

A MELANCHOLY SKEPTIC

*Lívia Guimarães*¹

RESUMO *Nas diversas fases de seu desenvolvimento, Hume associou diferentemente melancolia e filosofia. Nesse ensaio, proponho acompanhar seu progresso, começando pela crença juvenil de que uma vida filosófica preservaria o praticante da melancolia. Em minha hipótese, para o Hume maduro, apenas conhecimento no sentido amplo de vasta experiência se opõe a estados melancólicos, enquanto o conhecimento como estrita especulação racional se mostra irrealizável, ao provocar um estado de desespero melancólico no agente.*

Palavras-chave: Hume, ceticismo, melancolia

ABSTRACT *Hume variously viewed the association of philosophy and melancholy in different stages of his development. In this essay I propose to follow this progress, beginning with his youthful belief that a philosophical life would shelter its pursuer from melancholy. In my hypothesis, for the mature Hume knowledge in the broad sense of wide experience alone can ease melancholy states, while knowledge as narrow rational speculation proves itself untenable, as it triggers a state of melancholy despair in the agent.*

1

Melancholy is and has been many different things: a mood, a passing mood perhaps, and stable temperament; a natural disposition of the mind, and

¹ Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais. Artigo recebido em setembro e aprovado em novembro.

a peculiar character type. It's been seen as a pathological state, and as triggered by want, excess, and corruption. Its seat has been found in inner feeling, and in outer symptoms. It's been called dark and heavy, lucid and deep. Sometimes sorrow has singled out the melancholy, sometimes gloom, and sometimes despair. The word has been close to us for a long time, many times changed. What did it mean to Hume?

For Hume melancholy is a sentimental condition, a morbid state of sensibility. Sorrow, gloom, and despair are its associated passions. And prominent among its possible causes are delicacy of passion, solitude, and devotion to philosophy, or the love of truth. A lonely person's melancholy is gloomy. Deprived of sociable leisure, either by her own choice, for the sake of study for example, or involuntarily, by force of circumstances, she becomes sad. In her present situation what tomorrow can she anticipate other than a repetition of today's monotonous boredom? But she can and does improve when brought back to the excitement of company. A hypersensitive person's melancholy is sorrowful and anguished. Disappointments far outnumber, and therefore they far outweigh contentment in life. Recurrent unhappy circumstances repeatedly wound the excessive sensibility of this person. Her melancholy consists in a heightened capacity for suffering. But the sorrowful can find remedy in the cultivation of taste. That will educate her sensibility.

A true philosopher, the skeptic, may suffer a fit of melancholy despair. The intensity of her drama is overwhelming: although self-absorbed, she lacks self-confidence; although intellectually gifted, she is assaulted by imaginary fears; an aspirant to the tranquility of permanence, she is defeated by restlessness. Trapped in a mental fog, she loses sight of the surrounding world, loses touch with people, and paralyzed she no longer knows where to go.

The gloomy, the sorrowful, and the desperate, each one has a unique melancholy story. I do not mean to make a trespass on their uniqueness. Yet cognition is a thread common to the predicaments of them all. In this essay I seek to follow this thread, relating Hume's views to his own progress from an early age to full philosophical maturity. Often, knowledge is merely peripheral to the gloomy person's condition; it is not so when it comes to the melancholy skeptic or to the sensitive melancholy. In the broad sense of wide experience, knowledge can lighten up the sorrowful. But knowledge in the sense of rational speculation seems to weigh down the brooding skeptic. In the hypersensitive, it has a healing effect. In the hyper-rational, it causes the disease. How can that be?

2

I'd like to begin with a little Hume biography. Later I'll move onto philosophy.

The young Hume at 16 believes the studies that impart wisdom and lead to the happiness of the wise demand a life of retirement. At the time, he believes country life — the staying away from business and distractions — to be the most propitious to the cultivation of philosophy. In a letter of 1727 to his friend Michael Ramsay he is enthusiastically willing to embrace this life:

For the perfectly Wise man that outbraves Fortune is surely greater than the Husbandman who slips by her; And indeed this pastoral & Saturnine Happyne I have in a great measure come at, just now; I live like a King pretty much by myself; Neither full of Action nor perturbation, Moles somnos. This State however I can forsee is not to be rely'd on; My peace of Mind is no sufficiently confirm'd by Philosophy to withstand the Blows of Fortune; This Greatness & Elevation of Soul is to be found only in Study & contemplation, this can alone teach us to look down upon humane Accidents. ²

Three main factors that bear on Hume's adult thoughts and experience of melancholy are already there: solitude, study, and fortune. But it will take longer for Hume to realize that each of them, depending on the circumstances, may and does trigger a melancholy state in the human agent; that each has a double edge. For now, a naive Hume fancies that only fortune is to be feared; nevertheless that fortune can be conquered; and conquered by hard study of philosophy.

Are such thoughts Hume's own? They are possibly not. It is possible that tradition speaks through him, a willing follower. In later years, no longer a follower, Hume gives philosophical tradition voice in a set of essays that is somehow reminiscent of his youthful aspirations: "The Epicurean," "The Stoic," "The Platonist," and "The Sceptic."³ Their subject is human happiness imperiled by misfortune. Each school presents its outlook on how to deal with the fluctuations of fortune. Each brings forward its own philosophical rule for countering this human predicament. The gathering of them in a single group suggests that, in spite of irreconcilable disagreements, they all share one deep agreement: for them all the attainment of happiness in the face of misfortune is the greatest philosophical problem. In this respect, their stance is very much the same as the young Hume's.

2 Greig, J. Y. T. (editor). *The Letters of David Hume* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1932), volume I, letter 1, year 1727, page 10. Hereafter L and number of volume, plus letter number, year, and page.

3 See Hume, David. *Essays: Moral, Political, and Literary*. Edited and with a Foreword, Notes, and Glossary by Eugene F. Miller (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1985), 138-180. Hereafter Es, plus page number.

But the Hume who authors the essays is no longer the enthusiastic youth of an earlier time. The changes he's gone through show in their making. He now stages four distinct approaches, not a single, generic one. And now different speakers, none of whom assuming the identity of Hume himself, embody the approaches. Finally the speakers are depicted as if in the act of delivering an oratory piece to an imaginary audience of potential followers. Hume, the author, seems to take a critical distance. He positions us readers right by his side; we are, with him, an alert audience.

Genevieve Lloyd optimistically finds in the four essays a laudable display of sympathy on the part of Hume. In her interpretation, when granting every school a voice, a first person voice he did not censor and did not interfere with, Hume was moved by a sense of fairness; and by charitably impersonating each school, he showed that he was able to enter, respect, and understand points of view that were not his own.⁴ I disagree with Lloyd.

To me it seems there's enough theatrical effect in the essays to suggest that they are not written in sympathy with philosophical doctrines. The signs, not straightforwardly related to content, are however intriguingly revealing in form. The first sign has to do with rhetoric in the following manner. All speeches sound like intellectual testimonies. But should we trust them? Are they candid? Do they display the personal and involved character of a genuine testimony? Or are they cut for effect, solely aiming at persuasion?

The speeches are delivered from a stage where speakers stand in an unequal, higher position in relation to listeners, and remain isolated from their peers. Each in his turn stands alone up there, in a placement such that forbids any breach for dialogue, either between speaker and listener, or among the speakers themselves. No arguments can be given or taken. Converted to lecturers, or should I say preachers, they offer us dry sketches of unwavering paths to follow. But this is what dogmas are made of. And it is not Humean in the least.

The second sign is more trivial, and has to do with theatrical order, size, and tempo. Hume reserves for the Skeptic the final and longest speech in the series. If someone has the last word, the Skeptic does. In this perspective, beneath the frozen frames in sequence, a dynamic story unfolds before our eyes; a story that begins with the epicurean rejection of philosophy and also ends with a sort of rejection of philosophy, by the Skeptic, on higher grounds. Thus Hume raises us, the audience, to a vantage point of view from where the whole story passes in review, and not in the fragmented still frames accessible to the speakers. The formerly passive audience begins to function as critical

4 See Lloyd, Genevieve. "Hume on the Passion for Truth" in *Feminist Interpretations of David Hume*, Anne Jaap Jacobson (editor). (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000), especially p. 50-56.

listeners. We can follow the plot. And it feels as if Hume is giving us warning: here you see philosophical paths, he appears to say, and they've all been followed through to the end. Not too inviting, old beaten and long forgotten paths, they belong in the past, except for the skeptic, who is presently with us.

In the pursuit of happiness, the Skeptic recommends following one's inclinations, while he also emphasizes the relativity of value. Values, he says, are relative to our particular constitution, to our nature: "[o]bjects have absolutely no worth or value in themselves. They derive their worth merely from the passion. If that be strong, and steady, and successful, the person is happy." (Es 166) Now "constitution" or the "state of passions" is influenced by education, custom, prejudice, caprice, humor, all of these factors that philosophy may and does affect in many different ways. But philosophy, the Skeptic adds, is not necessarily useful to bringing about the state of passions that gives support to human happiness; it can even pose an obstacle to it.

If philosophy rises too high in its abstractions, it simply does not blend with the passions; hence it does not blend with human happiness either. That's probably his word for the Platonist who looks up to the divine, and doesn't even care about coping with fortune. If too narrow principled and opposed to the passions, philosophy can even cause unhappiness — a word to the Stoic. The Skeptic concludes that knowledge alone, philosophical and non-philosophical, that "humanizes the temper and softens the passions" is instrumental for happiness. He takes a bow, if only a slight bow, to the Epicurean. Happiness *is* in the passions, but contrarily to what the Epicurean might think the passions *can* mingle happily with philosophy.

The Skeptic in this essay resembles a Humean philosopher who knows better than to place blind trust in philosophy. In the conclusion to Book I of the *Treatise*, too high minded or too narrow principled a philosophy is shown to trigger melancholy. In *Of Delicacy of Taste and Passion*," Hume argues that none other than a humane philosophy can help to cure melancholy. How is it that the very Hume who at 16 wanted to follow the philosophers' lead is brought to this point? The very Hume who much like the Platonist aspired to philosophical divinity, and like the Stoic expected theory to toughen him against reversals of fortune? In the meantime, what changes happened to his concept of a philosophical life? And what is it that brought about change?

3

Hume himself was once a melancholy philosopher, and not long after writing to Michael Ramsey. He describes his condition in a letter of 1734 to a

medical doctor, and concludes: when philosophy is pursued at the expense of other human occupations, it turns its adept melancholy. Hume blames it on the solitude of study:

There was another particular, which contributed more than any thing, to waste my Spirits & bring on me this Distemper, which was, that having read many Books of Morality, such as Cicero, Seneca & Plutarch, & being smit with their beautiful Representations of Virtue & Philosophy, I undertook the Improvement of my Temper & Will, along with my Reason & Understanding. I was continually fortifying myself with Reflections against Death & Poverty, & Shame, & Pain, & all the other Calamities of Life. These no doubt are exceeding useful, when join'd with an active Life; because the Occasion being presented along with the Reflection, works it into the Soul, & makes it take a deep Impression, but in Solitude they serve to little other Purpose, than to waste the Spirit, the Force of the Mind meeting with no Resistance, but wasting itself in the Air, like our Arm when it misses its Aim. This however I did not learn but by Experience, & till I had already ruin'd my Health, tho' I was not sensible of it. (LI, 3, 1734, 13-14)

Hume is in the process of finding out that business and diversion — not the study of philosophy — are wholesome, promote mental good health, prevent and heal melancholy. If formerly he was convinced that philosophical knowledge would come to harden him against the hazards of fortune, thus shielding him from the melancholy that such hazards might cause, now, on the contrary, philosophy itself is hazardous, saddening and weakening of human constitution, both physically and mentally.

A few more years and a mature Hume will prefer semi-retirement to the total isolation willed by his 16 year old self. He will cherish friendship, and will desire to be spared only from business that is not of his interest. Writing in 1747 to Henry Home he draws a revised picture of the philosophical sage, to whom plenty of books and leisure suffice, but not without “the company of friends” — a happy resolution to a story that spans about twenty years of Hume’s life. (LI, 54, 1747, 99-100)

But the story is not yet fully told. Melancholy consequent to the study of philosophy remains intriguing. In the little we have seen of Hume’s correspondence it is prominent as a side effect of the voluntary reclusion and solitude that arduous studies demand. But the correspondence and the four essays as a series seem subtly to assume that philosophical theory itself may be a cause of melancholy. Next I intend to show that melancholy as an effect of philosophical theory may in its turn impair philosophical soundness; hence that objective validity and subjective well-being double influence one another. Together they may have peculiar effects on epistemic choices, and play a role in epistemological valuation. The conclusion to Book I of the *Treatise* will allow us to better grasp their combined significance.

4

In the conclusion to Book I, speaking in the first person as a negative dogmatist or Pyrrhonian skeptic, Hume falls in a state of melancholy despair. In that context, melancholy is consequent to multiple circumstances, so diverse as cognitive uncertainty and social isolation. And it is the outcome of scholarly activity of a particular sort. Can anything of value be learned from an analysis of this scholarly type? Is melancholy of any importance to the analysis? I think the answer is yes, it can, and it is.

In Robert Burton's classic *Anatomy*, melancholy is the scholar's doom. He is fated to live in poverty, ever dependent on the powerful, always lacking recognition, and never sufficiently able in the practical affairs of life. In some ways, Hume's melancholy scholar is in the same predicament as Burton's. He is a victim of lack of recognition, and the love of fame and reputation, as we know, was no small matter for Hume. And although he doesn't heed the powerful, he certainly does cherish his independence.

But then there are meaningful differences. Hume's acting out the inner workings of scholarly activity makes it possible for him to rehearse actual and passional experiences supervenient on first person philosophical knowledge. His analysis has layers of which Burton would be unsuspecting. Moreover Hume's scholar is not just any scholar. He is a skeptic, in danger of a direr practical failing: in the absence of belief, he will be left in total paralysis, and may die of inaction. Or else his continued doubt and uncertainty will make his inchoate actions be constantly purposeless and self-defeating. Finally, for Hume the skeptic's plight has to do with more than belief and disbelief. And it has to do with more than poverty and dependence. I think it has to do, strange as it may sound, with awareness.

In the *Treatise*, melancholy despair befalls the skeptic at the precise moment when he attains full awareness of his doubts and fears, in a moment of shock realization. It is an effect of his experiencing to the full his own epistemic achievements together with their necessary consequences. This intensely emotional experience is the starting point of a descent that opens up for the skeptic — graphically — a scene of unhappiness that up to that point he simply couldn't anticipate nor did he suppose to exist. This is no small drama, and it is not mere theatricals. It is nothing like the studied speeches staged in the four essays. Let's take a closer look at it.

5

The skeptic in the conclusion of Book I is done with the analysis of systems of philosophy, past and present. He has explained the nature of human understanding. And he has concluded that all belief and certainty is founded on the imagination. As the conclusion begins, he is readying himself to go further into the “immense depths of philosophy.”

Hume makes ample use of nautical metaphors: he is about to set sail in a weather-beaten vessel, willing to compassing the globe, but anticipating the perils of shipwreck. At once confident and diffident, disillusioned with his own means and resources, his reflections discover a lonely surrounding landscape of heavy clouds, dreary solitudes, and rough passages. Both the vessel and the sea look foreboding. Outward looking, he can foresee nothing but “dispute, contradiction, anger, calumny, and detraction” from fellow thinkers. Inward looking, he finds only “doubt and ignorance.” Desperately in need of support, he proceeds with hesitating steps, in dread of error and absurdity. This dramatic phrasing is Hume’s own.⁵

Throughout Book I Hume certainly had been investigating in earnest and making steady progress. But up to this point he had not yet fully understood exactly where he was heading. Now he has an insight, not in the form of a new theoretical finding, but in a painful sentimental conversion. It is as though doubt, disbelief, and critique must be felt to the full in a cluster of passions, or else they will lack significance. Melancholy despair here is an experience of awareness.

Dogmatic philosophers in the four essays and Hume, the youth, envision a philosophical way to happiness and away from melancholy. For them, other than philosophy, only fortune would make an alternative way. But while nobody should count much on fortune, philosophy can raise one above even the roughest fluctuations of fortune itself. Where fortune fails, it succeeds. Now what does the conclusion to Book I tell? Philosophy has failed the skeptic, and failed him so enormously that he is no longer able to place trust in his future, not even if fortune itself were to “guide” him. (T 172)

Yet the melancholy skeptic *is* a good philosopher. Actually he embodies qualities that might easily raise him to a role model for all philosophers. Cognitively he is endowed with lofty aspirations, sharp reasoning, thoroughness, rigor, precision, and clarity. Morally he shows honesty, courage, commitment, and love of truth. He sets high standards. His intellectual probity is above

5 Hume, David. *A Treatise of Human Nature*. Edited by David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 171-172. Hereafter T, plus page number.

suspicion. His conduct is irreproachable, and to any impartial observer, his conclusions are unquestionable.

Ironically, the very moment when he manifests all these qualities in full lucidity is also when he loses grasp. The payoff of his sharp analytical intellectual abilities is not the anticipated enlightenment: as he is seized by melancholy, unwarranted doubts and fears take hold of his perception, distorting it. His experience is no longer akin to our own. His views are alien to ours. He must not be seeing things right.

In more than one way this scenario invests a sentimental fact with epistemological significance. An epistemic conduct that inevitably ends in despair, as the skeptic's does here, must have epistemic misconduct built into it, since despair, in this case, negatively affects perception and judgment. Another way in which sentiment influences belief and cognition has to do with the agent's happiness. The unhappy sentimental state in which the skeptic finds himself is, in that context, what compels him to change his view. The loss of well-being is mainly what drives him away from the theoretical path he was fast following prior to his melancholy breakdown. If it were not for the breakdown, one wonders whether he would ever deviate from that path. In terms of its consequences, the sentimental experience amounts to epistemological invalidation followed by redirection. Melancholy despair is awareness — an “*intense* view.” But it is also release.

The melancholy skeptic of Hume's *Treatise* brings to the limelight the fact that moral consequences (in a broad sense) if unhappy may count among valid criteria for moderating epistemic conducts that would otherwise be deserving of unconditional praise and approbation, and would be taken as finished accomplishments of authentic epistemic virtues. They convert epistemic virtues into faults. Thus a state of melancholy despair acquires the roles of epistemic variable and tacit criterion of epistemological evaluation. Hume's melancholy skeptic makes actual this possible scenario.

But then what of philosophy? Not of just any, but true philosophy, and considering not factors extrinsic, but intrinsic to its practice? May not its having embedded melancholy eventually lead to entirely cutting off all science and philosophy? Not quite. Book I ends in a note of hope, expressed in a simple counsel: let that same afflicted skeptic attend to particular issues at particular times. In other words, let him not become high-minded and narrow principled. This course will naturally incline him to a just philosophy that favors mild and moderate sentiments. In this newly opened path Hume finds a way out of hard philosophy and an end to high drama. (T 178)

6

Hume's aesthetic essays pursue this opening. They bring together extensive knowledge of particulars and mild sentiments, the former a means to the latter. Knowledge can be a happy endeavor if understood as cultivation of taste that heals melancholy by subduing delicacy of passion. In "Of Delicacy of Taste" Hume maintains that hypersensitive persons, those subject to extremes of passion, tend to become melancholy for a simple reason. In the lives of almost all people misfortune is more common than good fortune. Although encountering the same amount of pain, such persons suffer more than others. For Hume, only delicacy that comes from the cultivation and refinement of taste can cure delicacy of passion in those afflicted with this kind of constitution. Many and varied accumulated experiences, be it in the observation of action and character, be it in exposure to books and works of art, modify a person's sensibility. In Hume's words, such experiences "enlarge the sphere of happiness and misery," and help to put the person's own experiences in a broader perspective, thus mitigating the violence of their original impact.

Taste is the calm passion into which the violent passions are converted after repeated exposure to agreeable and disagreeable scenes of life. In the specific case of melancholy passion, it is converted into an "agreeable melancholy" that Hume describes as peaceful and meditative. In his view, although the effects of misfortune can never be totally neutralized, the cultivation of taste strengthens the agent's understanding and common sense. It makes it possible to counterbalance hypersensitivity, as well as to intensify sensitivity to the "tender and agreeable" passions.

Taste itself is to a great measure a result of the cultivation and growth of knowledge and cognitive skills. In "Of the Standard of Taste" Hume emphasizes a few thick connections between taste and knowledge. He opposes delicate imagination and "fine and discriminating" sense organs, characteristic of "delicacy of taste," to imagination and sense organs that are "dull and languid," present in the vulgar taste. Besides, according to him, just appreciation requires, among other things, absence of prejudice and use of reason, for a work of art is a "chain of propositions and reasonings," the qualities of which should include consistence, uniformity, and adequacy of means to ends. Among its rational elements, true taste includes: "clarity of conception, exactness of distinction, vivacity of apprehension, excellence of the faculties." In this conception true taste is "[s]trong sense, united to delicate sentiment, improved by practice, perfected by comparison, and cleared of all prejudice." (Es 241) Therefore it is inseparable from "sound understanding."

In the cure of melancholy by means of the cultivation of taste, Hume finds a positive role for knowledge. The Hume we meet here is not like the philosophers in the four essays. Be it by seeking philosophical indifference on the face of the reversals of fortune (the Stoic), be it by rejecting a philosophical solution to the problem (the Epicurean), none of them, with the exception of the Skeptic perhaps, gets near Hume's solution as spelled in "Of Delicacy" and "Of the Standard." His point of view is not similar to that of the skeptic in despair either, nor to his youthful views. Fortune, philosophy, and happiness are now present in close association just as they were then. But see how different is the outlook. If then philosophy was a means of raising one above and beyond fortune, now knowledge is a means to living *with* fortune, embracing experience in its fullness.

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