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Hume and Pascal: Pyrrhonism vs. Nature

José R. Maia Neto

I

The view that Pyrrhonism is not practically viable was, according to Richard H. Popkin, held during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries by different philosophers such as Mersenne, Arnauld, Pascal, Ramsay, and others.¹ Among the anti-sceptics, this position was usually taken as an argument against Pyrrhonism. Popkin points out that Hume's main contribution to the "Pyrrhonian controversy" is to show that (i) "the Pyrrhonian doctrine was the logical outcome of philosophical analysis,"² (ii) that the infeasibility of Pyrrhonism does not weaken its epistemological force but only its psychological plausibility, and (iii) that this implausibility obtains because nature (the common affairs of everyday life and the feelings, impressions, and ideas thereby generated) impels the philosopher to believe.³

Popkin also makes an allusion to the similarity between Hume and Pascal on this issue.⁴ In this paper I compare the dilemma posed by Pascal as a propaedeutic to faith with the "dangerous dilemma" alluded to, but avoided, by Hume in the conclusion of book 1 of the *Treatise*. The dilemma follows from (i) above. At a certain point in his epistemological enquiry the philosopher is forced to make a hard choice between the quite disadvantageous alternatives: either to continue his philosophizing, which, leading to Pyrrhonism, may bring despair and cause the annihilation of his life, or to abandon philosophy, making him a prey of the "errors, absurdities, and obscurities" of a non-critical life.⁵ In what follows I compare Hume's solution to this dilemma with Pascal's.

II

In the following passage Hume shows the toughness of the dilemma and offers a first answer to it:

What party, then, shall we choose among these difficulties? If we ... condemn all refin'd reasoning, we run into the most manifest absurdities. If we reject it in favour of these reasonings, we subvert entirely the human understanding. We have, therefore, no choice left but betwixt a false reason and none at all. For my part, I know not what ought to be done

in the present case. I can only observe what is commonly done; which is, that this difficulty is seldom or never thought of; and even where it has once been present to the mind, is quickly forgot, and leaves but a small impression behind it. (T 268)

Note that in this first answer Hume manages to avoid the normative response that the dilemma demands. He provides, instead, a descriptive account which is a kind of solution because it purports to show that human psychology makes it unlikely that someone could reach the point at which he or she would have to choose between the two parties. The dilemma does not arise because nature stops the self-subversion of reason.

Most fortunately it happens, that since reason is incapable of dispelling these clouds, nature herself suffices to that purpose, and cures me of this philosophical melancholy and delirium, either by relaxing this bent of mind, or by some avocation, and lively impression of my senses, which obliterate all these chimeras. (T 269)

Hume means by nature in this passage both human nature and the social and natural environments which, in so far as they demand specific reactions, generate appropriate beliefs. Those beliefs imposed by nature are necessary for our survival. So, the mere interaction of the philosopher with the world outside his closet suffices to dispel his sceptical crisis. According to Hume, this determination of nature is absolute and necessary. "I find myself absolutely and necessarily determin'd to live ... I may, nay I must yield to the current of nature" (T 269). This view is reaffirmed in the *Enquiry*.

Nature is always too strong for principle. And though a PYRRHONIAN may throw himself or others into a momentary amazement and confusion by his profound reasonings; the first and most trivial event in life will put to flight all his doubts and scruples, and leave him the same, in every point of action and speculation, with the philosophers of every other sect, or with those who never concerned themselves in any philosophical researches.⁶

So, it would appear that the dilemma is just a fleeting impression in the imagination of the philosopher during a momentary sceptical crisis. Nature provides that such a crisis is not prolonged enough to disrupt his ordinary life. This position is consistent with other references by Hume to similar benevolent interventions of nature. For

instance, belief in external objects, in causality, and in personal identity, although wholly groundless, are likewise imposed by nature. And, as in the case of the dilemma, this determination is “most fortunate,” for those beliefs are equally required in practical life.

This position is, however, in tension with Hume’s psychology. Given that the nature in question is not primarily the physical world but the mental one, and given that the imagination has a dynamics of its own, it is, according to Hume’s principles, strong enough to enliven the contradictions arrived at by reason. So, provided that the philosopher reduces his interaction with the world outside his closet to a minimum, the imagination can, in principle, strengthen the sceptical crisis in the same way that the pragmatic demands of everyday life can weaken it. Furthermore, Hume points out that reasoning and attraction to opposition are also natural human tendencies (T 271, 432-38, 448-54). So, if it is true that nature usually rescues the philosopher from, it may also throw him into deep Pyrrhonism. Hume realizes this possibility and revises his first answer to the dilemma.

But what have I here said, that reflections very refin’d and metaphysical have little or no influence upon us? This opinion I can scarce forbear retracting ... from my present feeling and experience. The *intense* view of these manifold contradictions and imperfections in human reason has so wrought upon me, and heated my brain, that I am ready to reject all belief and reasoning. (T 268)

We are, therefore, back to the dangerous dilemma. There is a natural tendency attracting us to these “refin’d reasonings” which leads to complete Pyrrhonism, and another pushing us away from this reasoning and towards dogmatism. Is it then the case that, despite the determinism of nature, the philosopher is after all bound to make the hard choice? Hume cannot avoid completely the normative dimension of the issue. He can, however, minimize this dimension. According to Hume, the real practical choice is not the radical one of the original dilemma. The issue for the philosopher is how he will yield to his speculative natural tendency; that is, in what kind of intellectual activity he shall actualize it. On this issue Hume “make[s] bold to recommend [a moderate] philosophy” (T 271). (In the *Enquiry* he calls it “*mitigated* scepticism” [E 161].) This philosophy, Hume says, is better than “superstition,” the other possibility. The reason is that “superstition,” like “excessive Pyrrhonism” (E 159-60),

seizes more strongly on the mind, and is often able to disturb us in the conduct of our lives and actions. Philosophy on the

contrary, if just [that is, among other things, if not conducive to a "warm imagination"], can present us only with mild and moderate sentiments ... and seldom go so far as to interrupt the course of our natural propensities. (T 271-72)

Hume's position is that since both believing/acting in ordinary life and reasoning are natural tendencies, we shall yield to both, just taking care that the latter does not jeopardize the former. One does this by, among other things which I specify below, keeping a cool head while philosophizing; that is, by not taking philosophy too seriously. More precisely, one ought to mitigate the scepticism at which one often arrives during the epistemological enquiry.

Hume's solution to the dilemma is therefore twofold. The first answer holds partially: there is no reason for great worry because nature usually takes care of the problem by not letting it arise. But second, and this is the normative aspect of Hume's position, the philosopher shall "help" nature to avoid the situation in which the "dangerous dilemma" could arise by not taking his philosophizing so seriously that his imagination is "warmed" (is disturbed) by the sceptical conclusions he is likely to arrive at during his epistemological enquiry. Hume solves the dilemma by weakening its alternatives. The philosopher may have a bit of each part of the dilemma by keeping his scepticism in the closet, by continuously interacting with the outside world, and by confining his enquiry to "common life, and to such subjects as fall under daily practice and experience" (E 162). He thereby exercises his tendency for reasoning, keeps himself away from destructive Pyrrhonism, and, thanks to his mitigated scepticism, is able to hold a "set of opinions, which if not true (for that, perhaps, is too much to be hop'd for) might at least be satisfactory to the human mind" (T 272). In other words, the "errors, absurdities, and obscurities" of the original dilemma may be at least partially avoided. Hume's solution to the dilemma is, ultimately, to bring philosophy/scepticism to the side of nature/practical life by doing away with the traditional view of philosophy as the pursuit of the truth. "[P]hilosophical decisions are nothing but the reflections of common life, methodized and corrected" (E 162). "Generally speaking, the errors in religion are dangerous; those in philosophy only ridiculous" (T 272).

Robert Fogelin argues that "[t]he mitigated skepticism that Hume recommends is the causal product of two competing influences: Pyrrhonian doubt on one side, natural instinct on the other. We do not argue for mitigated skepticism; we find ourselves there. In this way Hume's skepticism and naturalism meet in a causal theory of skepticism itself."⁷

I think Fogelin is right to the extent that in his treatment of the question of assent to a sceptical position, Hume tries to minimize, as much as possible, the role of the will. (The radical choice demanded by the "dangerous dilemma" is avoided.) Notwithstanding, Hume cannot get rid of the normative dimension altogether. As Fogelin himself notes, Hume *recommends* mitigated scepticism. It would not be necessary to make such a recommendation if his final position were the mere causal product of the two competing influences. As I show above, Hume says that we *should* facilitate the action of nature by engaging in activities of everyday life and by keeping a cool head while philosophizing.

III

Pascal presents a dilemma which is not only similar to Hume's "dangerous dilemma," but which is also introduced (as in Hume) in connection with a tragic view of man (although this view is essential in Pascal and only peripheral in Hume). First, Hume: "When we trace up the human understanding to its first principles," we arrive at contradictions and at Pyrrhonism. Yet, Hume continues,

[n]othing is more curiously enquir'd after by the mind of man, than the causes of every phaenomenon; nor are we content with knowing the immediate causes, but push on our enquiries, till we arrive at the original and ultimate principle. (T 266)

This view is peripheral in Hume because he holds that this contradiction may be overcome by mitigating the desire to know first principles. For Pascal, however, this tragic condition defines our anthropology and can be explained only by Christian doctrine. Our longing for knowledge of first principles is the nostalgia of a pre-fallen situation in which we enjoyed perfect knowledge. Our miserable present fallen situation renders such knowledge unattainable,⁸ yet, because it is a basic predicament of our anthropology, we cannot get rid of the desire to have certain knowledge of the original and ultimate principle. The dilemma follows from this tragic situation.

What then is man to do in this state of affairs? Is he to doubt everything, to doubt whether he is awake, whether he is pinched or burned? Is he to doubt whether he is doubting, to doubt whether he exists? No one can go that far, and I maintain that a perfectly genuine skeptic has never existed. Nature backs up helpless reason and stops it going so wildly astray. Is he, on the other hand, to say that he is the certain possessor of truth, when at the slightest pressure he fails to

prove his claim ...? Who will unravel such a tangle? You cannot be a skeptic ... without stifling nature, you cannot be a dogmatist without turning your back to reason. Nature confounds the skeptics ..., and reason confounds the dogmatist. What then will become of you, man, seeking to discover your true condition through natural reason?

[K]now then, proud man, what a paradox you are to yourself. Be humble, impotent reason! Be silent, feeble nature! Learn that man infinitely transcends man, hear from your master your true condition. Listen to God.⁹

Note first that the similarity to Hume is not restricted to the point that nature dispels scepticism. Pascal also holds that this does not weaken in the least the epistemological force of Pyrrhonism. The difference between them is that whereas Hume mitigates the opposition so that a compromise between the dogmatic input of nature and the Pyrrhonian one of reason becomes possible, for Pascal the opposite forces of nature and reason are equipollent (on that he is more Pyrrhonian than Hume) and irreconcilable. Contrary to Hume, Pascal radicalizes the dilemma, thereby making unavoidable an absolute choice between either the dogmatism of faith or the philosophical reason which leads to despair. Unlike Hume, Pascal states his normative position clearly and loudly.

Pascal's radicalization of the dilemma is not inconsistent with Hume's principles. As I note above, despite the unlikelihood of complete Pyrrhonism, Hume does recommend mitigated scepticism and a cool attitude towards philosophy as a means to avoid the polarization of reason and nature. Hume also says that the contradictions arrived at by philosophical enquiry may, if "warmed" by the imagination, pose a situation similar to the one depicted by Pascal or the "dangerous dilemma" he stated at the outset. So the basic difference between them comes down to this. Hume tries to mitigate the dilemma by subordinating reason to nature, whereas Pascal tries to intensify it by stressing their ultimate irreconcilability. Because Hume holds that the imagination is malleable and that Pyrrhonism is ultimately epistemologically true, both *normative* procedures are consistent with Hume's philosophy. (Although Hume could say that his procedure, unlike Pascal's, is compatible with other and more diverse demands of nature.)

As to the forces in ordinary life that keep the philosopher from going into a sceptical crisis, Hume notes: "I dine, I play a game ..., I converse" etc. (T 269). Pascal also notices this function of ordinary life.

The only good thing for men therefore is to be diverted from thinking of what they are, either by some occupation which takes their mind off it, or by some novel and agreeable passion which keeps them busy, like gambling, hunting, some absorbing show, in short by what is called diversion.¹⁰

Those which for Hume are actions determined by natural instincts over which we have only limited control, for Pascal are deliberations of the will, however unconsciously undertaken. Hume underplays the role of the will by imputing determinism to nature. However, to engage in activities which prevent the dilemma from arising, or which facilitate the action of nature against it, is still to take a positive attitude. So, again, the difference between Hume and Pascal with respect to the point raised in the aforementioned passage is, ultimately, that Hume recommends, whereas Pascal condemns, "what is called diversion."

The juxtaposition of books 1, 4, and 7 of the *Treatise* with the conclusion of the *Enquiry* sheds light on Hume's relationship with Pascal and other Christian sceptics who take Pyrrhonism to be a propaedeutic to faith. Faith is presented as the alternative to the impossibility of knowledge.¹¹ In the *Treatise*, "philosophy" is recommended as the alternative to "superstition" (religion). In the *Enquiry*, when dealing with the same issue of how to yield to our natural tendency to enquiry while avoiding the destructive consequences of Pyrrhonism, "mitigated" as opposed to "excessive scepticism" is recommended.

Hume was certainly aware of the transition made and advocated by the Christian sceptics from excessive scepticism to fideism. Philo says at the conclusion of Hume's *Dialogues* that "[t]o be a philosophical Sceptic is, in a man of letters, the first and most essential step towards being a sound, believing Christian."¹² Moreover, his own psychological principles could show him the possibility of such transition. Hume, "the atheist" and naturalist, is certainly not sympathetic to this transition. Although possible, the transition, at least in Pascal, occurs through the intensification of Pyrrhonism in the imagination with the consequent "unnatural" (Hume would say) disruption of everyday life. Moreover, Hume's worry about religious enthusiasm is consistent with his worry about the tendency of the human imagination to be "delighted with whatever is remote and extraordinary" (E 162). In the *Treatise*, Hume says that this tendency is the ground of "superstition." In the *Enquiry*, he says that it should be avoided by means of mitigated scepticism. This suggests that Hume is aware of and rejects the mixture of Pyrrhonism with religion held by Christian sceptics such as Pascal.

Pascal wants the sceptical conclusions of reason intensified as much as possible in the imagination so that our misery without God

becomes clear. Hume wants scepticism mitigated so that appeal to God is not necessary. Pascal wants philosophy to feed our inclination to the remote and extraordinary so that our smallness in the universe is vividly stamped in our imagination. Hume wants philosophy integrated in the practical affairs of everyday life so that religious and metaphysical enquiries are replaced by scientific ones.

IV

I wish to conclude by qualifying Popkin's claim that "Hume solves the Pascalienne dilemma—Pyrrhonism or rationalism, consistency or credibility—by having both, the former in the closet, the latter in the world. The appeal to God for help is unnecessary."¹³

First, because Hume's "solution" is to weaken the alternatives of the dilemma, the Pascalian/"dangerous" dilemma is, strictly speaking, dissolved instead of solved. From an epistemological point of view the dilemma is ultimately true. As Hume puts it, "we have no choice left but betwixt a false reason and none at all." One could perhaps say that Hume chooses a false reason (however positively he might qualify his choice, for instance, by arguing that it is at least partially true, besides being the only possible one), while Pascal chooses none at all (however positively he might qualify his choice, for instance, by arguing that it is the most reasonable choice given the unavoidability of Pyrrhonism—the wager argument).

Second, although it is correct that Pyrrhonism is kept in the closet, it seems, especially in the *Enquiry*, that Hume wants it, once carefully mitigated, also in the world.

Finally, Popkin is right in pointing out that in Hume's final answer to the dilemma, appeal to God is unnecessary. Yet, appeal to "nature" is necessary.¹⁴ This appeal, like Pascal's to God, is ultimately a determination of the will. The difference is that whereas Hume builds a psychological situation in which the dangerous dilemma (that could render the appeal to God an attractive solution) does not arise, Pascal builds an opposite one in which the dilemma arises with the strongest vivacity. Both normative positions are consistent with the epistemological scepticism both hold. The basic difference being that Pascal, but not Hume, makes no effort to disguise his stand.

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1. Richard H. Popkin, *The High Road to Pyrrhonism*, ed. Richard H. Watson and James E. Force (San Diego, 1980), 133-41.
2. *Ibid.*, 105.
3. *Ibid.*, 145.

4. Ibid., 134, 155.
5. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 2d ed., rev., ed. P. H. Nidditch (Oxford, 1978), 267 (hereafter cited as "T").
6. David Hume, *Enquiries Concerning the Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 3d ed., rev., ed. P. H. Nidditch (Oxford, 1975), 160 (hereafter cited as "E").
7. Robert Fogelin, *Hume's Skepticism in the Treatise of Human Nature* (London, 1985), 150.
8. "We perceive an image of the truth and possess nothing but falsehoods, being equally incapable of absolute ignorance and certain knowledge; so obvious is it that we once enjoyed a degree of perfection from which we have unhappily fallen" (Blaise Pascal, *Pensées* [Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1966], 65).
9. Pascal, 64-65.
10. Pascal, 67-68.
11. For the tradition of Christian scepticism see Richard H. Popkin, *The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Spinoza* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1979).
12. David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, ed. N. Kemp Smith (Indianapolis, 1947), 228.
13. Popkin, *High Road*, 147.
14. A similar intervention with the same practical purpose is, for Berkeley, God's providence.