

PYRRHONIC HUME?

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1 Fruitless scepticism?

Sextus, Montaigne, Hume: Pyrrhonizers is an excellent book. The author shows an in-depth *knowledge*—if we are allowed to use such a term to refer to a sympathizer of Pyrrhonism—of the authors and subjects he deals with. Despite its title, the book is not primarily a treatise on the history of philosophy (Ribeiro 2021: 6). Tellingly, Sextus, Montaigne and Hume are addressed in support of Brian Ribeiro’s thesis, namely that the Pyrrhonian practice of philosophy—*Pyrrhonizing*—can have desirable effects on the character of the one who engages in it, such as openness of mind, attention to oneself, intellectual modesty or peace of mind. Thus, Ribeiro’s book can be read as a reply to one of the main and most common objections against Pyrrhonism, i.e., its fruitlessness². On the contrary, Ribeiro’s book involves understanding scepticism to the extent philosophy has been understood in the past: above all else a way of seeing and of being in the world, as was highlighted recently by Pierre Hadot³.

On our side, we agree with Ribeiro and would even add with Hume that the cultivation of philosophy does not limit its beneficial effects to the level of the individual character but extends equally to the social sphere⁴, although we also share with Hume a certain scepticism about the extent to which this beneficial influence of philosophy may have, both on the individuals who practise it and on society as a whole⁵. In what follows we will focus on a critical evaluation of Ribeiro’s reading of Hume.

¹ “The exercising of this skeptical ability, I will dub *Pyrrhonizing* (verb form), and this also makes room for the verbal adjective form, e.g. *Pyrrhonizing* tradition. Pyrrhonizers —being radical skeptics—” (Ribeiro 2021: 3).

² See David Hume, EHU, 12.II.23 SBN 159: “For here is the chief and most confounding objection to excessive skepticism, that no durable good can ever result from it; while it remains in its full force and vigour. We need only ask such a sceptic, *What his meaning is? And what he proposes by all these curious research?*”.

³ Ribeiro makes no secret of Hadot’s influence on his views (Ribeiro 2021: 127): “I have benefitted greatly from, and been very stimulated by, studying the writings of Pierre Hadot. Hadot’s focus on ‘philosophy as a way of life’ and on the self-transformative nature of ancient philosophy was a kind of revelation for me.”

⁴ “the genius of philosophy if carefully cultivated by several, must gradually diffuse itself throughout the whole society, and bestow a similar correctness on every art and calling”. EHU. 1.9 SBN 10.

⁵ “The empire of the philosophy extends over a few; and with regard to these too, her authority is very weak and limited.” “The Sceptic”. *Philosophical Works*. Vol. III. p. 191. We consider Hume’s essay to be crucial in order to clarify his views on the influence of philosophy on character. In turn, Ribeiro does not ignore this dimension of Humean scepticism, which, since philosophy is nothing but rational exercise

2 Hume a deist?

Ribeiro devotes three chapters of his book to the Scottish philosopher. Although our interest is mainly focused on the last two, we would like to say something about the first of them: “Failing to be Responsive to Reasons: Unbudging Faith, Irresistible Beliefs”. In this chapter, Ribeiro places Hume in the tradition of the Christian Pyrrhonists like Montaigne, Bayle or Huet. Without denying the critical attitude usually attributed to Hume regarding religion (Ribeiro 2021: 85), Ribeiro ascribes to Hume a respectful attitude towards it, leaving open the possibility that Hume himself might have adopted some kind of “tepid deism”⁶. Due to Hume’s severe critics to deism supported by natural theology or, at least, his wavering between deism on the one hand and scepticism on the other⁷—taking as sincere, though misleading, his statement that scepticism is, in a man of letters, the first step towards becoming a good Christian⁸—the ascription could be problematic.

Without denying the critical attitude usually attributed to Hume with respect to religion (Ribeiro 2021: 85), Ribeiro attributes to Hume a respectful attitude towards it, leaving open the possibility that Hume himself had adopted some kind of “tepid deism”, (despite his severe criticisms of the arguments that natural theology would have offered in defense of deism), or, at least, that Hume had oscillated between deism on the one hand and skepticism on the other, taking as sincere, although in some way misleading, his claim that skepticism is, in a man of letters, the first step to becoming a good Christian.

Notwithstanding, we think Ribeiro’s analysis proves correct in general terms. No doubt Hume was familiar with this tradition; no doubt we have enough biographical data to suggest that, if eventually Hume became a complete religious sceptic, this was no easy task at all (Ribeiro 2021: 87). No doubt Hume showed greater deference to sceptical deists and fideistic Christians than to theistic dogmatists; but what is the extent of this deference, what is its nature, and what is its justification? Let us consider Philo’s famous conclusion at the end of the *Dialogues*, which probably expresses Hume’s own point of view:

If the whole of natural theology, as some people seem to maintain, resolves itself into one simple, though somewhat ambiguous, at least undefined, proposition, *That the cause or causes of order in the universe probably bear some remote analogy to human intelligence*: if this proposition be not capable of extension, variation, or more particular explication: If it affords no inference that affects human life, or can be the source of any action or forbearance: And if the analogy, imperfect as it is, can be carried no further

(Ribeiro 2021: 4), would be a consequence of his scepticism regarding our capacity for “rational self-control” (Ribeiro 2021: 8).

⁶ “Hume is aware of this type of view (...) and respects it sufficiently to put it in Philo’s mouth (...) that Hume might have held some kind of *deistic* belief is not out of the question, *even given* the powerful criticisms he offers of natural theological arguments (...) Philo seems to avow something like what Popkin has aptly termed a “tepid deism.” We can’t rule out that Hume himself could have been such a tepid deist.” (Ribeiro 2021: 86). See also (Ribeiro 2021: 131).

⁷ “Perhaps *Hume himself* oscillated between doubt and deism? (...) Philo says this belief in an Ultimate Reality of some sort is such that “no man can be so hardened in absurd systems, *as at all times to reject it*” (D 214, my emphasis). But, of course, a man might reject it *at some times* and accept it at *others*.” (Ribeiro 2021: 88).

⁸ “In fact, I think the often-discussed Philonian declaration from Part 12— viz., “To be a philosophical sceptic is, in a man of letters, the first and most essential step towards being a sound, believing Christian” (D 228)— is just *literally true* on Hume’s view, even if it suggests mistaken inferences to the unwary” (Ribeiro 2021: 131).

than to the human intelligence, and cannot be transferred, with any appearance of probability, to the other qualities of the mind: If this really be the case, what can the most inquisitive, contemplative, and religious man do more than give a plain, philosophical assent to the proposition, as often as it occurs, and believe that the arguments on which it is established exceed the objections which lie against it? (Hume 1998: 116).

Is this really the conclusion of a deist? Given its restrictiveness, perhaps one would have to say that rather than a tepid deist one is dealing with an icy deist. For what Philo/Hume emphasizes is:

- 1) evidence does not allow us to establish more than an ambiguous, or at least indefinite, proposition
- 2) about the existence of one or more causes—which would not allow us to decide between monotheism or polytheism—
- 3) that only in terms of probability—that is, not being able to know with any certainty—they would have some remote analogy with human intelligence
- 4) being impossible deduce from that proposition any consequence that affects human life—which is tantamount to saying no morality can be deduced from it—
- 5) nor can any analogy be drawn with any other human faculty—which, for instance, would preclude attributing will to it⁹.

But, in fact, we do not even think we are dealing with a deistic conclusion at all, but simply and plainly with a purely sceptical conclusion, given that once these restrictions have been posed, Hume asks what the most inquisitive, contemplative and *religious* man can do but give his philosophical assent to that proposition as soon as it arises; a rhetorical question which should trigger on the reader's mind another question much more real: what if who considers this very proposition is inquisitive, contemplative, but not *religious* at all?

A Humean answer to this question would be, according to us, as follows: to consider the apparent existence of the cause or causes of order in the universe, etc., does not rely so heavily on evidence but on the nature of she or he who considers that evidence. If she or he is a religious man, she or he will choose a deistic conclusion (with all the severe restrictions we have already noted); otherwise, she or he won't. Since the question is evidentially undecidable, we are dealing with a strictly sceptical conclusion: the empirical evidence does not allow us to settle the question either in favour of deism (not even of such a narrow and innocuous deism as the one pointed out) or against it. The one who reasons justly must admit that whatever the conclusion might be, she or he does so not moved by evidence but rather by her or his own nature. Hence, whoever is prone to deism cannot avoid "some astonishment (...) from the greatness of the object: Some melancholy from its obscurity: Some contempt of human reason that it can give no solution more satisfactory with regard to so extraordinary and magnificent a question"; sceptical feelings that will be shared with those who are not prone to deism but that in religious man, and given his character, will give rise to another feeling, this no

⁹ All these points, moreover, are consistent with what Hume sets out in section XI of the EHU.

longer shared with non-religious man, namely: the longing for a divine revelation¹⁰; a longing which would be, again, the real cause of her or his credulity, for religious revelation means the occasional intervention of god in the order of the world, that is to say: a miracle, but Hume's reader knows from section X of the EHU that miracles can never be reckoned credible in rational terms.

Therefore, it is to this fideist in which the deistic skeptic turns to—aware of her or his faith in a *positive religious creed* can have no other justification than that which the weak deism in which her or his *natural theology* is summed up—to which Hume gives preference over the arrogant dogmatic theist who believes, mistakenly, of course, that she or he can build a complete system of theology on a purely rational foundation, showing, thus, her or his disdain for faith¹¹. Hence Philo's final words: "To be a philosophical skeptic is, in a man of letters, the first and most essential step towards being a sound, believing *Christian*", to which, after all, we should add: but only if that man of letters has a religious character and, for whatever circumstances, finds in Christianity the occasion to satisfy her or his religious longing. Although it can be deduced, as we have just noted, the superiority of the deistic sceptic turned fideist over the arrogant dogmatic theist, to Hume cannot be deduced that Christianity is rationally superior to any other religious creed, monotheistic or polytheistic—and by no means to those who are sceptically leaned towards atheism, let alone agnosticism, strictly speaking the most purely sceptical and rational position. If Christianity had to be considered superior in comparison to other religious systems, this superiority would not be rational or intellectual, but moral. Anyway, Hume is sceptical on the allegedly superiority of Christianity¹².

We do not think we are correcting what Ribeiro defends, but clarifying. Hume could be attracted to a certain form of deism. He was also familiar with the tradition of Christian Pyrrhonism and showed a certain deference to it. However, in his mature philosophical thought—see, for instance, the conclusion of Philo in the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*—this deference is only linked to the theistic dogmatist: according to this text no intellectual advantage can be inferred from sceptical deism, which in any case would be weak in its content, nor from a fideistic Christianity over any other positive creed, nor over a sceptically atheistic or, above all, agnostic position. Of all the concretions of this positive religion, fideistic Christianity would be indeed the most respectable intellectually and possibly also morally for Hume; but this would not give any intellectual advantage over other equally fideistic concretions of other positive religions, and it is more than doubtful that Hume would grant Christianity any moral predilection.

3 Tapestry or collage?

The general framework of Ribeiro's interpretation of Hume is drawn up in chapter 6: "Pyrrhonian Threads in the Great Humean Tapestry". Ribeiro argues there is no successful way of interpreting Hume as a whole, since irreconcilable approaches,

¹⁰ "But believe me, Cleanthes, the most natural sentiment which a well-disposed mind will feel on this occasion is a longing desire and expectation that heaven would be pleased to dissipate, at least alleviate, this profound ignorance by affording some more particular revelation to mankind, and making discoveries of the nature, attributes, and operations of the divine object of our faith. A person, seasoned with a just sense of the imperfections of natural reason, will fly to revealed truth with the greatest avidity". (Hume 1998: 116)

¹¹ "While the haughty dogmatist, persuaded that he can erect a complete system of theology by the mere help of philosophy, disdains any further aid and rejects this adventitious instructor." (Hume 1998: 116)

¹² For this question, the most important Humean texts would be *The Natural History of Religion, An Inquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* and some of his *Essays*, such as "Of Superstition and Enthusiasm".

mainly the sceptical and the naturalistic, coexist in his work¹³. Multiple Hume's thus leave open the possibility of considering only one of them, ignoring or bracketing the others (Ribeiro 2021: 109). Hence, without denying the existence of other Hume's, Ribeiro chooses to consider only the sceptical threads of this great tapestry, the one that would make up the Scottish philosopher's thought.

We are unsure about Ribeiro's tapestry metaphor. After all, each thread of tapestry's intricate texture must be woven together if the tapestry is to be a tapestry. Perhaps he should have spoken better of "collage", for there is no demand for strict coherence between its constituent parts: as an artistic composition glued onto a surface, it is likely to result in overlapping.

Metaphors aside, we believe every thinker aims to consistency. When confronted with her or his work, it is reasonable to apply the principle of charity and strive to find an interpretation that render her or his point of view as coherent as possible. Thus, we also share the "Several-Humes" reading as a "profoundly unattractive position"¹⁴: once we are forced to confess our failure to discover the coherence we presumed in Hume's approaches, as we presumed in those of any other author, "Several-Humes" reading should be seen as a last resource. At this point, we would like to see Ribeiro's arguments on Hume's philosophy developed further, as we therefore feel the global coherence of Humean philosophy is at stake. Indeed Ribeiro acknowledges that:

- 1) Hume embraced not one but several types of scepticism,
- 2) at least one of those scepticisms, academic scepticism, is very well synchronised with naturalism; and
- 3) Hume regarded academic scepticism as an outcome of Pyrrhonian Scepticism (2021: 129).

Based on the analysis of the first and second premise, Ribeiro argues the sceptical reading of Hume must be a Pyrrhonian one if it is to represent an alternative to the naturalistic reading¹⁵. But why should the sceptical reading of Hume represent an alternative to the naturalistic one, if the latter, we are told, combines easily with academic *scepticism*? If the last statement is correct, it is a foregone conclusion the naturalist reading is already a sceptical reading too. Strictly speaking, thus, Ribeiro might argue there are two possible sceptical readings of Hume's philosophy: the Pyrrhonian and the academic/naturalist, and not seeing how these two readings could be easily reconciled, he prefers the former to the latter.

At this stage, we would have liked a more detailed explanation to what extent either the Pyrrhonian version of scepticism is preferable to the academic one, or in

¹³ Following indeed Durland's approach: "Drawing heavily on recent work by Karánn Durland, I will be arguing that there is no way to unvex Hume's philosophy and achieve some pleasing resolution to the skepticism/ naturalism tension that infects his thinking. Thus, I will be defending the relatively novel and apparently radical view that the skeptic/ naturalist debate in Hume studies is insoluble. In response to this predicament, I will propose a novel and apparently radical alternative approach to Hume studies based on the notion of the "great Humean tapestry." (Ribeiro 2021: 98)

¹⁴ Durland 2011: 90. See also Ribeiro 2021: 107.

¹⁵ "Hume of course entertained many types of skepticism and not all of them were radical. However, the skeptical reading of Hume is concerned with Hume qua radical Pyrrhonizing skeptic. After all, as I pointed out in a note in the previous chapter, mitigated Academic skepticism combines quite easily with the sort of naturalism that some interpreters attribute to Hume, so— in order to represent a genuine alternative to the naturalist reading— the "skeptical reading" of Hume has to be the radical-Pyrrhonizer reading of Hume." (Ribeiro 2021: 112)

what sense naturalism (at least naturalism, like Hume's, that combines easily with academic scepticism) is a sceptical position—or even a detailed analysis of Hume's claim that academic scepticism resulting from Pyrrhonian scepticism is wrong. Maybe Ribeiro will provide us with enough clues to understand his views on these questions though.

From Ribeiro's references to academic scepticism as opposed to Pyrrhonian scepticism, we think it can be concluded with some certainty that, in his opinion, the difference between one and the other lies not so much on disagreement about the extent to which the effective suspension of judgement (*epoché*) may have, but rather: 1) the recognition by academic scepticism of a very peculiar area of probability. No knowledge is given here, but still there is legitimacy to have a say; so that 2) opinions about this area could be granted some kind of positive epistemic status¹⁶.

Ribeiro emphasized that many sceptical statements against certain kinds of beliefs—for instance, the existence of an external world—are unanswerable, so these statements would show we lack appropriate reasons for holding such beliefs. And yet, although we must concede that, in the absence of rational justification, these beliefs cannot amount to knowledge, this does not change the psychological certainty we embrace them; which is another way of recognising we lack all rational self-control, because we cannot adjust in this case our doxastic states to reasons, or rather, the lack of reasons which underlie them (Ribeiro 2021: 13).

It is in this light that Ribeiro's preference of the Pyrrhonian version of scepticism over the academic one would lie: given the unanswerability of Pyrrhonian arguments, the beliefs against they are addressed do not amount to knowledge—something Pyrrhonists and academics alike would concede—and lack any positive epistemic status—which is what Pyrrhonism defends against academic scepticism (Ribeiro 2021: 95). We cannot say, for instance, we know the existence of the external world, nor can we regard its existence as probable. Indeed, according to what Aulus Gellius has handed us down (*Attic Nights* XI, V, 5), Pyrrho's thought can be summed up in the following maxim: “Does not this matter stand so, rather than so, or is it neither?”. It was Marcel Conche who drew attention to the sentence's negative tone—*ou mallon*, no more—, key to understanding the scope of the Pyrrhonian proposal¹⁷. The *ou mallon* shows it is impossible to stress that something it is or it is not more than it is, or that it is and is not, or that it is neither of the two and, therefore, neither is nor is not.

Now, as Ribeiro reminds us, the sceptical—Pyrrhonian—arguments views as unanswerable as unconvincing are Hume's own (2021: 91). Thus, it would be no way to reconcile the Pyrrhonian Hume (who would argue that our firm conviction on the existence of the external world cannot be regarded as knowledge or give any other positive epistemic status), and the naturalist/academic sceptic Hume (who would argue we can regard our beliefs about what happens in the external world as more or less probable). Therefore, there is no coherent way of reading Hume. So

¹⁶ “There were two ancient schools of skepticism, the Academic and the Pyrrhonian... Pyrrhonizers—being *radical* skeptics—reject the contention of mitigated Academic probabilism which asserts that, while certain knowledge may elude us, we can nonetheless discover *probable* or *verisimilitudinous* (i.e., truth-*like*) views and that these views, while amounting to less than knowledge, should be understood as possessing some form of *positive epistemic status*. Thus, what makes Pyrrhonizers radical skeptics, in my view, is not that they have succeeded in the (perhaps psychologically impossible) attempt to *suspend judgment on all matters of investigation*, but rather that, qua radical skeptics, they relentlessly, ruthlessly inquire and, *crucially*, they make no claim, concerning any beliefs they *may* hold, that those beliefs enjoy any positive epistemic status.” (Ribeiro 2021: 2-3)

¹⁷ Conche 1994: 8.

we'd better accept Hume's interpretation of the great tapestry... albeit it would be better to speak of the great collage.

4 Pyrrhonic or academic?

However logical Ribeiro's *schizoid* reading of Hume's philosophy may seem, we believe a careful reading of Hume's texts enables for a more charitable, more coherent interpretation of his thoughts; an interpretation that would allow us to understand his attempt to reconcile pyrrhonism and academic scepticism (which Ribeiro stress is easily compatible with naturalism).

Obviously, we cannot provide such a detailed reading. We will just sketch what we understand to be the main lines of Hume's position regarding scepticism, its Pyrrhonian and academic variants¹⁸, and their mutual relationship, taking as a reference what he points out in the *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*—since we consider this work is a positive and mature manifestation of his views thereon¹⁹.

As Ribeiro reminds us, Hume gives in the beginning of section XII of EHU a fourfold classification of scepticism according to whether it is antecedent or consequent to the investigation, and according to whether each of these two variants is radical or moderate. Unlike Ribeiro, for whom Hume's antecedent scepticism does not deserve special attention (2021: 117), we think it is worthwhile to consider, albeit briefly, how Hume understands antecedent scepticism in its two modalities, radical and moderate, and how they are mutually related.

Regarding the first, radical antecedent scepticism, we read:

There is a species of scepticism, antecedent to all study and philosophy, which is much inculcated by Des Cartes and others, as a sovereign preservative against error and precipitate judgment. It recommends an universal doubt, not only of all our former opinions and principles, but also of our very faculties; of whose veracity, say they, we must assure ourselves, by a chain of reasoning, deduced from some original principle, which cannot possibly be fallacious or deceitful. But neither is there any such original principle, which has a prerogative above others, that are self-evident and convincing: Or if there were, could we advance a step beyond it, but by the use of those very faculties, of which we are supposed to be already diffident. The Cartesian doubt, therefore, were it ever possible to be attained by any human creature (as it plainly is not) would be entirely incurable; and no reasoning could ever bring us to a state of assurance and conviction upon any subject. EHU. 12. 3. SBN 149-150.

It is obvious that Hume is identifying antecedent radical scepticism with Cartesian hyperbolic doubt. But it is equally obvious that Hume does not merely

¹⁸ Whether or not what Hume means by "Pyrrhonism" and "academic scepticism" conforms to what was understood as such in antiquity is not our concern here.

¹⁹ As to whether there is an evolution in Hume's approach to these questions, we will not pronounce ourselves here either. To justify our choice it is enough to recall what Hume wrote in the "Advertisement", where he asked his publisher, W. Strahan (Letter to W. Staham, 26-X-1775. HL. Vol. 2. p. 301), to put before the edition of the second volume of his *Essays and Treatises on Several Subjects*: "Most of the principles, and reasonings, contained in this volumen, were published in a work in three volumes, called A Treatise of Human Nature... in the following pieces... some negligences in his former reasoning and more in the expression, are, he hopes, corrected... Henceforth, the Author desires, that the following Pieces may alone be regarded as containing his philosophical sentiments and principles." EHU. "Advertisement".

remind us such a doubt cannot “be attained by any human creature”: it is an argument that unmasks the paradoxical character of the Cartesian enterprise, for even if there were, as the French philosopher claimed, an original principle that had the right over other principles equally self-evident and convincing—the cogito—it would not ensure the reliability of our faculties, since “we could not advance a step beyond it, but by the use of those very faculties, of which we are supposed to be already diffident”. The internally paradoxical feature of this radical antecedent scepticism show that it is not only unattainable but also, *pace* Descartes, incurable. So, if it was put into practice “no reasoning could ever bring us to a state of assurance and conviction upon any subject”, the very condition to which, ideally at least, Pyrrhonian arguments should lead us.

Having discarded the radical Cartesian antecedent scepticism, Hume proposes a program of moderate scepticism, and gives a strictly methodological description:

It must, however, be confessed, that this species of scepticism, when more moderate, may be understood in a very reasonable sense, and is a necessary preparative to the study of philosophy, by preserving a proper impartiality in our judgments, and weaning our mind from all those prejudices, which we may have imbibed from education or rash opinion. To begin with clear and self-evident principles, to advance by timorous and sure steps, to review frequently our conclusions, and examine accurately all their consequences; though by these means we shall make both a slow and a short progress in our systems; are the only methods, by which we can ever hope to reach truth, and attain a proper stability and certainty in our determinations. EHU 12.4. SBN. 150

However, we believe Hume’s antecedent scepticism has a scope which is not purely methodological, and affects the object to which it has been addressed. For the scepticism that turns out to be a “necessary preparative to the study of philosophy” is nothing but curiosity the profound philosopher has about the foundation of our theoretical, practical and aesthetic beliefs:

The other species of philosophers consider man in the light of a reasonable rather than an active being, and endeavour to form his understanding more than cultivate his manners. They regard human nature as a subject of speculation; and with a narrow scrutiny examine it, in order to find those principles, which regulate our understanding, excite our sentiments, and make us approve or blame any particular object, action, or behaviour. They think it a reproach to all literature, that philosophy should not yet have fixed, beyond controversy, the foundation of morals, reasoning, and criticism; and should for ever talk of truth and falsehood, vice and virtue, beauty and deformity, without being able to determine the source of these distinctions. EHU 1. 2. SBN. 6²⁰

²⁰ At *Treatise’s* first book conclusion we find a similar statement: “I cannot forbear having a curiosity to be acquainted with the principles of moral good and evil, the nature and foundation of government, and the cause of those several passions and inclinations, which actuate and govern me. I am uneasy to think I approve of one object, and disapprove of another; call one thing beautiful, and another deform’d; decide concerning truth and falsehood, reason and folly, without knowing upon what principles I proceed.” THN. 1.4.7.12. SBN. 170-171. And again in the first *Enquiry*, when Hume is expounding his “Sceptical doubts concerning the operations of the understanding”, he warns: “My practice, you say, refutes my doubts. But you mistake the purport of my question. As an agent, I am quite satisfied in the

That is to say, the sceptical curiosity that Hume's earlier moderate scepticism recommends, neither denies nor question nor bracketing those beliefs, but merely asks about their foundation. In our view, this should be enough to explain Hume's realist tone, taking it for granted, for instance, there is an external world of physical objects causally interacting with each other. But we shall not insist on this. However, we want to underline that, at least as far as antecedent scepticism is concerned, Hume was not merely torn between two unconnected positions—radical scepticism and moderate scepticism—but it is from the psychological untenability of the former (and its lack of coherence), that reasons are offered to recommend the latter. At least on antecedent scepticism, Hume does not hold two alternative positions but only one coherent one. But what about consequent scepticism in its radical form?

In our view it is hardly arguable that, for Hume, the profound philosopher who investigates the foundation of our moral, theoretical or aesthetic general beliefs can only arrive at a Pyrrhonian conclusion, which would establish

either the absolute fallaciousness of.. (our) mental faculties, or their unfitnes to reach any fixed determination in all those curious subjects of speculation, about which they are commonly employed. Even our very senses are brought into dispute (...); and the maxims of common life are subjected to the same doubt as the most profound principles or conclusions of metaphysics and theology EHU. 12. 5. SBN 150.

There is no room here for a deep review of Hume's supporting arguments. We shall content ourselves with recalling schematically the result which, in his view, follows from the "deep investigations" of the foundations of our inductive inferences. These are based on experience: one believes the cases one has not observed will resemble those observed; but this presupposed uniformity cannot be proved, for it is not conceptually true since a change in the hitherto observed behaviour of objects is conceivable, nor can we prove it inductively without circularity, since it is obvious that we can only appeal to our past experience to justify our expectations about future experience if we already take it for granted that unobserved cases will resemble those observed. Thus, Hume concludes that "we have no argument to convince us, that objects, which have, in our experience, been frequently conjoined, will likewise, in other instances, be conjoined in the same manner..." EHU 12.22 SBN. 159. And yet, we do not thereby cease to make inductive inferences or to expect that unobserved cases will resemble observed cases, obeying a principle which is not reason "but custom or a certain instinct of our nature; which it is indeed difficult to resist, but which, like other instincts, may be fallacious and deceitful". The powerlessness to alter our "natural" way of proceeding is not a singularity of the sceptical argument against the rational grounding of induction, but rather a feature shared by all Pyrrhonian arguments, namely: "they admit of no answer and produce no conviction" EHU. 12.15, note 32 SBN. 155.

At this point we can understand the plausibility of Ribeiro's reading. Hume would be, on the one hand, defending the Pyrrhonian arguments are unanswerable, and thus we *should* doubt or leave the beliefs of that sort in abeyance, while on the other hand he would be stating that, in *fact*, we do no such thing; our nature

point; but as a philosopher, who has some share of curiosity, I will not say scepticism, I want to learn the foundation of this inference." EHU. 4.21. SBN. 38.

prevents us from doing so, as he emphasised in the *Abstract*: “[W]e assent to our faculties, and employ our reason only because we cannot help it. Philosophy would render us entirely Pyrrhonian, were not nature too strong for it” (*Abstract of THN*, paragraph 27. SBN 657).

Thus, between Pyrrhonism and naturalism, or academic scepticism, there would be no possible transition. If we adopt a philosophical attitude, we will arrive at a Pyrrhonian conclusion, according to which we should refrain from assenting to the mind’s faculties. When our attitude is natural, however, we just forget this prescription altogether and assent to them. The no transition between Pyrrhonism and naturalism is Hume’s own: when, disregarding the Pyrrhonian conclusions of his research into the basis of the reliability of our faculties, Hume conceded—as is typical of academic sceptics—the existence of a realm of probable reasoning (the matters of fact), to which they may apply and, even if they do not provide us with knowledge in a strict sense, they may offer us the reliability of the belief-producing process and began investigating a parcel of this realm: that of human nature. But is there really no transition between Pyrrhonism and academic scepticism? After all, as Ribeiro himself acknowledges, Hume considered academic scepticism as a result of Pyrrhonism.

At the beginning of Part III of the last section of the EHU one reads: “There is, indeed, a more *mitigated* scepticism or *academical* philosophy, which may be both durable and useful, and which may, in part, be the result of this Pyrrhonism, or *excessive* scepticism, when its undistinguished doubts are, in some measure, corrected by common sense and reflection” EHU 12.24. SBN 161. In this text Hume showed how mitigated or academic scepticism can result from Pyrrhonian or excessive scepticism, namely, by its correction by common sense and reflection.

Perhaps it is not too difficult to guess how common sense can correct Pyrrhonism: by warning, like Sancho did with Don Quixote, of the harmful consequences of the bizarre behaviour that would follow from a total suspension of judgement: “a Pyrrhonian cannot expect, that his philosophy will have any constant influence on the mind: Or if it had, that its influence would be beneficial to society. On the contrary, he must acknowledge, if he will acknowledge any thing, that all human life must perish, were his principles universally and steadily to prevail. All discourse, all action would immediately cease; and men remain in a total lethargy, till the necessities of nature, unsatisfied, put an end to their miserable existence” EHU. 12.21. SBN 160.

Subtle and more interesting is how reflection turns Pyrrhonism into academic scepticism. For if the Pyrrhonist reflects on her or his aim, she or he will conclude that her or his intention is nothing but “to destroy *reason* by argument and ratiocination” EHU. 12.17. SBN 155. But if the Pyrrhonist succeeds in this attempt, i.e. if she or he demonstrates rationally that we cannot trust reason—and Hume does not doubt that, as Pyrrhonist arguments are unanswerable, Pyrrhonism succeeds in doing so—should not her or his conclusion be turned back onto her- or himself? Should not the Pyrrhonist conclude that the rational conclusion *reason is unreliable* is unreliable in itself? As noted in the *Treatise*: “A true sceptic will be diffident of his philosophical doubts, as well as of his philosophical conviction...” THN 1.4.7.14 SBN 273.

As a result of her or his in-depth investigations, the Pyrrhonian concludes the beliefs we acquire as a result of our cognitive faculties cannot be justified by “arguments and reasoning”. Anyway, why this argument is tantamount to the assertion to withdrawing our assent to them? Only if we were to assume that we should assent only to what we can prove by “arguments and reasoning” would such a conclusion be justified. But it is precisely this dogmatic assumption the Pyrrhonist

seeks to undermine... even if she or he does so, “extravagantly”, by means of argument and reasoning.

Undermined, thus, the importance of reason, the reflexive Pyrrhonian must admit that accepting the convictions nature—not reason—imposes on her or him, she or he demonstrates her or his sceptical condition coherently: “I may, nay I must yield to the current of nature, in submitting to my senses and understanding; and in this blind submission I show most perfectly my sceptical disposition and principles” THN. 1.4.7.10. SBN. 269.

As far as consequent scepticism is concerned, its radical variant—Pyrrhonian—and mitigated—academic (variant which, in fact, is compatible with naturalism)—are not unconnected. The latter, as we have just seen, is the result of the former when corrected by common sense and reflection. To paraphrase another thinker who we believe to be equally sceptical (though perhaps more radically than Hume himself), we could say that Pyrrhonism, “when its implications are carried out strictly, coincides with” the purest academic scepticism.

One may ask, though, if it restores our natural confidence in our cognitive faculties, what would be sceptical about the academic scepticism compatible with naturalism and reconciled with common sense? As we have already noted, this is not a question that Ribeiro addresses, and neither will we. We will only highlight here that Hume’s philosophy doesn’t “leave everything as it is”. Although close to common sense, academic scepticism does not coincide with it. It keeps enough distance to allow the philosopher to go up her- or himself as critic of people’s superstition and fanaticism that dogmatic philosophers and theologians nourish. In this way, sceptical philosophy would not only have the effects on character that Ribeiro rightly points out, but also a dimension of ideological and enlightened critique, one Hume felt was no less important.

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