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Matthew D. Mendham, *Hypocrisy and the Philosophical Intentions of Rousseau. The Jean-Jacques Problem*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021. 296 pp. Illustrations, bibliography, and index. \$75.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 9780812252835; ISBN 9780812297805 (eb).

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Was Jean-Jacques Rousseau a hypocrite because he did not practice what he preached socially, politically, and educationally in his works? This question has been widely discussed in Rousseau literature and has usually given rise to two contrasting opinions. According to one opinion, the works of a philosopher should be viewed separately from his life, so Rousseau's followers saw no problem. According to the other opinion, Rousseau's often bizarre lifestyle was closely related to his work, and he can therefore be considered more or less a hypocrite. A third opinion, dominant in the nineteenth century, suspected that the hypocrisy was pathological, as in Cesare Lambroso's *Genia et follia* (1872) or Paul Julius Möbius' *Rousseaus Krankengeschichte* (1889). Rousseau's work could then be read on the assumption that it was as crazy as its author. Today, Rousseau is one of the most widely discussed philosophers. [1] Due to his style and certainly also to the subjects he discusses, he does not leave anyone who has begun to study him cold. Probably only Kierkegaard and Nietzsche have had as substantial an impact on readers of philosophy.

The suspicion of pathology has to do with Rousseau's posthumous stylization as a source of inspiration or, alternatively, as an inflammatory influence on the French Revolution. On 28 August 1800, in the room where Rousseau died in Ermenonville, Napoleon Bonaparte said to his companion General Louis Stanislas de Girardin, an admirer of Rousseau: "He was a fool, your Rousseau; he's the one who led us where we are." [2] But what if the "hypocrisy" doesn't apply to the extent that critics say it does? If Rousseau tried to live by his moral maxims, he could not simply have been a hypocrite, and if his plans in life failed, one must examine the development of that life and its changing priorities before drawing any further conclusions about the author as a human being.

Philosopher Matthew D. Mendham expounds this view in his innovative book. Hardly any other philosopher of importance linked his life and his works so closely as Rousseau, who left over one thousand pages of unpublished autobiographical material and an even greater number of letters, most of which have not been translated and will be examined and quoted here at length. The judgement of Rousseau presupposes that his own arguments were neglected and judged on a very selective basis. Mendham tries to focus on Rousseau as a whole and starts with the development of his thought, which was based on a stable core of philosophical convictions. The book is innovative in this regard: It does not merely interpret Rousseau's works, but analyzes the

patterns of motives that permeate his works and letters, posing the question of whether Ernst Cassirer's "Problem Jean-Jacques" really exists, and if it does, in what sense.

Mendham's book has six chapters dealing with various periods in Rousseau's life and examining the questions of virtue and hypocrisy. These chapters constitute separate studies, beginning with his abandoned children, followed by his personal reform after his illumination along the path to Vincennes, then further into his self-conception as a citizen, his political engagement, and his later autobiographical turning point as a writer, and loneliness as a way of life. The basic idea in Mendham's book is to find a middle ground between the two existing paradigms of Rousseau literature in all these passages of life, some of which overlap, which describe him as a "noble moralist" on the one hand and a "romantic liberalist" on the other (p. 13). One case considers Rousseau's teachings on virtue and justice, where he (along with Cassirer) is often considered a "flawed moralist." Another case presents Rousseau as a passionate advocate of subjectivity, hence "modern" (pp. 13-14). The two positions do not do justice to what Mendham describes as "the spontaneous goodness and solitary wholeness of the autobiographical Jean-Jacques" (p. 14). The chapters are case studies serving as evidence that Rousseau was guided by philosophical maxims of the virtuous life in his decisions and turning points. In other words, he did not simply become ever more paranoid in his life. Mendham is rightly cautious in what appear to be pseudo-pathological assumptions and adheres to facts, given contexts, research writings, and Rousseau's own remarks.

The first chapter is devoted to what is considered the biggest scandal in Rousseau's life which continues to occupy the literature one hundred and fifty years after the work of Claude Genoux^[3] and is still present, at least in the form of novels.^[4] It is about Rousseau's five children, whom he gave away to the Hôpital des Enfants-Trouvés in Paris after their births between 1746 and 1752. Given his writings on education ten years later, educators found it difficult to understand how one could credibly establish a radical new theory about natural upbringing and refuse to raise one's own children. Mendham notes that the basic pedagogical constellation in *Emile* foresees a "gouverneur," but no father, and to this extent is a literary reflection of Rousseau's own constellation. Moreover, the fictitious Emile is an "orphelin,"^[5] who receives a tutor who can be identified without difficulty as Rousseau himself. Mendham argues that we must differentiate between this and Rousseau's own explanations about giving away his children, which have often been taken to be rationalizations. Indeed, between 1751 and 1778 Rousseau attempted to explain in several instances why he had given his children away. Thus, the famous explanations in *Emile* and in the *Confessions* are not the only ones.

Mendham has categorized Rousseau's explanations for the first time, and differentiates twenty-five variants in six main categories: 1) I would not have been able to bring them up; 2) their family situation would have been unacceptable; 3) there were adequate public institutions for raising children; 4) I later came to regret these actions, and to respond appropriately; 5) if I was mistaken, I should not be fully or harshly blamed for it; and in one instance: 6) I would do it again, with much less doubt (pp. 23-24). In his explanations, Rousseau never mentioned the reality inside orphanages, such as variations in treatment based on the status of children or the high mortality rate (pp. 27-28).

Rousseau usually cited his "errors" as justification and expected less understanding than leniency (pp. 28-29). But already in his letter to Madame de Francueil (1751) he referred not to the social conventions about upbringing prevalent at the time, which eased him of his burden (30), but

rather tried to deal with the matter through his own moral maxims. Later commentaries contain sufficient evidence that Rousseau was torn by feelings of guilt, partly because he had not abided by his own maxims, and not because he had given them up (p. 47). Otherwise, one may conclude that he would hardly have felt guilty. But that is not the last word: “We see that Rousseau’s discarded children sometimes led him to acknowledge profound remorse and undertake moral labors as compensation, but, at other times, they led him to relentless apologetics and casuistry” (p. 49). His various attempts at explanation were full of contradictions, and there can therefore be no simple absolution. “Rousseau might be pitied for his misfortunes and even his culpability. Yet, his typical hedging for that culpability only enhances the tragedy of this case” (p. 50). A hypocrite, in the biblical sense, is someone who wants to gain an advantage but conceals his real intentions,[6] whereas Rousseau never knew how to handle his guilt. He had no plank in his eye.[7]

The second chapter deals with Rousseau’s experience of awakening (1749), his overflowing thoughts (effervescence), and the decision to adjust his life to his newly acquired principles. Here, too, Rousseau’s works and life do not simply fall apart, for he made repeated efforts to align his character with his convictions about virtue and social obligation (pp. 51-52). In his eyes this was a life’s work that became completely clear to him in the spring of 1751 (pp. 53-54). He then began to reform his life and renounced all appearances, changed his clothes, gave up his job, and resolved to be virtuous instead of just good, which was noticed in Paris. As Mendham writes, “The timid and easily ashamed man had become audacious, intrepid, and proud, scorning the manners and prejudices of his age” (p. 56). Was the departure from his previous life only half-hearted? Was he hiding behind a mask or was he only drowning in morality? None of these interpretations applies. Rousseau merely found a way of life that suited him in Montmorency (p. 61), and simple paranoia cannot explain it (p. 63).

For Rousseau, living in virtue meant overcoming the tyranny of self-love (*amour propre*) and making his personal independence from the judgement of others the basis of his existence as a writer (pp. 66-67). It was from this standpoint that he wrote his most important works, with which he also endangered himself. He knew what he was doing and combined “fretfulness about the preservation of his books with boldness about his personal security” (p. 70). His decision to lead the life of an independent writer can be considered a reasonable response to his illumination, but his withdrawal from Parisian life was not “feigned or philosophically groundless,” as his contemporaries and interpreters of his works claimed (p. 72). Born hypocrites in the style of Tartuffe never try to change their lives, and contrary to Nietzsche’s opinion, a hypocrite never stops being a hypocrite because he “always plays the same role.”[8]

But is not hypocrisy a part of Rousseau’s life when it comes to his civic behavior? This is the focus of chapter three. Apart from the business with Rousseau’s children, Mendham considers this one of the most difficult questions to ask because hardly any political theoretician attached as much value to civil virtues and republican commitment as Rousseau, the “Citoyen de Genève.” It was Diderot who said that he who lives like a hermit is a very special citizen (p. 73). But according to Mendham, Rousseau as a writer pursued a “distant citizenship,” which suggests that he could be more useful to his fellow citizens from a distance than in direct contact with them (p. 75). Seneca is cited to explain this: one does not serve the state without end, and one may also serve the state when he has withdrawn himself.[9] In most of his life Rousseau’s civil engagement was minimal, which puts a question mark over his self-appointed title of “Citizen of Geneva” (p. 85). On the other hand, after his works had been banned, he supported the Geneva

opposition, especially in the *Letters Written from the Mountain*, a lucid critique of the power relationships in his home town (pp. 87-88).

The confrontation with the patricians of Geneva is examined in chapter four. The high point came when Rousseau renounced his civil rights on 12 May 1763, a bold move that created a stir throughout Europe, which Rousseau paradoxically commented on in his *Letters from the Mountain*: “I have never fulfilled my duty as a Citizen better than the moment I ceased to be one” (p. 94). This has often been misunderstood, but, according to the famous passage in *Emile*, it is better to live with one’s paradoxes than to live with prejudices. Behind the *Letters from the Mountain* is not, however, just a bold decision, but a political theory that questions how individual freedom and social peace relate to each other, what role is accorded to people’s sovereignty, and what should happen when the will of the people is broken.

Mendham says there is no indication that Rousseau would have supported the violent abolition of a monarchy that would have made him a conscious stooge of the Revolution (p. 108). But there are exceptional situations of tyrannical rule in which “extrajudicial force” must be applied, which can express itself in various forms of protest. This can be understood as a subtle variant of Locke’s right to revolution, which exists when the government acts against the interests of citizens (p. 115). But Rousseau does not advise his compatriots in Geneva to overthrow their government by force (pp. 108-109). And those who resist need not choose between freedom and peace.

Between July 1762 and February 1765, Rousseau served as an activist in favor of political freedom and justice, but overestimated his personal influence and then withdrew from political life (pp. 114-115). This autobiographical turning point is described in an excursus (chapter five), and above all, but not only, in connection with Voltaire. Voltaire wrote his *Le sentiment des citoyens* at his country estate in Ferney, in the immediate vicinity of Geneva. He worked through Rousseau’s books and, in particular, commented on the *Letter to Beaumont*,^[10] before he struck an anonymous pamphlet of just eight pages in December 1764 and effectively denounced Rousseau without him knowing who the author was. Rousseau was deeply hurt, and all the more so when he had to suffer being pelted with stones in Môtiers, his Prussian place of exile, in September 1765, after which he fled with Thérèse and became a restless refugee. How far this affected his psyche is not the subject of the book (p. 118), but whatever the impact, it did not stop him from writing *Les Confessions* and from giving an account of himself and his life. He had written about himself before, so it is incorrect or an exaggeration to blame only Voltaire’s pamphlet for this autobiographical turning point, but the tone changed and led to a relentless openness that would hardly have existed without Voltaire’s critique (pp. 121-122). Rousseau did not fall politically silent either, as his two (posthumously published) reports on Corsica (1765) and Poland (1717) show, but he did choose to concentrate on himself and his life in solitude.

That was the definitive renunciation of virtues as a citizen and could also be understood as definitive hypocrisy, and not in the sense of Voltaire.^[11] But the question here is not “community or solitude,” as is made clear in chapter six. There are various types of “solitude” in Rousseau’s late works, not just one, and he reflects on his conduct not as a misanthrope, but in the light of his advocacy for community, justice, and virtue (p. 127). In his total withdrawal from society, Rousseau did not live like a Christian hermit. Life in the country, “rustic life” far from the cities (pp. 127-129), was subordinate to ancient Christian motives, but country life was a lifelong desire for which he paid with his increasing self-isolation. This suggests a return to himself and is reminiscent of Seneca, Plutarch, and Montaigne (p. 134).

His suspicions of a great conspiracy (p. 138) against him had real substance. As his return to Paris in June 1770 showed, his increasing fear was not unfounded and his withdrawal was consistent (pp. 139-140). It was at the same time a withdrawal from all social obligations, but his quest for an innocent and simple life was meant to serve as an example for those who wished to follow him. Yet, none of Rousseau's illustrious contemporaries withdrew from public life as abruptly and radically as he did. That was as much a provocation for intellectuals as his strange passion for botany. But what does this man owe to his society if he has suffered persecution, exile and, in his opinion, unfair treatment? Life according to philosophical principles can change according to the context, and can also lead to contrary conclusions. In any case, solitude has the advantage that one cannot harm others (p. 147). Among Rousseau's moral and paradoxical suggestions, this allows a general interpretation of his "hybrid principle." The point of departure is the famous quotation from La Rochefoucauld whereby "hypocrisy" is the homage which vice renders to virtue.[12] Rousseau sharply criticized Parisian intellectuals and aristocrats as hypocrites, and he was anything but a latitudinarian. Rather, with the overthrowers Catiline and Oliver Cromwell in mind, he warned the community against such impostors (p. 151).

In Rousseau's ideal communities, no one has anything to hide (p. 152). He himself sometimes views his life as exemplary, although or because he confesses that his personal inconsistencies make his philosophical endeavor seem unbelievable. In the end when he describes himself as weak, albeit virtuous, he relaxes his earlier ambitions but does not abandon them (pp. 155-156). One can therefore speak of an "inversion of priorities." Practical philosophy and philosophical life are sisters in aspiration; they stem from a common vision, but aspirations fluctuate as time goes by (p. 156). "As a whole," Mendham writes, "Rousseau's life is a profoundly mixed affair, while his thoughts both emerged from it and radically transcended it." The "Jean-Jacques problem" can thus be redefined as a life and not as a pathology (p.159).

From the very beginning, Rousseau the philosopher annoyed and divided the literary public. For this reason he was considered a "problem," but he was also honored and acknowledged as a genius who renewed and changed entire domains of thinking, from music, via political theory and education, to the modern novel and new forms of autobiography. Whether that was indeed the case and in what sense remains open to further historical research, but Rousseau was a "problem" within the meaning of a "hypocrite" only in the eyes of his enemies. His works display a continuous struggle between what an authentic life desires and what it assumes. Hypocrites are cowardly before the truth,[13] but Rousseau was never like that. He merely endeavored to succeed in his own eyes as a philosopher.

Mendham's excellent book shows how Rousseau was able to assert himself and at what cost. The book is rich in philosophy, presents arguments based on research without getting bogged down in endless details, and delivers an elaborate thesis (and no catechism: p. 159) on how to give the controversial figure of Rousseau a fair treatment without ignoring his glaring weaknesses, but also without underestimating the high qualities of this philosophical life or exposing it to ridicule. Finally, in his self-imposed solitude, Rousseau was able to write French philosophical prose that is unrivalled. Any attempt to see him as "problem," whatever it may be, must deal with the question of how this was possible.

NOTES

[1] Cesare Lambroso: *Genio e follia*. Seconda edizione completamente rifusa ed ampliata. (Milano: Gaetano Brigola, 1872); Paul Julius Möbius: *J.-J. Rousseau's Krankheitsgeschichte*. (Leipzig: F.C.W. Vogel, 1889). One indication of this are the numerous international editions of collected works, one of the latest of which is Eve Grace and Christopher Kelly, eds., *The Rousseauian Mind* (London and New York: Routledge, 2019).

[2] "But we're not badly off, Girardin replied." P.L. Roederer: *Œuvres, publiées par A. M. Roederer* (Paris: Firmin Didot Frères, 1854): vol. 3, p. 336.

[3] Claude Genoux, *Les enfants de J.-J. Rousseau* (Paris: Serrière, 1857).

[4] Isabelle Marsay, *Le fils de Jean-Jacques ou La Faute à Rousseau* (Paris: Ginkgo, 2012).

[5] The fifth volume of François Rozier's *Cours Complet d'Agriculture* distinguishes between three classes of children that are given to orphanages, "enfants trouvés, orphelins, enfants délaissés." François Rozier, *Cours Complet d'Agriculture* (Paris: Rue et Hôtel Serpente, 1784), vol. 5, sect 495.

[6] Matthew 6:2-16.

[7] Matthew 7:3-5; Luke 6:42.

[8] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, all too Human*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 39.

[9] Lucius Annaeus Seneca, *Epistulae morales ad Lucilium*, 7:68, 2.

[10] See Chapter five in George R. Havens, *Voltaire's Marginalia on the Pages of Rousseau. A Comparative Study* (New York: Haskell House, 1966).

[11] "L'hypocrite sourit, l'énergumène aboie." Voltaire, "Le Russe à Paris," 1760.

[12] François La Rouchefoucauld, *Maximes* (1678), 218. There are several types of hypocrisy: *Maximes*, 233. See for a modern view: Raphael Sassower, *The Specter of Hypocrisy. Testing the Limits of Moral Discourse* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

[13] For Kierkegaard, a hypocrite was a special case of the dishonest and the untruthful. See Heiko Schulz, *Aneignung und Reflexion. II. Studien zur Philosophie und Theologie Kierkegaards* (Berlin and Boston: Walter de Gruyter 2014), p. 437.

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