the *Dialogues*, completed two years before his death, he returned to it, determined to vindicate his solitariness. ‘Wicked men are not in the wilderness, they are in the world’, he wrote.

Who does not see... that it is not possible for the wicked man to love living alone and with himself? He would feel himself in company that is too bad, he would be too ill at ease, he would not be able to bear it for very long... Amour-propre, the principle of all wickedness... thrives in society, which caused it to be born and where one is forced to compare oneself at each instant. It languishes and dies for want of nourishment in solitude. *Whoever suffices to himself does not want to harm anyone at all.*⁶⁸

Rousseau then went on, with his usual grandiosity, to blame Diderot’s misrepresentation of him for a general revolution in attitudes to solitude. ‘Until that time, the love of seclusion had been regarded as one of the least ambiguous signs of a peaceful and healthy soul’, he wrote; but then, with a ‘stroke of the pen’, Diderot had transformed solitude from a ‘peaceful and gentle taste’ into ‘an infernal rage’, thereby defaming not just Jean-Jacques but all intellectual solitaries:

Many respected wise men and Descartes himself were thereby transformed in an instant into so many awful misanthropes and scoundrels. The Philosopher Diderot may have been alone when he wrote that sentence, but I doubt he was alone when he thought of it, and he took great care to circulate it widely in society. Would that it pleased God that the wicked man were always alone!⁶⁹

Thus – thanks to Diderot and the rest of his erstwhile friends – Rousseau had been made an intellectual outcast, or so he claimed; literary society had rejected him, and he rejected it in turn. Yet Rousseau knew himself to be a wise man as well as a good one. In his *Dialogues* he listed his books, the ‘fruits of [his] seclusion’, comparing them favourably to the ‘profound meditations and immortal works’ of other solitary thinkers.⁷⁰ He also knew himself to be a supreme original, both in character (‘I am not made like any of the [men] I have seen; I dare to believe that I am not made like any that exist.’) and independence of mind: ‘I will never take the public’s judgments as my own’ or be guided ‘by the interpretations of others’.⁷¹ What Rousseau emphatically was *not*, however, was a philosopher: a label he spurned throughout his intellectual career. Philosophers were liars, sophists, narcissists, men who ‘carr[y] the egoism of *amour propre* to its furthest extreme’.⁷² The philosophical influence was wholly invidious: it was philosophy, not peaceful solitude, that divided people from one another, ‘loosening the social bonds formed by mutual esteem and benevolence’.⁷³ Philosophy was the enemy of *pitié*, that natural sympathy of the uncorrupted heart that withers in the face of reason and vanity: ‘It is Philosophy that isolates [man]; by means of Philosophy he secretly says, at the sight of a suffering man, perish if you wish, I am safe’.⁷⁴

By contrast, as he never tired of pointing out, Rousseau himself was a man of warm sympathies and strong attachments: so strong indeed, he confided to his friend Malesherbes, that at times – that is, when his love objects behaved in ways that he didn’t expect or like – his affections threatened his sanity.⁷⁵ This inability to control other people’s feelings tortured Rousseau. His solitariness was driven by this anguish and by his, not unrelated, passion for introspection, his need to stand apart from the noisy world in order to hear ‘that interior voice which all our philosophers have such a stake in stifling and which they treat as a chimera because it no longer speaks to them’.⁷⁶ This ‘interior voice’ was also the voice of God which Rousseau – like many spiritual recluses before him – heard in the ‘innermost citadel’ of his soul.⁷⁷ So this inward turn of Rousseau’s was hardly new, or certainly not new in the way that some historians of selfhood have proposed. Nevertheless, with Rousseau we do see a different kind of solitude come into being: solitude as the epicentre of a singular private self, a self whose authenticity and moral freedom are rooted in the secret world of subjectivity: a ‘new world’, as Lytton Strachey described Rousseau’s seclusion, ‘of mysterious melancholy and quiet intimate delights, of long reflexions amid the

solitudes of Nature, of infinite introspections amid the solitudes of the heart'.⁷⁸

Here, we might think, was Nietzsche's subtle solitude in its first incarnation. If there is such a thing as a distinctively modern self, then Rousseau's hugely influential depictions of his solitude surely helped to create it. But what could a man of this temperament have to say to David Hume, or Hume to him?

The short-lived encounter between the two men was famously catastrophic. The circumstances were not auspicious. In 1762 Rousseau published two incendiary works – his political tract the *Social Contract* and his didactic novel *Émile* – that turned him into a fugitive, pursued by state and church authorities in France and Switzerland. In 1766 Hume offered Rousseau refuge in England. The offer was gratefully accepted. The brouhaha that followed has been narrated many times, twice at book length, so I'm not going to detail it here.⁷⁹ Suffice it to say that both men behaved badly: Rousseau with his usual openness and extravagance, Hume more stealthily. History has dealt with Rousseau more severely: having allowed Hume to bring him to England and to assist him in manifold ways, including persuading King George to award him a pension, Rousseau then turned on his benefactor, charging him with crimes ranging from a blood-chilling stare to conspiring with his enemies.⁸⁰ There was some emotional truth to these allegations: Hume didn't respect Rousseau (although he loved his fame), and this showed in some of his treatment of him.⁸¹ The punishment, however, far exceeded the offence. Rousseau's paranoia turned the star-struck Hume into a nightmare villain, a monster of sadistic betrayal. Shocked and enraged, Hume retaliated by denouncing Rousseau to all and sundry. Rousseau was a lunatic, Hume declared, 'an arrant madman' who should be locked up.⁸² At the beginning of their acquaintance Hume had complimented Rousseau on their shared 'love of philosophical retreat', but now Rousseau's isolationism was a mark of his derangement, he was a 'wild philosopher' whose solitude was not Socratic, as Hume had earlier praised it, but bestial.⁸³ As the quarrel went public in late 1766, one of Hume's supporters described Rousseau as an orangutan (Rousseau had famously argued that man in the state of nature was a type of ape), while the *London Chronicle* carried a cartoon portraying Rousseau as a bearskin-clad savage, which Hume thought apt.⁸⁴ It isn't hard to understand Hume's hostility: he had been traduced. Also, he knew that Rousseau was writing his *Confessions* and this panicked him, so against all advice from his friends he published a 'concise and genuine' account of their quarrel.⁸⁵ But there was more to it than this, as we can see when we look further into the two men's relationships to solitude.

Rousseau was not the first dedicated solitary with whom Hume had been entangled. Two decades earlier he had served as paid companion to a young aristocrat, the Marquess Annandale, who was eventually declared insane – a fate Hume blamed on his 'excessive love of solitude'.⁸⁶ The year that he spent in rural isolation with Annandale was a miserable one for Hume, and it

seems likely that his relationship with Rousseau awoke memories of this, as he struggled to find somewhere in England sufficiently remote to satisfy his famous charge (he eventually settled him in the wilds of Staffordshire).⁸⁷ It seems likely too that the pathological aloneness Hume discovered in both the Marquess and Rousseau played on his own ambivalence about solitude: his often-expressed ‘passion for retreat’ vying with his disapproval of ‘monkish solitude’ and a fear that his own reclusive tendencies might make him unfit for polite society, like a ‘Hottentot’ fleeing civilization for brute solitude, as one letter suggested.⁸⁸ Throughout his career Hume assiduously cultivated a reputation for kindly conviviality – *le bon David*, his Paris friends dubbed him – in stark contrast to Rousseau’s isolationism.

But there is a paradox here. For despite Hume’s image as a model of genteel sociability as against Rousseau’s graceless solipsism, it was Rousseau who repeatedly opened himself to scrutiny, both internal and external, and Hume who hid in the solitude of an undisclosed self. I offer this argument provisionally, more perhaps as a provocation than a conclusion, and I conclude by elaborating on it.

* * *

What are we doing, when we think? Or to put the question rather differently: who are we with, when we are thinking? There is a long tradition, inaugurated by Plato, which depicts thinking as inner dialogue, ‘a talk the soul carries on with itself’ as Socrates famously described it.⁸⁹ For Saint Augustine and many Christian contemplatives after him, the dialogic relationship was with God, while for Enlightenment Platonists such as Lord Shaftesbury, echoing Socrates, it was with the self as colloquist, one-half of a ‘doubled soul’, as Shaftesbury wrote; a two-in-one as Hannah Arendt much later described it, such that the thinking self is always, as Arendt put it, ‘in company...solitary but not lonely’; or as Shaftesbury said, quoting Scipio, ‘never less alone than when I am by myself’.⁹⁰

Rousseau’s lone meditations display a powerful sense of this inner companionship, of a solitude shared with an alter-ego whose presence he often found deeply enriching but also, all too often, darkly persecutory. As Grimm said of Rousseau, ‘he takes with him a companion who will not suffer him to rest in peace’.⁹¹ In his *Rousseau: Judge of Jean-Jacques*, mentioned above, Rousseau gave this tormenting companion a voice as the ‘Frenchman’, an interlocutor who repeats every vicious criticism that has ever been lobbed at Rousseau which his hapless target, dubbed ‘Rousseau’, attempts to rebut. Yet in his final work, *Reveries of a Solitary Walker*, this other self (‘my expansive soul’ as Rousseau describes it in this text) appears as serene or joyful, even at times euphoric with sublime joy, ‘a stupefying ecstasy...-which...made me cry out in the agitation of my raptures, “Oh great being! Oh great being...”’.⁹² Before their falling-out Hume had noted this mystical element in Rousseau, his feeling of being in ‘immediate communication with

the divinity'.⁹³ In this respect at least Rousseau's inwardness was as old as religious experience itself, certainly as old as the experiences described in Augustine's *Confessions*, the work which provided the model for Rousseau's *Confessions*. Like Augustine, Rousseau displays himself to his readers inside out – the private life of the soul nakedly exposed: a characteristically paradoxical act for this endlessly paradoxical solitaire.

And Hume? Who was Hume with, when he was alone? The philosopher's answer in the *Treatise* is unequivocal: no-one. No gods for this faithless thinker; nor any kind of philosophically credible subjective presence.⁹⁴ No self, no inner Hume, no enduring 'I' with whom to commune. Perhaps some other person – some ordinary unseptical person – might look within, Hume observes, and find 'something simple and contin'd, which he calls *himself*, but 'I am certain there is no such principle in me'. Peering within, all Hume found were fleeting sensory perceptions, no me-substance, no soul and – most surprisingly and intriguingly perhaps – no inner speech, none of that dialogic chatter that accompanies human cognition.⁹⁵ Self-identity, Hume writes, is 'merely a quality which we attribute to [our perceptions], because of the union of their ideas in the imagination. . .'. The self, Hume declares, is imaginary, 'a fiction'.⁹⁶ It is at this point in the *Treatise*, at the end of Book I, that Hume breaks into his wail of loneliness:

Where am I, or what? From what causes do I derive my existence, and to what condition shall I return? . . . What beings surround me? and on whom have I any influence, or who have any influence on me? I am confounded with all these questions -⁹⁷

– from which, as we saw before, cheerful conviviality rescues him. Instead of fruitlessly searching for a self, Hume simply enacts it in his relationships with others. This, he insists, is what all people naturally do. As James Harris says, Hume's account of human nature is 'compulsively social'.⁹⁸ The experiential self is relational; people live themselves through other people. Human beings, Hume insists – *contra* Hobbes's vision of humankind as fundamentally egoistical – are sympathetic creatures, feeling with and for each other, and it is this 'remarkable propensity' that shapes our subjectivity.⁹⁹ As Harris writes, 'for Hume the sense of self is a thoroughly social artefact, the product entirely of sympathetic responses to the opinions and sentiments of others'.¹⁰⁰ Selfhood is grounded in the felt presence of others; a complete absence of other people is unsupportable.

We can form no wish, which has not a reference to society. A perfect solitude is, perhaps, the greatest punishment we can suffer. Every pleasure languishes when enjoyed a-part from company, and every pain becomes more cruel and intolerable.¹⁰¹

For the young Hume then, philosophical solitude was morbid, conjuring up doubts and fears from which everyday sociality, ‘the common life’, rescued him; or so he claimed.¹⁰² Did this change in the course of his life? We do not know. From his contretemps with Rousseau it’s clear that solitariness went on being an issue for Hume, but how exigent an issue cannot be discerned.¹⁰³ In a period when personal letters were often far from private, circulating widely in educated circles – as we know that many of Hume’s letters did – his correspondence unsurprisingly reveals little beyond the ambivalence I’ve described. And we learn nothing from his late-life autobiography with its impossibly equable narrator. Whoever the dying Hume felt himself to be in the final solitude of his writing chamber, he was not going to share this with his reading audience.

For Rousseau, by contrast, solitude provided a space of freedom – for thought, desire, reverie – far greater than the common life, much less salon philosophizing, could ever offer him. ‘I bless heaven’, he wrote to Mme D’Épinay, ‘for making me. . . a hermit. . . rather than a philosopher!’ But hermits, as Diderot had snidely pointed out, do not make good citizens: one of the few points on which he and Rousseau agreed. So, in a final twist to this story, it was Rousseau, not Hume, who in his political writings condemned solitude as inimical to civic unity, even going so far as to counsel banishment for recalcitrant recluses.¹⁰⁴ A solitariness permissible for Jean-Jacques – that intellectual renegade whose ‘independent nature [makes] me incapable of enduring the constraints. . . necessary for anyone who wants to live among men’ – was forbidden to ordinary men, and even more to ordinary women, whose routinized subjugation, as prescribed in *Émile* and elsewhere, showed these constraints at their most repressive.¹⁰⁵ Solitude for Rousseau was a maverick male privilege: an idea with no appeal whatsoever to Hume whose intellectual heterodoxy was married to a passion for public recognition and a delight in social belonging. Yet for both men (as indeed for all of us) the path to knowledge could be a lonely one. The questing mind lives everywhere and nowhere; its wanderings can feel frighteningly solitary, lone voyages across boundless seas, as they did for the young Hume. Gods, Socratic interlocutors and other possible inner companions notwithstanding, there is a zone within the reflective self which is absolutely solitary – a ‘point where we all stand single’ as Wordsworth wrote – where are to be found some of philosophy’s greatest pleasures as well as its undeniable perils. I wish my readers plenty of the former and few of the latter, with some convivial games of backgammon, or maybe a friendly drink or two, when productive solitude gives way, as it occasionally must, to the loneliness of the creative mind, past and present.

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

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- 1 David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739–40), London, 1987, p. 412.
- 2 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, ‘Letter to Mme d’Épinay’ (1757), quoted in Leo Damrosch, *Rousseau: Restless Genius*, Boston, 2005, p. 293.
- 3 Steven Shapin, ‘“The Mind is its Own Place”: Science and Solitude in Seventeenth-Century England’, *Science in Context* 4: 1, 1991, p. 200.
- 4 Shapin, ‘The Mind is its Own Place’, p. 200.
- 5 *The Philosopher in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Conal Condren, Stephen Gaukroger and Ian Hunter, Cambridge, 2009.
- 6 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudice of Morality* (1881), Cambridge, 1997, p. 253.
- 7 John Donne, ‘Solus Adest. The Physician Comes’, *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions* (1624): <https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/d/donne/john/devotions/chapter5.html>.
- 8 Michel de Montaigne, ‘On Solitude’, *The Complete Essays* (1580), London, 1987, pp. 267–78.
- 9 Shapin, ‘The Mind is its Own Place’, p. 195.
- 10 Francis Bacon, ‘Of Friendship’ (1597), in *The Major Works*, Oxford, 2002, pp. 390–1. Aristotle had written: ‘he who is unable to live in society, or who has no need because he is sufficient for himself, must be either a beast or a god’: Aristotle, *The Politics* [c350 BCE], translation taken from *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. Jonathan Barnes (1984), ed. Stephen Everson, Cambridge, 1996, p. 14.
- 11 Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics* (c340 BCE), translated and introduced by David Ross (1925), revised ed J. L. Ackrill and J.O. Urmson, Oxford, 1992, p. 264.
- 12 For Renaissance perspectives on the relationship between solitude and genius see Noel L. Brann, *The Debate Over the Origin of Genius During the Italian Renaissance*, Leiden, 2002; for the seventeenth and eighteenth century see Shapin, ‘The Mind is Its Own Place’, pp. 192, 193, 205, 209.
- 13 Francis Bacon, ‘The Advancement of Learning’ (1605), *Major Works*, p. 132.
- 14 Steven Shapin, *Never Pure: Historical Studies of Science*, Baltimore, 2010, p. 158.
- 15 Bacon, ‘Advancement of Learning’, p. 140.
- 16 The association between sickness and scholarship stretches back at least to Aristotle: Anne Vila, *Suffering Scholars. Pathologies of the Intellectual in Enlightenment France*, Philadelphia, 2018, p. 1.
- 17 Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621), New York, 2001, p. 245; Mart J. van Lieburg, *The Disease of the Learned*, Oss, 1990; Vila, *Suffering Scholars*.
- 18 Burton, *Anatomy*, pp. 246–7.
- 19 Shapin, ‘The Mind is its Own Place’, p. 201; Richard Yeo, *Defining Science: William Whewell, Natural Knowledge and Public Debate in Early Victorian Britain*, Cambridge, 2003, pp. 135–6. For a nuanced account of the interplay between solitude and sociality in conceptualizations of the scientific life see Claire Preston, *The Poetics of Scientific Investigation in Seventeenth-Century England*, Cambridge, 2015, especially chap. 3.
- 20 Bacon, ‘Advancement’, p. 148.
- 21 Thomas Sprat, *The History of the Royal Society of London for the Improving of Natural Knowledge*, London, 1667, pp. 95–7.
- 22 Rene Descartes, *Discourse on the Method* (1637) in *Descartes: Key Philosophical Writings*, ed. Enrique Chávez-Arviso, transl. Elisabeth S. Haldane and George R. T. Ross, Ware, 1997, p. 77. The ‘cogito’ refers to Descartes’s famous proposition that the only certain knowledge achievable by thinking is that one is thinking: ‘cogito, ergo sum’: ‘I am thinking, therefore I am’.

23 Descartes, *Discourse*, p. 77. But see below (n. 56) for a different version of Descartes's philosophical solitude.

24 Shapin, 'The Mind is Its Own Place', p. 204, 205; Steven Shapin, *A Social History of Truth: Civility and Science in Seventeenth-Century England*, Chicago, 1994, p. 164.

25 John Evelyn to Robert Boyle, 3 Sept 1659: *The Letterbooks of John Evelyn*, eds. Douglas Chambers and David Galbraith, Toronto, 2014, vol 1, p 254. See also Gillian Darley, *John Evelyn: Living for Ingenuity*, New Haven, 2007, p. 157.

26 John Evelyn, *Publick Employment and an Active Life Prefer'd to Solitude* (1667), in *Public and Private Life in the Seventeenth Century: the Mackenzie-Evelyn Debate*, ed. Brian Vickers, Delmar NY, 1986, p. 168.

27 Shapin, 'The Mind is Its Own Place', p. 203.

28 Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, London, 1766–88, chap. 50; Vicesimus Knox DD, 'On the Duties of the Preacher and the Hearer', *Works of Vicesimus Knox*, London, 1824, vol. 6, p. 308.

29 David Hume, 'Of Essay Writing' (1742), in *David Hume: Essays, Moral, Political and Literary*, ed. Eugene F. Miller, Indianapolis, 1985, pp. 533–4.

30 David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (1751), in Hume, *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. P H Nidditch, Oxford, 1989, p. 270.

31 Luisa Sigea, *The Dialogue of Two Young Maidens on Courtly Life and the Life of Retirement* (1552), quoted in Joan Gibson, 'The Logic of Chastity: Women, Sex and the History of Philosophy in the Early Modern Period', *Hypatia* 21: 4, 2006, p. 4.

32 Mary Astell, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies* (1694), ed. Patricia Springborg, Peterborough Ontario, 2002, p. 105; Jaqueline Broad, *Women Philosophers of the Seventeenth Century*, Cambridge, 2002, pp. 122–4. Astell's opponent, interestingly, was another leading woman intellectual: the philosopher Damaris Masham.

33 Bridget Hill, 'A Refuge from Men: the Idea of a Protestant Nunnery', *Past and Present* 117, 1987, p. 128.

34 David Hume to Andrew Miller, 18 April 1764, *The Letters of David Hume*, ed. John Y. T. Greig, vol. 1, p. 434.

35 In the late eighteenth century the Swiss physician Johann-Georg Zimmermann published a work on solitude, *Über die Einsamkeit* [1755–6; expanded version 1784–5] which was rapidly translated into French and English and become very influential. For insightful discussions of Zimmermann's book and its impact, see David Vincent, *A History of Solitude*, London, forthcoming 2020; Anne Vila, 'Solitary Identities: Perspectives on the "Contemplative" Life from 18th-Century Literature, Medicine, and Religion (France, Switzerland)', presented 18 July 2019 at the congress of the International Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies in Edinburgh. I am grateful to David Vincent and Anne Vila for permitting me to read their works prior to publication.

36 Samuel Johnson, *The History of Rasselas, Prince of Abissinia* (1759), Oxford, 2009, pp. 93–4.

37 For the eighteenth-century masturbation panic see Thomas Laqueur, *Solitary Sex: a Cultural History of Masturbation*, Brooklyn NY, 2004. The longstanding association between solitude and 'savagery' has not been systematically investigated but for some interesting reflections on the connection see Pieter Verstraete, 'Savage Solitude: the Problematisation of Disability at the turn of the Eighteenth Century', *Paedagogica Historica* 45: 3, 2009, pp. 269–89.

38 Thomas Reid, *Essays on the Active Powers of Man*, Edinburgh 1788, part 2, chap. 2 ('Animal Principles of Action: Desires'), p. 141.

39 Hume, 'Of Refinement in the Arts' (1760), *Essays*, p. 271.

40 *The Spectator*, 12 March 1711; Hume, 'Of Essay Writing', pp. 533–5. Many recent studies of intellectual culture in early modern Europe have emphasized the central part played by 'civil conversation': for a particularly insightful discussion of this see Peter N. Miller, *Peiresc's Europe: Learning and Virtue in the Seventeenth Century*, London, 2000. While Miller's study focuses on the early seventeenth century his arguments illuminate later developments.

41 Richard Yeo, 'John Locke on Conversation with Friends and Strangers', *Parergon* 26: 2, 2009, p. 33. Scholars who cloistered themselves in 'secret cabinet[s]', Locke went on, 'cantonnise themselves' (Yeo, pp. 19–20).

42 Anthony Ashley Cooper, Third Earl of Shaftesbury, 'Sensus Communis, an Essay on the Freedom of Wit and Humour in a Letter to a Friend', *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* (1711), ed. Lawrence E. Klein, Cambridge, 1999, p. 30; Samuel Johnson, *The Adventurer*, no 85, 28 Aug. 1753.

43 David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748), in *Enquiries*, p. 9.

44 John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689), London, 1997, p. 105. See also Yeo, 'Locke', pp. 21, 31.

45 I borrow my phrasing from Lorraine Daston, who takes the argument further: 'The price of [scholarly] detachment was often solitude, and the price of solitude could be madness': Lorraine Daston, 'Enlightenment Fears, Fears of Enlightenment', in *What's Left of Enlightenment*, ed. Keith M. Baker and Peter H. Reill, Stanford CA, 2001, p. 122. Daston goes on to describe Rousseau's solitariness as a 'lonely megalomania' consequent on his 'thirst for independence' (pp. 122–23).

46 In 1751 Hume wrote to a friend describing an encounter with his younger self: 'Tis not long ago that I burn'd an old Manuscript Book, wrote before I was twenty; which contain'd, Page after Page, the gradual Progress of my Thoughts on that head [belief in God]. It began with an anxious Search after Arguments, to confirm the common Opinion: Doubts stole in, dissipated, return'd, were again dissipated, return'd again; and it was a perpetual Struggle of a restless Imagination against Inclination, perhaps against Reason': David Hume to Gilbert Elliot of Minto, 10 March 1751, in *Letters*, ed. Greig, vol. 1, p. 154. For Hume's movement away from religious belief see James Harris, *Hume: an Intellectual Biography*, Cambridge, 2015, pp. 48–51; for suggestions that a religious crisis contributed to his breakdown see Annemarie Butler, 'Hume's Early Biography and *A Treatise of Human Nature*', in *The Cambridge Companion to Hume's Treatise*, ed. Donald C. Ainslie and Annemarie Butler, Cambridge, 2015, pp. 1–5; Annette Baier, *The Pursuits of Philosophy: an Introduction to the Life and Thought of David Hume*, Cambridge Mass., 2011, pp. 11–13.

47 Harris, *Hume*, pp. 80–1.

48 Hume, 'Letter to a Physician', March or April 1734, in *Letters*, ed. Greig, vol. 1, pp. 12–18. Greig heads this letter 'To [Dr George Cheyne]' (p. 12) and it does seem likely that Cheyne, a specialist in nervous diseases, author of *The English Malady* (1733), was the addressee, although John Arbuthnot, another well-known physician, is also a possibility (Harris, *Hume*, pp. 76–7).

49 Hume, 'Letter to a Physician', in *Letters*, ed. Greig, p. 18.

50 Reflecting on the 'near Cartesian' solitude in which Hume composed the *Treatise*, Annette Baier contrasts his intellectual solitariness to that of Descartes, writing of Hume that 'a solo attempt of a single thinker, distrustful of education and testimony, and confined to the ideas he can get for himself' produced no 'typically Cartesian conclusions about the seaworthiness of his singly manned and singly maintained vessel'. The result, Baier goes on, was Hume's sense of 'monstrous isolation', which I discuss below. See Annette Baier, *A Progress of Sentiments: Reflections on Hume's Treatise*, Cambridge Mass., 1991, pp. 3–4.

51 David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739–40), Harmondsworth, 1969, pp. 311–12.

52 Hume, *Treatise*, p. 316.

53 Hume, *Treatise*, p. 316. Hume also compares his disorder to the 'Coldness & Desertion of the Spirit' described in the 'Writings of the French Mysticks, & in those of our Fanatics here' (Hume, 'Letter to a Physician', *Letters*, ed. Greig, p. 17): a telling juxtaposition since solitude was regularly blamed for 'fanaticism' and 'enthusiasm'. For Hume on religious enthusiasm see Ann Taves, *Fits, Trances and Visions: Experiencing Religion and Explaining Experience from Wesley to James*, Princeton NJ, 1999, pp. 41–5; for the link between enthusiasm and solitude see Lawrence Klein, 'Sociability, Solitude and Enthusiasm', in Lawrence E. Klein and Anthony J. La Vopa, *Enthusiasm and Enlightenment in Europe, 1650–1850*, San Marino CA, 1998, pp. 153–78.

54 Harris, *Hume*, p. 101.

55 Hume, *Treatise*, p. 315. Having dismantled most of the philosophical fundamentals, including causality, Hume was left 'ready to reject all belief and reasoning, and . . . look upon no opinion even as more probable or likely than another', which plunged him into the 'most deplorable condition imaginable' (*Treatise*, p. 316). The literature on Humean scepticism is vast and I make no attempt to summarize it here. But for some illuminating accounts see Baier, *Progress of Sentiments*; Harris, *Hume*; Donald W. Livingstone, *Philosophical Melancholy and*

Delirium: Hume's Pathology of Philosophy, Chicago, 1998; Genevieve Lloyd, *Enlightenment Shadows*, Oxford, 2013, pp. 61–80. As all these commentators point out, Hume sought to distinguish his scepticism from Pyrrhonist extremism, although whether he succeeded in this is less clear (Richard H. Popkin, *The High Road to Pyrrhonism* (1980), Indianapolis, 1993, pp. 103–49).

56 David Livingstone's insistence that the feelings expressed in these passages are 'peculiarly philosophical passions' not to be confused with real emotions (Livingstone, *Philosophical Melancholy*, p. 25) is common among Hume interpreters. But in a recent essay John Richetti gives a more nuanced account, linking Hume's expressions of misery to his 'most radical and of course personal conclusions' about the instability of the self, and leaving open the possibility that he was just as frightened and wretched as he claimed: John Richetti, 'Empiricist Philosophers and Eighteenth-century Autobiography', in *A History of English Autobiography*, ed. Adam Smyth, Cambridge, 2016, pp. 157–60.

It's worth noting that Descartes once gave a not dissimilar account of the psychological impact of his lone meditations: 'So serious are the doubts into which I have been thrown as a result of yesterday's meditation that I can neither put them out of my mind nor see any way of resolving them. It feels as if I have fallen unexpectedly into a deep whirlpool which tumbles around me so that I can neither stand on the bottom nor swim up to the top.' See René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641), transl. John Cottingham, Cambridge, 1991, p. 16. The place of watery metaphors in the language of philosophical discovery might bear investigation.

57 Hume, *Treatise*, p. 318.

58 David Hume, 'My Own Life', Greig, *Letters*, vol. 1, pp. 1–7. Adam Smith's letter to William Strachan on Hume's death supported Hume's self-presentation. Smith described in detail the cheerful equanimity with which Hume approached his death, concluding that his friend had a 'temper, indeed, [that] seemed to be more happily balanced, if I may be allowed such an expression, than that perhaps of any other man I have ever known.... The extreme gentleness of his nature never weakened either the firmness of his mind or the steadiness of his resolutions. His constant pleasanry was the genuine effusion of good nature and good humour, tempered with delicacy and modesty, and without even the slightest tincture of malignity': Adam Smith to William Strachan, in *Letters*, ed. Greig, vol. 2, pp. 450–2.

59 For references to his 'low spirits', 'total indifference towards everything in human life', and 'lost...Relish for pleasure' see Hume, letter to Adam Smith, 13 Sept. 1763; letter to Comtesse de Boufflers, 29 July 1764; in *Letters*, ed. Greig, vol. 1, p. 395, 457; letter to Robert Clerk, 12 Dec. 1761, in *New Letters of David Hume*, Oxford, 1954, ed. Raymond Klibansky and Ernest C. Mossner, p. 65. For Hume's general state of unhappiness in the early 1760s see Ernest C. Mossner, *The Life of David Hume*, Oxford, 1980, p. 421.

It should be noted that many other letters from Hume insisted upon his cheerfulness: responding to his friend William Strahan's comment that he had 'a Desponding character', Hume wrote, 'On the contrary, I am of a very sanguine Disposition' (letter to William Strahan, 25 Oct. 1769, in *Letters*, ed. Greig, vol. 2, p. 210). This was certainly how he wished to be perceived both by his contemporaries and by posterity.

The reception of Hume's works varied, but even his *Treatise*, which he famously claimed 'fell dead-born from the Press' ('My Own Life', *Letters*, ed. Greig, vol. 1, p. 2), got considerable attention. As Harris sums up: 'the narrative of neglect and misunderstanding' that Hume presented in 'My Own Life' and elsewhere, contained 'a considerable amount of exaggeration... Most of his books met with the kind of reception most writers of the time would only dream about': Harris, *Hume*, p. 34.

60 This account of Rousseau's reclusiveness is adapted from my 'Rousseau and Wollstonecraft: Solitary Walkers', in *Thinking with Rousseau: From Machiavelli to Schmidt*, ed. Helena Rosenblatt and Paul Schweigert, Cambridge, 2017, pp. 211–34.

61 Rousseau's passion for solitude is evident in many of his writings, published and unpublished, but was most fully expressed in his final work, *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, written between 1776 and 1778 and published posthumously in 1782. The nature and significance of his reclusiveness has been explored in many works: some I have found particularly useful are Jean Starobinski, *Transparency and Obstruction*, Chicago, 1988; Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Transparency and Obstruction* (1971), transl. Arthur Goldhammer, Chicago, 1988; Marshall Berman, *The Politics of Authenticity: Radical Individualism and the Emergence of Modern Society*, New York, 1970; Jerrold Seigel, *The Idea of the Self*, Cambridge, 2005, pp.

210–47; Tzvetan Todorov, *Imperfect Garden: the Legacy of Humanism*, Princeton, 2002; Leo Damrosch, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Restless Genius*, New York, 2005; Antoine Lilti, *The Invention of Celebrity* (2015), Malden MA, 2017, chap. 5. Anne Vila, in *Suffering Scholars*, discusses the contemporary medical view of Rousseau as a prototype of the melancholic intellectual solitary (pp. 130–40).

62 R. A. Leigh, 'Boswell and Rousseau', *The Modern Language Review* 47: 3 (1952), pp. 290–318.

63 Edward Duffy, *Rousseau in England: The Context for Shelley's Critique of the Enlightenment*, Berkeley CA, 1979, p. 11.

64 Voltaire, letter to Jean-Jacques Rousseau, 30 Aug. 1755; available at <http://courses.washington.edu/hstcu302/Voltaire%20Letter%20to%20Rousseau.htm>. '[N]o one has ever been so witty as you are in trying to turn us into brutes:' Voltaire wrote to him, 'to read your book makes one long to go about on all fours.'

65 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Four Letters to M the Président de Malesherbes Containing the True Picture of My Character*, letter of 28 Jan. 1762, *The Collected Writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, ed. Roger Masters and Christopher Kelly, Hanover NH, 1990–2010 [hereafter *CW*], vol. 5, p. 580.

66 Louisa Shea, *The Cynic Enlightenment: Diogenes in the Salon*, Baltimore, 2010, p. 101.

67 Philip Nicholas Furbank, *Diderot: A Critical Biography*, London, 1993, p. 151. In fact Diderot intermittently expressed strong support, and personal taste, for solitary retreat (see Vila, *Suffering Scholars*, pp. 59–64).

68 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Judge of Jean-Jacques: Dialogues*, *CW*, vol. 1, pp. 99–100.

69 Rousseau, *Judge of Jean-Jacques*, p. 99.

70 Rousseau, *Judge of Jean-Jacques*, pp. 100–101. Commenting on Rousseau's self-portrayal as a philosophic solitary, Geoffrey Symcox notes his debt to classical exile motifs: 'Here I am the barbarian'. Rousseau quoted Ovid in his *First Discourse*, 'for I am not understood by others.' See 'The Wild Man's Return: the Enclosed Vision of Rousseau's Discourses', in *The Wild Man Within: an Image in Western Thought from the Renaissance to Romanticism*, ed. Edward Dudley and Maximilian E. Novak, Pittsburgh, 1972, p. 235.

71 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Confessions*, *CW*, Vol 5, p 5; Rousseau, *Judge of Jean-Jacques*, p. 19, 85.

72 Rousseau, *Judge of Jean-Jacques*, p.79.

73 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Préface de Narcisse* (1753), quoted in Starobinski, Rousseau, p. 23.

74 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origins and Foundations of Inequality Among Men or Second Discourse* (1755), ed. Victor Gourevitch, Cambridge, 1997, p. 153.

75 'Letter to Malesherbes', 28 Jan. 1763, *CW*, vol. 5, p. 581.

76 Rousseau, *Judge of Jean-Jacques*, p. 22.

77 See notes 92, 93.

78 Lytton Strachey, 'The Rousseau Affair', *Books and Characters. French and English* (1907): available at https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/s/strachey/lytton/books_and_characters/chapter10.html

79 David Edmonds and John Eidinow, *Rousseau's Dog: a Tale of Two Great Thinkers at War in the Age of Enlightenment*, London, 2006; Robert Zaretsky and John T. Scott, *The Philosophers' Quarrel: Rousseau, Hume and the Limits of Human Understanding*, London, 2009.

80 The quarrel can be traced through the Hume/Rousseau correspondence and letters exchanged between Hume and his friends in France and Britain. For Rousseau's charge-sheet against Hume see his letter of 10 July 1766: Hume, *Letters*, ed. Greig, vol. 2, pp. 385–401.

81 Hume regarded Rousseau as a much better writer than thinker, admiring his eloquence while having little regard for his philosophical arguments. See, for example, his letter to Comtesse de Boufflers, 22 Jan. 1763, in *Letters*, ed. Greig, vol. 1, p. 373–4; letter to Hugh Blair, quoted in Edmonds and Eidinow, *Rousseau's Dog*, p. 163.

Hume was well aware of Rousseau's reputation for 'entertain[ing] groundless suspicions of his best friends' (letter to Marquise de Barbentane, 16 Feb. 1766, *Letters*, ed. Greig, vol. 2, p. 14) and several of his Paris acquaintances, hearing that he planned to take Rousseau to England, warned him about the likely outcome (letter to Marquise de Barbentane, 16 Feb. 1766, *Letters*, ed. Greig, vol. 2, p. 13, n.3). Interestingly, Hume himself admitted to a similar propensity on at least one occasion (letter to Comtesse de Boufflers, 14 July 1764, in *Letters*, ed. Greig, vol. 1, p. 451). Hume also knew how much actual persecution Rousseau had suffered.

Yet despite this he made secret enquiries about the state of Rousseau's finances (Edmonds and Eidinow, *Rousseau's Dog*, pp. 160–1), entered into secret dealings over his living arrangements, all seemingly with the most benign intentions but covert nonetheless (Edmonds and Eidinow, *Rousseau's Dog*, pp. 183–91), disguised his knowledge about the authorship of an unpleasant spoof directed at Rousseau which acquired wide currency (Edmonds and Eidinow, *Rousseau's Dog*, pp. 192–204), and most astonishingly, opened some of Rousseau's letters (Zaretsky and Scott, *Philosophers' Quarrel*, pp. 159–60).

82 Zaretsky and Scott, *Philosophers' Quarrel*, p. 175; Hume, letter to Richard Davenport, 15 July 1766, in *Letters*, ed. Greig, vol. 2, p. 65.

83 For Rousseau's solitude as Socratic see letter from Hume to Rev. Hugh Blair, 28 Dec. 1765, in *Letters*, ed. Greig, vol. 1, p. 530; for Rousseau's reclusiveness as a mark of derangement see Hume's letter to Anne-Robert-Jacques Turgot, 22 May 1767, in *Letters*, ed. Greig, vol. 2, pp. 137–9, also his letter to Adam Smith, 8 Oct. 1767, in *Letters*, ed. Greig, vol. 2, p. 164. Hume also attributed Rousseau's solitariness to his 'frequent and long Fits of the Spleen' (depression): letter to Rev. Hugh Blair, 25 March 1766, in *Letters*, ed. Greig, vol. 2, p. 30; letter to Comtesse de Boufflers, 3 April 1766, in *Letters*, ed. Greig, vol. 2, p. 35.

84 For Rousseau as an orangutan see Hume, letter to Andrew Miller, 21 Oct. 1766, in *Letters*, ed. Greig, vol. 2, p. 97 n.2. For the cartoon see Hume, letter to Comtesse de Boufflers, 2 Feb. 1767, in *Letters*, ed. Greig, vol. 2, p. 120; Zaretsky and Scott, *Philosophers' Quarrel*, p. 190.

85 *A Concise and Genuine account of the Dispute between Mr. Hume and Mr. Rousseau: with the letters that passed between them during their controversy. As also, the letters of the Hon. Mr. Walpole, and Mr. D'Alembert*, translated from the French, London, 1766: available at <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/ecco/004851885.0001.000/1:3?rgn=div1;view=fulltext#DLPS45>

The account included self-justificatory editorializing on Hume's part which was poorly received in both France and Britain. For Hume's anxiety about Rousseau vilifying him in his *Confessions* see p. 92: 'He [Rousseau] has frequently told me, that he was composing his memoirs, in which justice should be done to his own character, to that of his friends, and to that of his enemies. . . Nothing could be more unexpected to me than my passing so suddenly from the class of his friends to that of his enemies; but this transition being made, I must expect to be treated accordingly; and I own that this reflection gave me some anxiety. A work of this nature, both from the celebrity of the person, and the strokes of eloquence interspersed, would certainly attract the attention of the world; and it might be published either after my death, or after that of the author. In the former case, there would be no body who could tell the story, or justify my memory'. See also Hume to Adam Smith, 8 Oct. 1767, 17 Oct. 1767, in *Letters*, ed. Greig, vol. 2, pp. 166, 168.

In fact Rousseau concluded his *Confessions* in 1765, before the quarrel with Hume (a projected further volume was never written). But in his *Judge of Jean-Jacques* he made slighting references to Hume's pretended kindness to him, dwelling in particular on the portrait of him that Hume had commissioned from Alan Ramsay, which Rousseau detested: *Judge of Jean-Jacques*, pp. 91, 94, 205, 233.

86 Hume, Letter to Sir James Johnstone of Westerhall, 27 Nov. 1745, in *Letters*, ed. Greig, vol. 1, p. 175.

87 The search for somewhere remote enough to satisfy his charge exasperated Hume: letter to Marquise de Barbantane, 16 Feb. 1766, Greig, *Letters*, vol. 2, pp. 15–16. Rousseau, for his part, complained about Hume forcing him to meet people when he wished to be alone: letter to Hume, 4 Dec. 1765, in *Letters*, ed. Greig, vol. 2, pp. 383, 397.

88 Letter to Earl of Shelburne, 12 Dec. 1761, in *Letters*, ed. Greig, vol. 1, p. 348; letter to Robert Clerk, 12 Dec. 1761, in *New Letters*, ed. Klibansky and Mossner, p. 65. Hume also counselled Adam Smith against solitude: Dennis C. Rasmussen, *The Infidel and the Professor: David Hume, Adam Smith and the Friendship that Shaped Modern Thought*, Princeton, 2017, pp. 150–1.

89 Matthew Duncombe, 'Thought as Internal Speech in Plato and Aristotle', *Logical Analysis and the History of Philosophy* 19:106, 2016, pp. 105–25.

90 Shaftesbury, 'Soliloquy, or Advice to an Author', *Characteristics*, pp. 70–83; Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind* (1971), London, 1978, p. 171. Self-converse was a recurring theme among early modern savants: for Robert Boyle on it see *The Works of Robert Boyle*, ed. Michael Hunter and Edward B. Davis, 14 vols, London, 1999–2000, vol. 13, pp. 126–9.

91 Edmonds and Eidinow, *Rousseau's Dog*, p. 272.

92 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Letters to Malesherbes*, *CW*, vol. 5, p. 579.

93 Hume, letter to Rev. Hugh Blair, 28 Dec. 1765, in *Letters*, ed. Greig, vol. 1, p. 530.

94 Hume, 'Of Personal Identity', *Treatise*, pp. 299–311. An 'idea of ourselves is always present to us', Hume writes (*Treatise*, p. 403) but it's an idea with no substantive or spiritual correlate. For Hume's religious scepticism see his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (1779). Hume's sympathy with Rousseau as a victim of persecution probably owed something to the hostility he himself faced as an 'infidel' thinker.

The solitariness of the religious sceptic is a theme with a long history: looking back to Descartes in 1753, the Encyclopedist Turgot surmised that Descartes had not dared to admit the irrelevance of God to his philosophy because of the solitude this entailed: see *The Enlightenment World*, ed. Martin Fitzpatrick, Peter Jones, Christa Knellwolf and Ian McCalman, London, 2006, p. 6.

95 Philip Godfrey-Smith, *Other Minds: the Octopus and the Evolution of Intelligent Life*, London, 2016, p. 138. On the 'soliloquising philosophic voice' in the *Treatise*, see John Richetti, *Philosophical Writing: Locke, Berkeley, Hume*, Cambridge Mass, 1983, p. 40.

96 Hume, *Treatise*, pp. 306–11.

97 Hume, *Treatise*, p. 316. As Ernest Gellner wrote of Hume: 'a philosopher who has excogitated and worked through the epistemological, empiricist calvary to solitude may also be liable to other forms of solitude': *Language and Solitude: Wittengstein, Malinowski and the Habsburg Dilemma*, Cambridge, 1998, p. 44.

98 As Harris says of Hume, he 'attains confidence in his sense of self only when the move is made from the introspection of the study out into the social realm': James A. Harris, 'Reid and Hume on the Possibility of Character', in *Character, Self and Sociability in the Scottish Enlightenment*, ed. Thomas Ahnert and Susan Manning, London, 2011, p. 41.

Hume's writings on selfhood have been endlessly debated. For an illuminating discussion of the issues see Martin Jay, *Songs of Experience*, Berkeley, 2005, pp. 58–66. In his subsequent works Hume eschewed further speculation on the thorny topic.

99 Hume, *Treatise*, pp. 366–82.

100 Harris, 'Reid and Hume', p. 41.

101 Hume, *Treatise*, p. 412. 'Reduce a person to solitude', Hume writes in his *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, 'and he loses all enjoyment, except either that of the sensual or speculative kind...' (p. 220).

102 The contradictions Hume faced in appealing to common life and social instincts as remedies for the 'forlorn solitude' of his philosophy are well discussed by John Mullan in his *Sentiment and Sociability: the Language of Feeling in the Eighteenth Century*, Oxford, 1988, pp. 1–56.

103 In a letter to Turgot written at the height of his quarrel with Rousseau, Hume suggested that the 'notion of Retreat and Solitude' which often seized men of middle age (he was then fifty-six) 'when [they are] disgusted with Business' usually proved unhappy because men at that time of life had fewer sources of pleasure, 'and ought least to be left to their own Reflections': 22 May 1767, *Letters*, ed. Greig, vol. 2, p. 137.

Hume never married. He lived on and off in his family home in Berwickshire for the first half of his life, then with his sister Katherine and housekeeper Peggy Irvine in Edinburgh, with extended intervals in London and Paris. He had many close friends, including many women friends, and appears to have formed a romantic attachment to Mme de Boufflers, which came to nothing.

104 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Of the Social Contract* (1762), Cambridge, 1997, p. 150.

105 Damrosch, *Rousseau*, p. 41. 'The most vicious of men', Rousseau wrote in 1758, 'is he who isolates himself the most, who most concentrates his heart in himself; the best is he who shares his affections equally with all his kind.' See *Politics and the Arts: Letter to M. D'Alembert on the Theatre* (1758), Ithaca NY, 1968, p. 117. I discuss Rousseau's attitude to women in *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Feminist Imagination*, Cambridge, 2003, and in 'Solitary Walkers'.