

## Comments on Joel Buentings's "Two Views of Pyrrhonism in Hume"

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According to Joel Buenting, the Pyrrhonian sceptics "adopt[ed] an attitude that afford[ed] them many beliefs ... [and] were able to do so because they accepted appearances as a criterion for practical action" (p.1). Thus, "like Hume himself, [they] adopt[ed] a mitigated scepticism" (p.2).

From this premise, Buenting argues, against what he calls the received view, two main points, namely (i) that "Hume had a deep working knowledge about Pyrrhonism", and also (ii) that "Hume knew an attitude that suspends all judgements did not represent the Pyrrhonian view" (p.2).

He supports these claims first by pointing out instances of the correct understanding of Pyrrhonian methodology in Hume's work. As he notes, Hume's very criticisms evidence that he understood the equiprobable, doxastic, and psychological components of Pyrrhonian methodology, i.e., *isosthenía*, *epoché*, and *ataraxía*. Second, Buenting mentions probable (I'd say certain) sources of Hume's knowledge of Pyrrhonism (Bayle, Diogenes Laertius, Stanley, Huet), stressing that none of them confirms the received view. For example, he argues, I believe correctly, that Diogenes Laertius' account does not attribute to Pyrrho a total suspension of judgment. Along the same line, he argues that Bayle does not condemn the sceptics to a state of complete inactivity. In his words, "it would be fair to say, then, that both Bayle and Diogenes are sensitive to the mitigated

nature of Pyrrhonism” (p.9). Third, Buenting quotes passages from “A Letter from a Gentleman”, *Treatise*, and *Enquiry*, which again, present Pyrrhonists as mitigated sceptics who do not totally suspend belief. All the above shows, in conclusion, that “Hume knew the radical sceptical attitude wasn’t characteristic of Pyrrhonian scepticism” (p.12).

In defense of his hypothesis, Joel Buenting offers us a thoughtful and stimulating essay. He both reminds us of the rich past debate, and presents a fresh perspective on the problem of Hume’s Pyrrhonism. The comments I intend to propose seek just to propitiate him an opportunity to further explore his valuable insights. I start with a few suggestions, follow with some questions, and end with further reflections.

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(1) To begin, then:

Although there are great contributions (and a large debate) on the progress of Hume’s *commitment* to Pyrrhonian scepticism, there is less work done, it seems to me, on the possibility that you raise of Hume’s *conception* of Pyrrhonism progressing with time. On footnote 6, you rehearse a comparison between the *Treatise* and *Dialogues* in this regard. This is an intriguing possibility, and I think you might wish to further explore it in the future.

Still in a diachronic perspective, in this paper you display the three components of Pyrrhonian methodology in different and widely separated texts of Hume. It might perhaps be advisable to see the whole method applied to a single problem in one text. I should be particularly interested in examples and discussion of *isosthenía* or the equal force of contradictory propositions in Hume’s approach (or the Pyrrhonian approach according to Hume) to the problems of philosophy.

Among Hume's influences, you seem especially interested in Huet. I think it is highly desirable to revive interest in this much-neglected source, and I hope you will accomplish this too in the future progress of your research.<sup>1</sup>

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(2) Now, I should like to propose you a few questions:

- a) On page 3, you rely on a passage of the *Dialogues* (DNR 1.13.136) to maintain that: "Hume first argues that sceptics cannot develop equiprobable arguments consistent with an attitude that suspends all judgements". A note of caution might be needed here, since the speech takes place in a dialectical context, the speaker is Cleanthes, and his claim is that neither is Philo justified in distinguishing assent to the propositions of science from assent to those of common life, nor to, having given assent to science, in refusing his assent to natural religion.
- b) On page 4-5, you refer the reader to the conclusion of Book 1 of the *Treatise*, sections V and XII of the *Enquiry*, and part I of the *Dialogues*, to maintain that "Hume argues that because our natural inclination to have metaphysical beliefs outweighs the Pyrrhonian's contrived method at having no beliefs, it is impossible for sceptics to adopt an attitude of permanent theoretical doubt". I'm not sure though, that Hume counts metaphysical beliefs among the natural beliefs that outweigh scepticism.

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<sup>1</sup> Huet would probably constitute an interesting challenge as well. At the same time that he was a *savant* and a respectable man of the church, the posthumous publication of the *Philosophical Treatise* aroused much perplexity. Thus, Hume's appeal to his authority may carry at least a hint of ambiguity. In addition, I suspect that a reference to Huet could strengthen a sceptical-fideistic modern interpretation of Hume's concept of belief, such as Richard Popkin's, for example. I am not as confident that it would strengthen his ties to the ancient sceptics.

In fact, the passage you quote just prior to the statement above says “action, employment and the occupations of common life” (not metaphysics), is the great subverter of Pyrrhonism.

- c) On page 11, you quote a passage from “A Letter from a Gentleman” to evidence that “Hume had a good grasp of Pyrrhonism, since he denies that Pyrrhonians adopt an attitude that suspends all judgements and denies that Pyrrhonism has an appreciable effect on practical activities”. With you, I am sure that Hume had a good grasp of Pyrrhonism. But “A Letter” continues to seem at least equivocal to me, since Hume makes an effort to distance himself from Pyrrhonism (theirs are principles “of mere curiosity”) and makes an effort to identify himself with a scepticism that serves simply to “abate the Pride of *mere human Reasoners*”. For rhetorical or prudential reasons, which should be taken into account, he may be there deliberately misrepresenting the Pyrrhonians, and even himself, and his debt to them.<sup>2</sup>

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(3) Last, I should like to propose to you some further reflections on the subject of your essay.

My question here is to a lesser extent whether Hume read and knew of Pyrrhonism

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<sup>2</sup> Otherwise put, in “A Letter” Hume aligns the *Treatise* with scepticism, but not so resolutely with Pyrrhonian scepticism if in earnest. He counts Socrates, Cicero, Huet, the ancient Fathers, and the early Reformers among the sceptics who, like him, represent “the Weakness and Uncertainty of *mere human Reason*” (p.426). But the Doctrines of the Pyrrhonians, he says, “have been regarded in all Ages as Principles of mere Curiosity, or a Kind of *Jeux d’esprit*, without any influence on a man’s steady principles or conduct in life” (p.425). He also says: “so extravagant a Doubt as that which Scepticism may seem to recommend, by destroying *every Thing*, really affects *nothing*, and was never intended to be understood *seriously*, but was meant as a *mere Philosophical Amusement*, or Trial of *Wit and Subtilty*” (p.426). Also cf. David Fate Norton, “Hume’s A letter from a gentleman: a review note”, *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, v. 6, no. 2, April 1968, p. 161-167.

(which he did), or whether he misrepresented Pyrrhonism in his text (which he may have done), but rather how he appropriated the Pyrrhonian legacy, and why he sometimes chose to describe himself as a Pyrrhonist, and sometimes not. In other words, I'd ask: How did Hume comprehend all the sources he consulted? What use did he make of Pyrrhonism and why? I believe the question then turns out to be, to borrow from the first *Enquiry*: "What is meant by a sceptic?"<sup>3</sup>

Although I believe this can only be answered on a text-by-text, theme-by-theme basis (so many traditions intersect in Hume),<sup>4</sup> we may seek to find some trends, keeping in sight that the historical accuracy of Hume's presentation of Pyrrhonism has to be colored not only by the numerous references (and contradictory ones) that he could draw upon, but also by the ordinary semantic connotations of the appellation in his time – for as we know, "Pyrrhonian" quite often was a term of reproach, derision, and even abuse for Hume's contemporaries.

When Hume actually names the Pyrrhonian school in his work, he often seems to me to be in a sort of self-defensive or self-justificatory mode.<sup>5</sup> For instance, in the *Treatise*, blissfully innocent of the attacks that were still to come, he is content to explore the

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<sup>3</sup> Together with you and many readers, I agree that Hume had access to primary and secondary sources of Pyrrhonism, both ancient and modern, studied them with care, and understood them well. I also agree that scepticism was quite important to Hume's philosophy. Still, very generally, I'd ask: Does the standard interpretation indeed claim that Hume did not understand Pyrrhonism, or at least not very well? In his critical edition of the *Treatise*, David F. Norton observes that the current deep probing on the very meaning of Pyrrhonian scepticism makes it more difficult rather than more easy to establish Hume's association with the ancient sceptical school in a precise and straightforward way. I think he is right, and I think your footnote 1 and 3 substantiate this point. Moreover, even if we disregard the modern debate, on their very surface the concepts of belief, knowledge, science, probability, verisimilitude, and likelihood signify differently in different epochs, and that certainly complicates the association. For belief for Hume is stronger than the merely acquiescing and following the appearances of Pyrrhonism. Likewise, the probable opinions that constitute scientific knowledge for Hume are weaker than the probable opinions of the Academics.

<sup>4</sup> Thus, not a sceptic in morals, Hume was famously sceptical in matters of religion, for example.

<sup>5</sup> But note that in the *Dialogues*, Philo cheerfully, even mischievously, embraces the Pyrrhonian *persona* in all its buoyancy.

sceptical possibilities consequent on philosophical theories. But in the “Abstract”, and in “A Letter from a Gentleman”, he finds himself compelled to clarify the nature of his scepticism. And there, as we’ve noted, he calls his philosophy “sceptical”, but - pointedly - not “Pyrrhonian”. To the philosophy of the first *Enquiry*, he lavishly applies the expression “academic” or “mitigated scepticism”, and surprisingly, seems to demote ancient Pyrrhonism to a trite, popular, and therefore not very significant place.

This is a curious phenomenon. In the *Enquiry* Hume offers a sober characterization of his scepticism.<sup>6</sup> The book’s jargon is typically modern (using experimentation, association, mechanism), and modern is also its concern with the possibility and limits of knowledge, its sensitivity to the impact of modern science, and its notion of nature as observable regular operations. But in the *Enquiry*, references to ancient sources are particularly noticeable, not only because they supersede references to the moderns,<sup>7</sup> but also because the two decisive insights of Hume’s philosophy - its sceptical orientation and its basis on common life, which according to him endow it with significance simultaneously theoretical and practical - are considered original contributions of Academic scepticism, which he sees as the model of sane and productive philosophy.

Indeed, Hume reads back in the Academy findings that are his own. The same freedom takes place in his appropriation of the term “Pyrrhonian” in the conclusion of the book. In the subdivisions of consequent scepticism, Hume quickly sets aside as *trite*, *weak*, and *popular* the forms of scepticism both with regard to human faculties (evidence of sense, relativity of appearances)<sup>8</sup> and with regard to moral evidence or reasonings

<sup>6</sup> Even though the *Treatise* is the work that best manifests the inquisitive spirit of Hume’s philosophy.

<sup>7</sup> For example: it is Stoics and Academics that he uses to represent the different kinds of philosophy; in the decisive questions of morality, both in the section on liberty and necessity and in the section on a particular providence and future state, the Stoics are his adversaries.

<sup>8</sup> In Hume’s words: “I need not insist upon the more trite topics, employed by the sceptics in all ages, against the evidence of *sense*; such as those which are derived from the imperfection and fallaciousness of

concerning matter of fact (dispositions of the subject, relativity of judgments and opinions),<sup>9</sup> where we recognize modes of ancient Pyrrhonism.<sup>10</sup> In contrast, Hume considers the modern developments *philosophical* forms of Pyrrhonian consequent scepticism, particularly the scepticism about the independent existence of external objects and the distinction between primary and secondary qualities, concerning the senses; the sceptical paradoxes of the infinite divisibility of space and time, concerning demonstrative reason; and his own sceptical doubts concerning moral evidence in causal reasoning. The apparent conclusion is that, although he does not state it, Hume seems to distinguish the maturity from the infancy of Pyrrhonism, and philosophically embraces only its modern expression, which he declares triumphant.

As we know, Hume then argues that such philosophy destroys the conviction temporarily, but its influence is never lasting and should not be, for this would result in the summary destruction of human life. It is thus that he settles for an Academic, mitigated, useful and lasting form, derived from the correction of the excessive scepticism by common sense and reflection. However, the Pyrrhonian experience leaves marks. It introduces doubt, caution, and modesty, restricts enquiry to the limits appropriate to human understanding, and controls the excesses of imagination.

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our organs, on numberless occasions; the crooked appearance of an oar in water; the various aspects of objects, according to their different distances; the double images which arise from the pressing one eye; with many other appearances of a like nature” (p.113).

<sup>9</sup> In full: “The popular objections are derived from the natural weakness of human understanding; the contradictory opinions, which have been entertained in different ages and nations; the variations of our judgment in sickness and health, youth and old age, prosperity and adversity; the perpetual contradiction of each particular man’s opinions and sentiments; with many other topics of that kind” (p.118).

<sup>10</sup> The subdivisions of antecedent scepticism seem to have a clear origin. Excessive is the dogmatic Cartesian, the moderate is of Academic inspiration, revived by Foucher and others, and also present in Descartes. A problem already insinuates itself here, though: the origin that Hume attributes to methodical caution and modesty is imprecise – at the same time previous to the investigation and Academic, and consequent to the experience of radical Pyrrhonism, therefore derived from it. This imprecision seems to be a sign of Hume’s indifference to rigorous historical distinctions.

Hume does not deny his indebtedness and contributions to Pyrrhonism in the *Enquiry*. Indeed, he openly acknowledges them. But I believe it is a Pyrrhonism drawn by his own pen and, in its more colorful tints, reserved perhaps for the closet.

I wonder how you would respond to these thoughts. But mostly, I'd like to thank you for your fine essay, from which I've learned so much, and wish you great happiness in your research about Hume's views of Pyrrhonism.

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