

HUME ON MELANCHOLY, SCEPTICISM AND BACK-GAMMON

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One of the best known passages in Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature* occurs in the closing pages of the work's first Book. In this Book, Hume has been discussing broadly epistemological topics, including the nature of causal explanation, and his conclusion is that broadly sceptical views are to be endorsed. The 'science of man', whose desirability is announced in Hume's Introduction,¹ seems to have turned out, by the end of Book I, to be defence of scepticism itself. Reflecting on this outcome, Hume finds (or claims to find) a consolation:

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. I dine, I play a game of back-gammon, I converse, and am merry with my friends; and when after some three or four hour's amusement, I wou'd return to these speculations, they appear so cold, and so strain'd, and ridiculous, that I cannot find in my heart to enter into them further.²

The present paper explores issues raised in this passage and views which it implies. Section 1 offers thoughts on the sense of 'melancholia' that is appropriate in Hume's case. Section 2 discusses scepticism as a theme in Hume's writings and section 3 comments on responses to scepticism which his work contains. Section 4 explores the response to scepticism given in the *Treatise's* melancholy-and-backgammon passage. In section 5, I look beyond Hume's writings and sketch developments in Adam Smith

1 D. Hume *A Treatise of Human Nature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1978) pp. xv-xvi.

2 Ibid. p. 269.

and (in my closing lines) in German thought.

1. *Philosophical melancholy and delirium*

Without doubt, 'philosophical melancholy and delirium' is the most dramatic phrase in the passage just quoted. A consideration of it helps shed light on the question of how the passage as a whole may be read.

Is Hume's melancholy and delirium a pathology that is best seen in medical – which is to say, somatic or psychosomatic – terms? Such a view may seem to be suggested by Hume's letter of 1734 which asks an unnamed physician for advice concerning a number of broadly depressive symptoms.³ If, however, we pause for a moment at Hume's term 'melancholy',⁴ a broader perspective than that of medical science comes into view.

In European thought, the notion of melancholy has a lengthy – Ancient and Medieval as well as Early-Modern – history. Not the least intriguing aspect of the term is the range of associations, and inner tensions, which it acquired over time. If one connotation of *melancholy* is *depression*, another is artistic and philosophical inspiration; and if melancholy has been seen as stemming from somatic imbalance, so also has it been viewed as possession by (benign or malevolent) gods.⁵ By the sixteenth century, issues concerning melancholy had tended to cluster – so I suggest – around a specific philosophical problem, viz, the problem of how *scepticism's challenge* may be met. At the start of the century, Durer's *Melancholia 1* depicts a pensive angel which has been described as 'super-awake' and as 'inactive not because she is too lazy to work but because work has become meaningless to her; her energy is paralysed not by sleep but by thought'.⁶ Is she thinking about scepticism, and how it might be overcome? In the century's closing decades, Montaigne not only considered himself a melancholic but wrote movingly about how sceptical challenge is to be seen.⁷

3 The letter (which may or may not have been sent) is given in D. Fate Norton, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Hume* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1993) pp. 344-50. Who may the physician have been? Scholarly opinion is divided: see E.C. Mossner *The Life of David Hume* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1980) pp. 85-8 and J.P. Wright 'Dr. George Cheyne, Chevalier Ramsay and Hume's Letter to a Physician' *Hume Studies* Vol. 29, No 1. (2003).

4 Hume refers to melancholy not merely in the *Treatise* but in the 1734 letter as well (*Companion* p. 349). For brief comment, see note 8 below.

5 For a survey of views, see C. Lawlor *From Melancholia to Prozac: A History of Depression* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2012). As an antidote to the present-day assumption that the terms *melancholy* and *depression* are synonymous, consult Henry Cornelius Agrippa's *Three Books of Occult Philosophy or Magic* of 1531-33: the 'power of melancholy', reports Agrippa, is one whereby 'celestial spirits...are sometimes drawn into men's bodies' – the result being imaginative, rational, and mental achievement. (I quote from the Kessinger reprint of the relevant passage.)

6 E. Panofsky *The Life and Art of Albrecht Durer* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 2005) p. 160.

7 See M. de Montaigne *Complete Essays* (London: Penguin Books 2003) pp. 432-3, 441, 729; M.A. Screech *Montaigne and Melancholy* (London: Duckworth 1983) pp. 24, 66.

How do these comments relate to Hume? There can be no question, of course, of ascribing to Hume a belief in melancholy's divine or supernatural origins; on the other hand, a reference to *melancholy* in the sense of *depression* is compatible with his general line of thought.⁸ This being so, should we concede that the 'melancholy and delirium' of the *Treatise* is, indeed, to be understood medically? Such a view strikes me as misleading, or at least one-sided, because Book I, Part IV of the *Treatise* – the Book and Part where the quoted passage occurs – is devoted to a discussion of scepticism. As we have seen, scepticism and melancholy came, in the early-modern period, to be related themes. My suggestion is that when, in the passage quoted, Hume refers to 'philosophical' melancholy and delirium we should take him at his word: the melancholy and delirium which he has in mind is conceptual rather than somatic (or psychosomatic). More than this: the philosophical or conceptual problem which confronts Hume (and Durer's angel) is that of how the challenge of scepticism may be overcome.

A recent or semi-recent contribution to Hume scholarship not merely highlights the issue of scepticism but employs, as its title, the phrase with which our discussion has been concerned.⁹ For Livingston, "Pyrrhonian doubt" [i.e. scepticism] throws the philosopher into the darkest despair' and what Hume terms philosophical melancholy and delirium is the result.¹⁰ While Livingston is, thus, sensitive to the roots of Humean melancholy in sceptical anxiety, he is however much less persuasive where the outcome of this melancholy is concerned. Once sceptical reflection is pursued to its bitter end, then and only then – so we are given to understand – can the 'primordial authority of custom' be heard.¹¹ In Livingston's words: the 'melancholy state of suspending philosophical judgement' makes the theorist notice 'the radiant world of unreflectively received common life'.¹² In effect, Livingston views the moment when we see ourselves as 'participants in custom'¹³ as one of quasi-mystical insight – and he regards custom itself as something sacrosanct. The result of this line of thought is not merely to highlight Hume's political conservatism; it is to portray him as so deep a conservative that criticism of custom betrays his fundamental philosophical claims.

What are we to make of Livingston's interpretation? Let us agree, rightly or wrongly, that Hume favoured a conservative political position. And let us agree, further, that numerous sceptical philosophers have argued as follows: if all judgements may be questioned, then (surely) a 'life in conformity with traditional customs' is the most reasonable course.¹⁴ So far but, I suggest, but no further may Livingston's

8 In his 1734 letter, 'Melancholy' is linked to contemplation of a dismal and discouraging – in a word, a *depressing* – future prospect.

9 D. W. Livingston *Philosophical Melancholy and Delirium: Hume's Pathology of Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1998). Durer's *Melanconia I* is – strikingly – reproduced on the cover of the book.

10 *Ibid.* p. 36.

11 *Ibid.* pp. 36-7.

12 *Ibid.* p. 8. See, for valuable critical discussion, P.S. Fosl 'Donald W. Livingston's *Philosophical Melancholy and Delirium*' *Hume Studies* Vol. XXIV, No. 2 (1998), especially – in the present connection – p. 361.

13 *Ibid.* p. 37.

14 The words are those of Sextus Empiricus: see his *Outlines of Scepticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2000) p. 7.

interpretation be endorsed. First a point of detail: the paragraph from the *Treatise* from which the present discussion starts, and to which Livingston appeals,¹⁵ makes no mention whatever of custom. Second, an observation regarding the sceptical tradition: sceptics who endorse a life in accordance with custom generally have in mind an endorsement that is unenthusiastic and lukewarm. In Sextus's words: they 'neither avoid nor pursue anything with intensity; and hence they are tranquil'.¹⁶ Their point is not that custom is positively valuable but that commitment presupposes principles which may undermine themselves. Turning to Hume's own specific position: whilst it is, of course, true that *custom* plays a central part in his political theory and his view of reason, it is no less evident that his writings call into question customs of the day. The most clear-cut example of this is his stance towards religion: Bothwell's picture of 'David Hume, Just A-Dying' is hardly an image of a man turning heavenward as eighteenth-century piety would dictate.¹⁷ The more such points are considered, the stronger becomes the suspicion that Livingstone's line of thought is mistaken. Epiphanies regarding the common world's radiance, and a view of custom as above criticism, are alien to Hume's thinking. Most suspicious of all is Livingston's presentation of scepticism as, merely, a step towards social complacency and an endorsement of existing norms. At times, let us concede, Hume may have been complacent. But when he dwells on problems of scepticism – as in *Treatise* Book I, section vii – his thought is open-ended and his writing raw-edged.

2. *Hume and scepticism*

Two questions demand consideration in the light of the preceding section. In what sense do I understand 'scepticism'? And in what fashion does scepticism (thus defined) feature in Hume's work?

The first of these questions admits of longer and shorter answers. One short answer is that my understanding roughly follows Popkin's magisterial *History of Scepticism*.¹⁸ Another is a statement of the same point in conceptual terms. By scepticism, I understand the view that the conceptual foundations on which normative and cognitive claims rest are either *unknowable* or *non-existent*. Sceptical questioning brings (or attempts to bring) this unknowability or non-existence to light. Such questioning represents a philosophical challenge because it threatens (in Hume's words) to 'lead us into such sentiments, as seem to turn into ridicule all our past pains and industry, and to discourage us from future enquiries'.¹⁹ Worse, an individual who becomes caught up in it is plunged in 'the most deplorable condition imaginable' and

15 See *Philosophical Melancholy* p. 37.

16 *Outlines* p. 10.

17 J. Wain, ed., *The Journals of James Bothwell 1762-1795* (London: Mandarin Paperbacks 1992) pp. 247-51.

18 R.H. Popkin *The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Descartes* (Assen: Van Gorcum 1960). See, further, Popkin 'David Hume: His Pyrrhonism and His Critique of Pyrrhonism' in V.C. Chappell, ed., *Hume* (London: Macmillan 1968); also his 'Sources of Knowledge of Sextus Empiricus in Hume's Time' *Journal of the History of Ideas* Vol. 54, No. 1 (1993).

19 *Treatise* p. 266.

'the deepest darkness'.²⁰

A more lengthy answer to my first question attempts to shed light on the notion of conceptual foundations. Let us suppose that one individual asks another “On what foundation, or basis, does such-and-such a truth claim rest?” The second individual may, properly, respond by indicating the *criteria of validity* that the claim sets out to meet. But such a response cannot be the end of the matter. The initial questioner may ask: “But can the criteria of validity themselves be defended?” To ask about foundations is, I propose, to ask about the *validity of criteria of validity*. I do not explore this proposal here.²¹

My second question raises a fundamental issue about how Hume's *Treatise* is to be viewed. It is in Book I that Hume unfolds his well-known accounts of causality (in terms of 'constant conjunction') and of the self (in terms of 'a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which...are in a perpetual flux and movement').²² Are these accounts to be viewed as, themselves, sceptical in character? Or are they philosophical doctrines which may (when properly understood) be defended against sceptical attack? Here, I do not confront this issue directly but sketch a line of thought which throws Hume's closeness to scepticism into dramatic relief.

This sketch, which occupies the remainder of the present section, opens by quoting a passage from the common sense philosopher and Hume-critic Thomas Reid. The passage remarks on how perception of the external world opens the mind to 'grand and beautiful scenes', and continues:

But when I look within, and consider the mind itself, which make me capable of all these prospects and enjoyments; if it is indeed what the *Treatise of human nature* makes it, I find I have been only in an enchanted castle, imposed by spectres and apparitions. I blush inwardly to think how I have been deluded; I am ashamed of my frame, and can hardly forbear expostulating with my destiny: is this thy pastime, O Nature, to put such tricks upon a silly creature, and then to take off the mask, and shew him how he hath been befooled? If this is the philosophy of human nature, my soul enter not into its secrets. It is surely the forbidden tree of knowledge; I no sooner taste of it, than I perceive myself naked, and stript of all things, yae even of my very self. I see myself, and the whole frame of nature, shrink into fleeting ideas, which, like

20 Ibid. p. 269.

21 Some further discussion, in a history-of-ideas context, is contained in my 'Sin, Scepticism and the Foundations of Scottish Political Theory' (<http://richard-gunn.com>).

22 *Treatise* pp. 87, 252.

Epicurus's atoms, dance about in emptiness.²³

I quote this passage at length because of its extraordinarily vivid character – and because it points to a key feature in the *Treatise*. This feature is highlighted in what I see as one of the the passage's most striking phrases: Hume's *Treatise* depicts the mind as 'an enchanted castle'. When Reid employs this phrase, his meaning is not (I suggest) that the *Treatise* generates enchantment. It is, rather, that it reveals mechanisms – so to say, conjuring tricks or sleights of hand – which lie behind seemingly well-grounded cognitive claims. In Reid's words: 'I blush inwardly to think how I have been deluded'. If the arguments of the *Treatise* are successful, in other words, they lead to uncertainty and disappointment in oneself. Did Hume experience philosophical melancholy and delirium (see above) because he felt, when he looked back on *Treatise* Book I, that he depicted the human mind as 'an enchanted castle' in Reid's sense? Before jumping to this conclusion, we should remember that Hume's *Treatise* and Reid's *Inquiry* were written a quarter of a century apart – and that Hume and Reid held very different philosophical positions.²⁴ Although justified, these reminders should not make us underestimate the quoted passage's significance. Reid is sensitive to a tendency in the *Treatise* which – in the eighteenth century as now – a reader cannot readily miss.

I carry my sketch further by referring to a (relatively) recent commentator. In a passage which makes no mention of Reid but which, nonetheless, runs parallel with the Reid quote just given, David Miller suggests that

Hume's science of the mind, although accounting for the judgements we make in terms of the mechanisms that produce them..., has at the same time undermined those judgements by showing them to rest on foundations that are absurdly flimsy.

And he continues:

Is Hume, then, a sceptic about human understanding?
Is the upshot of his account a generalized doubt about the products of mental activity?²⁵

In a word, Reid and Miller say the same thing in different ways. What is of interest is the argument with which supports his reading.

This argument concerns the part played by the notions of *custom* and *imagination* in

23 T. Reid *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 2000) p. 22. The passage is quoted in D. Kettler *Adam Ferguson: His Social and Political Thought* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers 2005) p. 41.

24 The main difference concerned religious belief (which Hume viewed critically and which Reid endorsed). See, for discussion, D. Fate Norton *David Hume: Common-Sense Moralism, Skeptical Metaphysician* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1982) pp. 19, 170-3.

25 D. Miller *Philosophy and Ideology in Hume's Political Thought* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1981) pp. 33-4.

Hume's account of cognitive and other claims.²⁶ Miller's point can, I think, be summarised in the form of a contrast: an account of *how judgements are made* and an account of judgements' conceptual basis are two different things.²⁷ Notions of custom and imagination shed more light on the former rather than the latter. If such notions are treated as though they supply a conceptual basis, scepticism is the result. For example, it may be that humans tend to *imagine* that 'constant conjunction' involves 'necessary connection'²⁸ – but the notion of necessity disappears if it is made to rest on imagination alone. Again, it may be that *custom* leads humans to picture a specific 'bundle or collection of different perceptions' as a unitary individual – but the notion of unitary agency disappears if it has only a customary force. If the human mind is viewed in terms of custom and imagination alone, judgements (including cognitive judgements) become 'absurdly flimsy' (Miller). Reid's charge that Hume pictures the internal world as 'an enchanted castle' gathers force.

What happens to the Reid-Miller reading of the *Treatise* if the notions of custom and imagination are left out of consideration? Does the accusation that Hume pictures the mind as 'an enchanted castle' cease to be applicable? My suggestion is that this is not the case. It is not merely because Hume refers to custom and imagination that Reid's image of 'an enchanted castle' is telling. On the contrary, considerations which invite a Reid-Miller line of argument are present throughout the story that the *Treatise* tells.

Arguably, difficulties of the sort indicated begin with the *Treatise's* opening sentence: all human perceptions 'resolve themselves', so Hume tells us, into impressions and ideas.²⁹ The sentence gives notice that the argument of the *Treatise* concerns individual psychology, and that questions concerning judgements' conceptual basis will be understood as questions about how (psychologically) judgements are made. The entirety of *Treatise* Book I – including its discussions of selfhood and causality – take place within the shell of the individual's psyche. In place of causality, Hume advises that we concentrate on the *image* of causality – or the impressions which are associated with it. In place of selfhood, Hume advises that we concentrate on the *image* of selfhood – or the bundle of impressions out of which a notion of causality is built.³⁰ Once questions about judgements' criteria are, thus, individualised and psychologised, the route to endorsement of scepticism is plain.

Standing back, I repeat that what I have produced is not a demonstration that *Hume is*

26 On custom, see especially D. Hume *Enquiries Concerning the Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1963) pp. 43-5. On imagination, see *Treatise* pp. 117-8, 198, 204. For Miller's argument, and for the Hume references just given, see *Philosophy and Ideology* pp. 26-33.

27 Whereas an account of *how judgements are made* shade over into questions of psychology, an account of judgements' conceptual basis raises questions about the criteria of validity (see above) that the judgements employ. A discussion of this point evidently invites further discussion – which I do not attempt here.

28 For Hume on 'necessary connexion', see *Treatise* pp. 87ff.

29 *Treatise* p. 1.

30 The word *image* requires comment. In eighteenth-century usage, one meaning of *imagination* is *thought which employs images* (whether these images be empirical or freshly invented). When Hume employs the term 'imagination', this is, accordingly, one meaning which he may have in mind. The argument of the present section is not affected by this historical consideration.

a sceptic but a sketch which throws Hume's closeness to a sceptical position into relief. My concern is to demonstrate that Hume's cast of thought calls for an answer to the question of how problems of scepticism may be addressed. Stated differently, Hume's thought does not merely require an answer to scepticism in the same way that *any* philosophy must welcome a rebuttal of sceptical objections. The situation is more urgent, and philosophical melancholy is justified, because Hume has (so to say) tacked with sceptical winds. The next section of my paper concerns Hume's attempts to tack in a different direction. It examines passages in his writings where replies to scepticism are set forth or implied.

3. Replies to scepticism

In a number of places, Hume's writings contain passages which suggest ways in which scepticism's challenge can be met.³¹ I comment on the passages concerned – including in my list the 'back-gammon' passage from which my discussion began. My overall impression is that Hume's responses are (although interesting) unsatisfactory.

Before turning to the passages concerned, I offer some thoughts on the question of *what sort of solution* problems of scepticism might admit. If Hume's views on causality and selfhood are, themselves, bound up with sceptical thinking, does a rebuttal of scepticism require a return to a conceptual *status quo ante* where everything is as it was before sceptical questions were raised? For Hume, there can be no return to a condition of pre-sceptical innocence. So far as the doctrines of *Treatise* Book I are concerned, there can be no question of returning to a notion of causal efficacy inscribed 'in objects'³² (as distinct from a conception of constant conjunction). Nor can there be a return to the essentialist notion of an individual soul (as distinct from 'a bundle...of different perceptions'). Rather than returning to a mystified notion of nature or a superstition-ridden view of selfhood, what is wanted in a "Humean" answer to scepticism is a demonstration that judgements – be they cognitive or normative – rest on knowable foundations and may be discussed in an open and rigorous and conceptually searching way. It is my impression that Hume's writings fall short of such a demonstration. In Scottish thought, Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* – see below – is the work where such a demonstration begins.

Turning now to Hume's responses, I note that his implied answers to scepticism fall into three groups. I comment briefly on each.

(i) Although Hume's *Treatise* opens with with broadly epistemological discussion, its final Book presents an account of the conceptual foundation on which justice – and social life generally – rests. Viewed in the context of the present paper, the final Book suggests a way in which specifically normative judgements can be rescued from the

31 The present section draws upon, and carries further, discussions in Gunn 'Scepticism, Religion and Political Theory in the Scottish Enlightenment' (see *Felsefe Gazetesi* for 27 August 2013 and <http://richard-gunn.com>), section 5.

32 *Treatise* p. 165.

challenge that scepticism represents.³³ Hume's key idea is that social life rests not on *promises* (as Scottish social contract theory had contended) but on *conventions*. Illustrating the idea of agreements or conventions which emerge 'without the interposition of a promise', Hume refers to 'two men, who pull the oars of a boat': such men, he suggests, 'do it by an agreement or convention, tho' they have never given promises to each other'.³⁴ Might rules of justice, and of social life generally, come into being through such a process? Although conservative commentators on Hume have found such a suggestion attractive, the answer to this question is uncertain. Two grounds for disquiet may be mentioned. First: if the example of the two men in a boat is taken literally, who first dips an oar in the water and attempts a provisional stroke? Why should either oarsman take the initiative – unless he knows already that the other will respond in kind? And second: Hume's *conventions* have customary status – and suspicions may be raised about the notion that customs grow up naturally, as Hume's illustrations seems to suggest. In sum, Hume's example of 'two men, who pull the oars of a boat' seems more plausible as an account of how social existence *continues* than as an account of how it is 'founded originally' (to employ Hume's own expression).³⁵ The example seems best attuned to situations where social existence is already presupposed.

(ii) In his *Essays*, Hume attempts a line of argument which goes unnoticed unless debates concerning scepticism in earlier centuries are kept in view. For writers such as Montaigne, scepticism regarding natural reason was a preparation not for nihilism but for an appeal to Christian faith.³⁶ Faith, these *fideist* writers considered, may rescue humanity from scepticism owing to its supernatural (rather than merely natural) and God-given status.³⁷ For Hume, there can of course be no question of turning to fideism in its conventionally Christian and other-worldly meaning – but there can be a question of giving the notion of faith a secular and this-worldly application. Let me explain.

Just as fideist responses to scepticism (or versions of scepticism) construe faith as a helping hand extended to humans who flounder amidst scepticism, so Hume in the *Essays* construes society as containing mechanisms which operate successfully regardless of what individuals who are caught up in them choose or think. In the same way as faith is, for the fideists, a supernatural gift, so the social mechanism operates independently of the individual – with the result that sceptical challenge is removed. Do such social mechanisms exist? Hume explores two possibilities. One is the eighteenth-century British party system, which works best (Hume considers) when prised away from notions of 'WHIG' and 'TORY' identity and allowed to function in a way where self-interest has free reign.³⁸ The other is the emerging

33 On scepticism and conceptual foundations, see my comments at the start of section 2 above.

34 *Treatise* p. 490; see also *Enquiries* p. 306.

35 D. Hume *Essays: Moral, Political and Literary* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund 1987) p. 471.

36 See Montaigne *Complete Essays* p. 683; Popkin *History of Scepticism* pp. 55-6, 62.

37 I have argued elsewhere that Jean Calvin's emphasis on faith (as God-given) is deeply rooted in the sceptical tradition.

38 *Essays* pp. 70-2.

eighteenth-century market economy, where rich countries unintentionally help poor countries through investment (the attraction being cheap labour).³⁹ Are Hume's examples of mechanisms persuasive? There is a sense in which they are: both appeal to an all-too-real experience of being caught up a social dynamic regardless of one's own desires and thoughts. But there is a further sense in which the examples are disastrous: if the mechanisms may sometimes yield benign outcomes, in other cases they may unleash a dynamic which turns choice and thought to shreds. Do the mechanisms to which Hume points transcend scepticism or provide fresh ammunition for sceptical argument? The answer to this question is doubtful to say the least.

(iii) A further line of argument is more indefinite: Hume does not so much suggest ways of ending scepticism than explore responses to scepticism's challenge – on the assumption that this challenge is an ever-present threat. How should we theorise, if any question of philosophy 'is so *obscure* and *uncertain*, that human reason can reach no fixed determination with regard to it'?⁴⁰ Hume's answer is that philosophy should adopt 'the style of dialogue and conversation': a dialogic style, wherein 'opposite sentiments...afford an agreeable amusement', is – so he tells us – especially appropriate where 'nothing but doubt, uncertainty and contradiction have, as yet, been the result of our most accurate researches'.⁴¹ Interestingly, Hume's willingness to shift from a monologic to a dialogic mode of presentation appears to be linked to an attempt to broaden philosophy's audience: in an essay published in 1742 – that is, very shortly after the *Treatise* 'fell still-born from the press'⁴² – Hume expresses the hope that the dividing line between '*learned*' and the '*conversible*' portions of humankind will be overcome.⁴³ It is as though, following the seeming anticlimax of the monologically-organised *Treatise*, Hume broadens his focus from the universities to the salons where a more sympathetic audience may be found. My suggestion is that, when Hume turns to essay-writing and ultimately to dialogue, his needs to respond adequately to scepticism and to find a social *milieu* for philosophising go hand in hand.

In the present paper, I do not comment directly on Hume's increasing interest in dialogic thinking: the remarks on Smith in section 5, below, indicate how in my view such a response to scepticism may be developed. Instead, my concern is to round off my consideration of responses to scepticism in Hume's writings. I do so by offering some thoughts on how the passage quoted at the start of my paper – the passage from the *Treatise* on melancholy and back-gammon – is to be seen. These thoughts are, I note in passing, a free-standing supplement to the list of replies or responses just given. But the passage's strongest affinities are with response (iii).⁴⁴

39 Ibid. pp. 286-7.

40 D. Hume *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (London: Penguin Books 1990) p. 38.

41 Ibid. For discussion, see W.L. Sessions 'A Dialogic Interpretation of Hume's *Dialogues*' *Hume Studies* Voll. XVII, No. 1 (1991) and M. Malherbe 'Hume and the Art of Dialogue' in M.A. Stewart and J.P. Wright, eds., *Hume's Connexions* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press 1995).

42 D. Hume 'My Own Life' in *Essays* p. xxxiv; see E.C. Mossner *The Life of David Hume* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1980) p. 117.

43 *Essays* p. 533.

44 The "oscillation" approach which I discuss below, and which is fundamental to the back-gammon passage, is not

4. *Philosophy and backgammon*

In section 1, I commented on Hume's 'melancholy' and its background. I pointed to its philosophical character and its relation to scepticism as an issue. Here, I turn from the problem which the passage takes as its starting point to the solution which it seemingly gives: 'I dine, I play a game of back-gammon, I converse, I am merry with my friends'. Is complementing a life of study with episodes of merriment an adequate response to the despair and darkness that scepticism brings in its wake?

Here, I suggest that interpretative discussion must tread carefully: contrary to what may be a first impression, dining and playing back-gammon is *not* the response that the quoted passage recommends. What is recommended is neither *study on its own* nor *back-gammon on its own* but, rather, an oscillation between the two activities. So to say, Hume advises that we divide our time between the study and the parlour – or between the modes of activity appropriate to each location. It is, we may note, difficult to disagree that a life spent solely in one location or the other is mentally unhealthy. But a general reflection of this sort leaves open the question: in the face of scepticism's challenge, can an “oscillation” approach (as I have termed it) be sustained?

Two points in this connection call for comment. The first is that an “oscillation” approach does not refute scepticism conceptually; instead, it counsels distraction from disquiet that is admittedly chronic. Such advice may, perhaps, be helpful. But it requires that, whether in the study or the parlour, one and the same individual hides from him or herself.⁴⁵ The second point is, I suggest, more damaging for Hume's position: what I have called an “oscillation” approach is unsupportable, at any rate where activity in the parlour is concerned. Problems which confront an individual in the (metaphorical) parlour include ones from which sceptical challenge may arise. This is especially so where moral judgements are concerned, but issues concerning scepticism may be generated by cognitive judgements as well. In a word, the division between parlour and study is at most paper-thin. The everyday world, wherein back-gammon goes forward, is steeped in theoretical or study-based controversies – as Hume well knows. The most striking example of such controversy is given by religion. For Hume's contemporaries, religion was an everyday issue: Hume acknowledges this when he tells us that 'superstition arises naturally and easily from the popular opinions of mankind'.⁴⁶ If parlour and study were unrelated realms,

unrelated (so I suggest) to the to Hume's proposal that the division between the '*learned*' and '*conversible*' portions of humankind is be bridged. (There are differences, of course: in the eighteenth century, back-gammon was played amongst men whereas, for Hume, the '*conversible*' portion of mankind consists of upper class women.) It is of interest, in the present connection, that Hume at one point suggests that the study of *history* 'keeps in a just medium' (*Essays* p. 568). He does not pursue this suggestion in the *Essays* – and I do not discuss it here.

⁴⁵ Stated differently: the passage in effect recommends “splitting” in the psychoanalytical sense.

⁴⁶ *Treatise* p. 271.

however, Hume's critique of religion would be misconceived.

The points which I have raised in connection with the *Treatise's* “oscillation” approach strike me as serious. But are they fair to Hume? Our discussion requires a further step. Why should Hume feel that he is in a position to treat life outside the study as a realm unaffected by sceptical worry? An answer is suggested by the quoted passage's observation that 'nature itself...cures me of...philosophical melancholy and delirium'. Why, in Hume's view, should 'nature' have the sought-after curative capacity? An answer to *this* question is suggested by Hume's admission, at the end of his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, that his sympathies are more with Cleanthes (the character in the dialogue who favours teleological thinking) than they are with Philo (who puts forward more overtly sceptical views).⁴⁷ In admitting to these sympathies, Hume is not telling us that he himself endorses a teleological conception of nature: elsewhere, he makes it very clear that in his view such a conception is 'pretty uncertain & unphilosophical'.⁴⁸ He is, rather, admitting that, when he moves out of his study and into everyday life, nature *looks to him* as though it is teleological in character. Spontaneously and pre-reflectively, it *looks to him* as though it is something made. To such an admission the only proper response is, I suggest, the following: nature does not *look to us* in the same manner. In the twenty-first century, nature does not pre-reflectively have a teleological (or purposive, or “made”) appearance. We may add that it is, in part, owing to the *Treatise's* own arguments that this demystification of nature has come about.

5. Beyond Hume

Can discussion be left at the point where Hume has carried us? In the present paper, the general picture of Hume's engagement with scepticism is one where problems raised outweigh solutions given. How, in a demystified world, may judgements rest on a knowable basis? What may count as such a basis? How may judgements be debated in a rigorous and conceptually searching way? The theorist who propounds telling answers to questions that Hume left in abeyance is Adam Smith. With Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), the tradition of conjoint social and theoretical critique begins.

In the closing section of a paper, it is impossible to argue in detail for an admittedly-controversial claim. What can be attempted is to indicate the shape which such an argument may take. My suggestion is that Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* presents a broadly convincing view of human interaction,⁴⁹ and that interaction (thus presented) is for Smith the basis or foundation on which judgements rest. The

47 Hume *Dialogues* p. 139.

48 Hume to Hutcheson, quoted in Mossner *Life* p. 135; see, to the same effect, *Treatise* p. 171.

49 See, on Smith's view of interaction, R. Gunn 'From Smithian Sympathy to Hegelian Revolution' in H. Kapuku, M. Aydın, I. Şiriner, F. Morady and Ü. Çetin, eds., *Politik İktisat ve Adam Smith* (Istanbul: Yön Yayınları 2010). A similar presentation is given in my 'Adam Smith and Friends' (<http://richard-gunn.com>), opening section.

judgements which the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* primarily has in mind are (as its title implies) normative judgements; but Smith seems willing to extend his interaction-based account to judgements of a cognitive kind.⁵⁰ In essence, Smith builds on the social and dialogic strand in Hume's thinking which we explored briefly in section 3, point (iii), above. But the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* sees capacities in interaction which Hume was inclined to sleight.⁵¹ Perhaps it is unfair to single out a specific instance, but the conviviality of back-gammon players and the ethically serious discussion which Smith has mind sit uneasily alongside one another as examples of what interaction may mean.

Smith, in short, offers a social and dialogical conception of selfhood whereas Hume (as I have suggested in section 2, above) remains trapped in the psyche of the individual as though it were a shell. This entrapment is, I suggest, the ultimate source of Hume's inability to overcome scepticism. Smith moves beyond scepticism (and does so without invoking pre-sceptical innocence) because, thinking dialogically, he is aware of resources that interaction contains. Which resources? My suggestion – which I do not argue here – is that Smith's notion of “good” conversation⁵² and Habermas's conception of an 'ideal speech situation'⁵³ proceed in parallel, and permit truth claims (together with value claims) to be discursively redeemed.

Standing back from my all-too-brief comments on Smith, I acknowledge their incomplete and selective nature: a comparison between Hume and Smith may turn on a range of issues not considered here.⁵⁴ As justification for emphasis, however, I note the importance to subsequent theorising of interaction as a philosophical theme.

Can discussion of the themes explored in the present paper be traced beyond Hume and Smith? If attention is shifted from Scotland to Germany, this question can (I suggest) be answered in the affirmative.⁵⁵

50 See A. Smith *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1976) p. 19. (The passage I have in mind is the final paragraph of *Theory* Book I, section I, ch. III.)

51 In the present connection, it may be significant that Hume pictured 'sympathy' on the analogy of 'strings' whose motion 'communicates itself to the rest' (*Treatise* p. 576), whereas Smith thought of sympathy as arising 'from...the situation which excites it' (*Theory* p. 12). For Hume, in other words, sympathy is emotional contagion whereas Smith links sympathy to imagination – and holds open a space for ethical critique. See, for discussion, S. Fleischacker 'Sympathy in Hume and Smith: A Contrast, Critique and Reconstruction' in C. Fricke and D. Follesdal, eds., *Intersubjectivity and Objectivity in Adam Smith and Edmund Husserl* (Heusenstamm bei Frankfurt: Ontos 2012).

52 For Smith, a “good” conversation is one where interactive roles – for example, 'spectator' and 'agent' (*Theory* p. 113) – circulate in a swift and unconstrained way.

53 On the notion of an 'ideal speech situation', see J. Habermas 'Wahrheitstheorien' in H. Fahrenbach, ed., *Wirklichkeit und Reflexion* (Pfullingen: Neske 1973). Compare with note 52, above, Habermas's declaration that in an ideal speech situation there is 'a symmetrical distribution of the opportunities for all participants in the discourse to choose speech situations and carry them out' ('Wahrheitstheorien' p. 255).

54 A comparison which suggests itself is that between Hume's views on market economy – see section 3, point (ii), above – and Smith's views as expressed in his *Wealth of Nations*. At first sight, the similarity appears overwhelming. But there is a difference: whereas Hume (writing under fideist inspiration) hopes that market mechanisms will quieten scepticism, Smith writes of commercial society in a much more critical way. Where Hume seeks perfection, Smith presents a picture where dark tones exist. See, most notably, A. Smith *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics 1981) pp. 781-3.

55 I am indebted, in what follows, to S. Fleischacker 'The Sceptic and the Fideists: Why Hamann and Jacobi Loved Hume' (paper presented at the Annual East Mediterranean Seminar for the Scottish Enlightenment, Zakyntos, June

In the last two decades of the eighteenth century, anxiety regarding scepticism galvanised German philosophical thought.⁵⁶ Significantly in the present context, one of the forms which this anxiety took was concern whether scepticism associated with Hume had been convincingly refuted.⁵⁷ An especially interesting figure in German responses to Hume was Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi: for Jacobi, empirical evidence (which Hume favoured) and religious faith (which Hume is commonly held to deplore) are one and the same.⁵⁸ Because the German term *Glauben* translates both 'belief' and 'faith' (in English), it is tempting to dismiss Jacobi's reading as sophistic – but such an approach may be hasty. Perhaps Hume insufficiently distinguishes between faith and evidence, and (as Jacobi suggests) Hume's alleged empiricism rests on fideistic foundations? I do not explore this possibility here, but note that such an interpretation harmonises with my paper in that it draws Hume closely into the sceptical tradition. In effect, Jacobi claims (and my paper reiterates) that Hume's relation to scepticism involves unfinished business.

Where, in regard to scepticism, does late eighteenth-century German philosophy leave us? A possible answer to this question is that, just as Smith overcomes Humean scepticism by turning to interaction, so Hegel overcomes the scepticism of Schulze and the fideism of Jacobi by turning to mutual recognition. It is on the terrain of mutual recognition, and there alone, that truthful (or 'scientific') thinking may be attained. Whereas Hume and Schulze and Jacobi remain in the last instance monological theorists,⁵⁹ Smith and Hegel operate in social and dialogical terms. From their work, the critical theory tradition begins.

I end my paper by attempting to convince a reader that the issues raised in connection with Hume and Smith are by no means of merely historical interest. Whilst commenting on the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, I referred to Habermas's notion of an ideal speech situation – and, here, I propose that the later Habermas turns to a theory of truth reminiscent of the “oscillation” approach which (as we have seen) Hume favours.⁶⁰ Truth, he tells his reader, is 'Janus-faced':⁶¹ in the realm of rational discourse (which corresponds to Hume's study), it amounts to warranted belief whereas, in the everyday life-world (which corresponds to the parlour where backgammon is played), it is an act of affirmation. Must truth be understood in such (so to say) parcelled-out and divided terms? I doubt that this is the case: my suspicion is that a conception of truth must be thought through along the lines of the “consensus”

2012). Likewise to continuing discussion with Adrian Wilding.

56 For a helpful general survey of the period, see F.C. Beiser *The Fate of Reason* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press 1987).

57 See, for example, G.E. Schulze 'Aenesidemus' (1792) in G. di Giovanni and H.S. Harris, eds., *Between Kant and Hegel* (Indianapolis: Hackett 2000) pp. 112-6.

58 F.H. Jacobi 'David Hume on Faith' (1787) in his *The Main Philosophical Writings and the Novel 'Allwill'* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press 2009) pp. 266ff.

59 See, however, the passing references to an “I-Thou” relation scattered in Jacobi's work: for example, *Main Philosophical Writings* pp. 231, 265.

60 See J. Habermas *On the Pragmatics of Communication* (Cambridge: Polity Press 1998) pp. 357-8; *Truth and Justification* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press 2005) pp. 8, 36-40, 250.

61 *Pragmatics of Communication* p. 363.

theory that Habermas's earlier 'Wahrheitstheorien' presents. But to move truth-theory from the framework of the later to the earlier Habermas is, in effect, to shift it from the still-monological Hume to the interactionist Smith. Whatever may be the merits of such a move, Hume's and Smith's conceptual perspectives are vital to present-day concerns.

October 2013