María José Villaverde Rico, *Rousseau visto por sus contemporáneos: odio e idolatría* (Madrid: Guillermo Escolar, 2025), 223 pp.

John Christian Laursen
University of California, Riverside (EEUU)

This book surveys the wide range of reactions to Jean-Jacques Rousseau in the 18th century. If there was one thing that man could do, it was polarize. Some people loved him, his books, and his ideas, and some people hated them. The same goes today, although I would guess that more people love him today than hate him, and that a lot of that has to do with his critiques of conventions.

María José's book is not an ordinary biography (10). Rather, it is a history and analysis of other people's reactions to him and of his reactions to them. Much of it consists of exploring his feuds with other intellectuals, and he certainly carried on a large number of them. Other books and articles have been written about particular feuds, but this one sets them in juxtaposition and more or less chronological order so we can see a wide panorama and its patterns. One could read all of the following, and many more, on single figures who feuded with Rousseau: Gerardo López Sastre, "Hume y Rousseau, o cuando las desavenencias personales no tocan la filosofía", *Daimon: Revista de Filosofía*, 43, 2008, 169-173; Robert Zaretsky and John T. Scott, *Rousseau, Hume, y los límites del entendimiento humano* (Barcelona: Buridán, 2009); Adrian Ratto, "Soledad y filosofía: Las criticas de Diderot a Rousseau", *Revista de Filosofía* 40, 2015, 45-60; Ourida Mostefai, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau, écrivain polémique* (Leiden: Brill Rodolpi, 2016); Joanna Stalnaker, "Rousseau and Diderot" en Helena Rosenblatt and Paul Schweigert, eds., *Thinking with Rousseau: From Machiavelli to Schmitt* (Cambridge University Press, 2017, 175-191. Or one could read this book, and have a survey of them all.

It is worth mentioning that Rousseau had a wide popular following among women and non-intellectuals who read and cried in response to *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, admired the roles given to Émile and Sophie in *Émile*, and loved Rousseau's paeans to nature. Perhaps Voltaire was as widely known, but other philosophers of the day such as D'Holbach, Helvétius, and Diderot were not, not to mention writers like Kant and Hegel or Habermas and Rawls, who would never have the wide readership that Rousseau did. David Hume was surprised to find out how widely known Rousseau was, outside of the salons and circles of intellectuals (24).

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The book raises the big question of the respective roles of a writer's philosophy and his or her life. There was a time when the history of philosophy was written almost entirely centered on the published work of philosophers with almost no attention to their lives. This was in part because little was known about the personal lives of some philosophers, just as little is known today about the lives of Pyrrho or of Sextus Empiricus, for example – and that in spite of Diogenes Laertius's attempts to describe them in his *Lives of the Philosophers*. Good biographies of philosophers were few and far between until perhaps the last 50 years. But now we know that we can find a lot of clues in their contexts, polemics, and social relations to what philosophers meant when they wrote something. This book helps us understand what Rousseau was trying to do. Most of his polemics are designed to attack his personal and philosophical enemies and defend his own life and views. It is never just philosophy.

Several of Rousseau's enemies started out as his friends. Denis Diderot and Melchior Grimm are two cases of great friendship converted into disgust and hate. Villaverde brings together many testimonies about how big differences in personality, resentments, jealousies (mostly from Rousseau's side) and other personal issues, but also in philosophical and moral values, turned Rousseau against them. Diderot's atheism just did not feel right to Rousseau. But things got worse, and after several years many of his friends or ex-friends were assuming that he had gone crazy (51-52, 93-94, 97, 101, etc.). Villaverde documents in fascinating detail the many blows and counterblows of the polemics between Diderot and Rousseau and their contemporaries. It is intriguing to see Diderot explain why he keeps returning to Rousseau, even after his death: "ask a jilted lover why he still loves his ex-lover and you will find out why a man of letters retains a stubborn attachment to a talented man of letters" (72).

The next big opponent was Voltaire. There was a great deal of rivalry and jealousy on both sides, and also fundamental differences in their ideas about nature, humanity, society, religion, politics, and more (78). Rousseau thought of himself as a Cato, or moral scourge of the powerful, for his times (80, 83). Voltaire, on the other hand, loved the arts, pleasures, luxury, and style of the powerful, and was not above a great deal of dissimulation in his dealings with and about Rousseau (105). But another interpretive clue for understanding Rousseau was supplied by Voltaire: in some ways, he was like Diogenes the Cynic (93, 103, 109). He reveled in being different from the crowd of intellectuals, in moral criticism of prevailing ways, in a peculiar and unconventional lifestyle. He and Voltaire were like water and oil.

Then there were quarrels with Hume and the D'Holbach coterie. With Hume it was another case of very different attitudes toward almost everything, and Rousseau's suspicion of plots against him, which may have been a paranoia. Some of Rousseau's quarrel with D'Holbach was a reaction against

the latter's atheism, but some was a reaction against his criticism of Rousseau's relationship with Thérèse Levasseur (122). This is worth a discussion itself. Levasseur, a semi-literate laundress and chambermaid, met Rousseau in 1745, had 5 children with him who were all abandoned to charity orphanages, and married him in 1768. When he died in 1778 she lobbied for a pension as his widow in many quarters and eventually received one. Villaverde points out that Rousseau did not seek an equal partner in Levasseur (188), nor of course did many men, or women, do so in those days, in part because there was almost no cultural heritage supporting such equality (although he knew Madame Dupin and her arguments in favor of equality and lived in one of the houses of Madame D'Épinay, who also made such cases) (168-169). Some sort of complementarity was the most widely spread ideal. Many people disapproved then and still do now of Rousseau's relationship with Levasseur, seeing it as some sort of abusive relationship. Villaverde brings up some interesting counter-points to the conventional wisdom: Madame de Staël claimed that abandoning the children at orphanages was her idea, not his, and that Rousseau was jealous of her liaison with a younger man, whom she married a year after the author died (14). A liaison with a priest was rumored, and Samuel Boswell claimed many sexual encounters with her, but on the other hand it seems that Rousseau's urinary problems ruled out sexual intercourse after a time, so she may have been desperate for other outlets (14). When Rousseau suggested she enter a convent after his death, she stoutly rejected the idea (14). She must have had a strong personality in some ways. David Hume was surprised by how much influence she had on Rousseau, and other friends called her his "gouvernante" (14). She got something out of it, too: her elderly mother lived in their household for decades, and he thought she plotted against him (43-44). How all of this will be evaluated will depend a lot upon the individual reader's interpretations.

Villaverde does a nice job of dealing with the vexed question of Rousseau's relationship with the *antiphilosophes*, those who criticized the *philosophes* such as Hume, Diderot, D'Holbach, and others. They were mostly clerical, noble, or bourgeois, and made many criticisms of the *philosophes* that were similar to Rousseau's. They attacked from many angles, not at all as a unified force. When they attacked some of the same people that Rousseau feuded with, it was often for different reasons. They also attacked him. We learn that the intellectual life of the mid-eighteenth century was as alive at it is today to myriad currents and countercurrents, polemics and counter-polemics, opportunists, liars, personal revenge, arrogance, snobbism, and public betrayal as much as ideals and counter-ideals. If anyone thinks that the history of philosophy is all high-minded, this book will set them right.

Villaverde also does a nice job of reviewing the many opposing opinions of scholars of the last few decades, who classify Rousseau as an example of every position on the political and philosophical spectrum, leaving it up to each reader to decide which one might be right. Villaverde decides that Rousseau bases his ideas on a cosmology, metaphysics, and moral philosophy very different from the other *philosophes* (165). As she puts it, he was "a son of the Enlightenment who rebelled against it" (167).

Rousseau was also quite a sexist, and Villaverde reviews his critiques of feminism well (168ff.). He did not follow the enlightened Chevalier de Jaucourt, who argued for women's equality (174). There is much here that parallels Whitney Mannies, "Debating Gender in Eighteenth-Century France: Contesting the 'Letter to d'Alembert'", *History of European Ideas* xx, 2025, xx-xx (forthcoming).

This book is the product of four decades of study of Rousseau that Villaverde began with *Rousseau y el pensamiento de las luces* (Madrid: Tecnos, 1987) and followed up with numerous chapters on him in other books such as *La ilusión republicana* (Madrid: Tecnos, 2008). In some of these she was harshly critical of Rousseau. My impression is that she has softened her view of him. Recognizing his weaknesses, throughout this book, makes him more human and even allows us to pity him.

As a summary, we have seen that Rousseau and his contemporaries spent a lot of time feuding with each other, arguing pro and con on many issues, such that personality, envy, pride, and personal relationships seem to explain more of what is written than calm philosophical analysis. All of this material could make a reader ask: is my own philosophy a product of my personality, piques, jealousies, and relationships, or is it a product of logic, truth, and critique? Most likely it is a product of both, but that raises the intriguing question as to whether it is possible to measure how much of each, and how to identify which is which. When, where, and why does personality dominate over rationality, or the other way around? We do not seem to have protocols for answering these questions. María José Villaverde's book is an excellent exploration of the many ways in which these opposing factors interacted in the life and ideas of Rousseau and his contemporaries.