

FOUR ESSAYS

Tragedy, The Standard of Taste, Suicide, The Immortality of the Soul

David Hume

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[Brackets] enclose editorial explanations. Small ·dots· enclose material that has been added, but can be read as though it were part of the original text. Occasional •bullets, and also indenting of passages that are not quotations, are meant as aids to grasping the structure of a sentence or a thought. Every four-point ellipsis indicates the omission of a brief passage that seems to present more difficulty than it is worth.

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Glossary

genius: high-level intellect; a less strenuous meaning than the word has today.

physical: contrasted with 'moral'; it means 'having to do with how things stand in the actual world'.

principle: In the phrase 'the principles of which I am composed', Hume seems to mean 'the physical elements of my body'.

science: organised knowledge of any kind.

soul: mind; it has no religious significance here.

speculative: having to do with matters of fact.

sympathy: fellow-feeling; I can sympathise with your pleasure as well as with your grief.

Tragedy

The spectators of a well-written tragedy get from it sorrow, terror, anxiety, and other emotions that are in themselves disagreeable and uncomfortable; and they get *pleasure* from this! It's hard to understand. The more the spectators are touched and affected, the more delighted they are with the spectacle; and as soon as the uncomfortable emotions stop operating, the play is at an end. A play of this kind can't survive having more than *one* scene of complete joy and contentment and security; and this scene is sure always to be the concluding one. If the play has any happy scenes woven into its fabric—not merely placed at the end—they create only faint gleams of pleasure; and these are thrown in so as to produce variety, and so as to plunge the characters in the play into deeper distress by means of that contrast and disappointment. The poet uses all his skill to get his audience into states of compassion and indignation, anxiety and resentment—to get them there and to keep them there. How *pleased* they are depends on how *afflicted* they are, and they are never so happy as when they use tears, sobs, and cries to express their sorrow and relieve their heart, swollen with the tenderest sympathy and compassion. [Hume speaks of 'the poet' because he is thinking of poetic dramas such as those of ancient Greece and Elizabethan England.]

Critics with some slight ability to think philosophically—there haven't been many of them!—have noted this strange fact and tried to explain it. The Abbé Dubos, in his reflections on poetry and painting, says that the most disagreeable state of mind is the slack and listless state of idleness that the mind drifts into when it has no emotions and has nothing to do. To get rid of this painful situation, 'the Abbé says, the mind looks for pastimes and activities—business,

gambling, shows, public executions—whatever will arouse the emotions and distract the mind from thinking about itself. It doesn't matter *what* the emotion is: let it be disagreeable, afflicting, melancholy, upsetting—it is still better than the bland slackness of perfect tranquillity and repose.

It must be admitted that this explanation is at least in part satisfactory. When gambling is going on at several tables, you'll see that onlookers flock to the table where the stakes are highest, even if they don't find the best players there. The spectator sees or at least imagines intense emotions arising from great losses or gains, and through sympathy [see Glossary] this gives him a little of the same emotions and provides him with momentary entertainment. It makes the time pass more easily for him, and provides some relief from the oppression that men usually feel when they are left entirely to their own thoughts and meditations.

We find that common liars in their stories exaggerate not only joy, beauty, happiness and magnificence but also every kind of danger, pain, distress, sickness, death, murder and cruelty. This is their seemingly absurd secret trick for pleasing their hearers, arousing emotions in them by which to hold their attention and lock them into the marvellous stories the liars are telling.

However ingenious and satisfactory this explanation may seem to be, it can't be the whole story about the phenomenon we are discussing. Consider some very distressing event which would, if it happened on stage, give us pleasure of the kind I have been discussing; and then think about confronting such an event not on the stage but in real life. It would still be a most effective cure for slack idleness of mind, but what it caused in us wouldn't be pleasure but

rather sincere and unmixed distress. Fontenelle seems to have been aware of this difficulty; so he tries another explanation of the phenomenon, or at least to add something to the theory of Dubos that I have mentioned. He writes:

‘Pleasure and pain, different though they are in themselves, are pretty much alike in what causes them. The phenomenon of *tickling* indicates that when pleasure is pushed a little too far it becomes pain, and that when pain is moderated a little it becomes pleasure. From this it follows that there is such a thing as a *gentle and agreeable sorrow*, something near the borderline between pleasure and pain. It is a weakened and diminished pain. The heart has a built-in liking for being moved and affected. Melancholy events suit it, and so do even disastrous and sorrowful ones provided there’s something in the situation to soften the blow. A well-staged play has almost the effect of reality—almost, but not entirely. However much we are swept away by the spectacle, however greatly the senses and imagination may push aside reason, there still lurks at the bottom of our mind a certain idea of *falsehood* in the whole of what we see—a faint sense that “None of this is really happening”. Although this idea is weak and disguised, it is enough to lessen the pain we suffer from the misfortunes of those whom we love, and to reduce it to the point where it turns into a pleasure. •We weep for the misfortune of a hero to whom we are attached. At the same time •we comfort ourselves by reflecting that it’s only a fiction. The mixture of *those* two feelings constitutes our agreeable sorrow and brings us to tears that delight us. But the affliction caused by external events that one perceives through the senses is stronger than the consolation that comes from an internal reflection. What ought to

predominate in this mixture, therefore, are the effects and symptoms of sorrow, not those of pleasure.’

This solution seems to be sound and convincing, but it can’t fully account for the phenomenon we are discussing unless something is added to it. The passions aroused by eloquence are all *extremely* enjoyable, as are the feelings that are moved by painting and the theatre. That is the main reason why Cicero’s speeches to the Roman law-court bring delight to every reader who has good taste; and it’s hard to read some of them without the deepest sympathy and sorrow. There is no doubt that Cicero’s merit as an orator depends largely on his success at this particular part of an orator’s work. When he had the judges and all his audience in tears, that’s when they were the most highly delighted, and expressed the greatest satisfaction with him. In his role as a prosecutor, his wrenching description of Verres’s butchery of the Sicilian captains is a masterpiece of this kind; but I don’t think anyone will say that being present at a miserable scene of that kind would provide one with *entertainment*. And in this case the sorrow isn’t softened by the thought of fiction, for the audience were convinced of the truth of every detail. Well, then, what is it in *this* case that raises a pleasure from the bosom of uneasiness, so to speak—a pleasure that still retains all the features and outward symptoms of distress and sorrow?

I answer: This extraordinary effect comes from *the very eloquence with which the melancholy scene is represented*.

- The genius [see Glossary] required to depict events in a lively manner,
- the skill employed in gathering together all the pathetic details,
- the judgment displayed in how they are set out—the exercise of these noble talents, together with
- the power and beauty of the prose,

bring the highest satisfaction to the audience, and arouse the most delightful emotions. In this way not only is •the uneasiness of the melancholy emotions overpowered and erased by something stronger of an opposite kind, but •the whole thrust of those emotions is *converted into pleasure*, and increases the delight that the eloquence gives us. The same force of oratory employed on an uninteresting subject wouldn't please us half as much, or rather it would strike us as quite ridiculous; and our mind, being left in a state of absolute calmness and indifference, would get nothing from those beauties of imagination or expression that give it such exquisite entertainment when they are combined with emotion. The thrust or urgency arising from •sorrow, compassion, indignation is •not suppressed but• given a new direction by •the feelings of beauty. The •latter, being the dominant emotion, take command of the mind and convert the •former into themselves, or at least colour them so strongly as totally to alter their nature. And the soul [see Glossary], being roused by emotion and at the same time charmed by eloquence, experiences a whole strong emotion that is altogether delightful.

The same forces are at work in tragedy, with one additional feature: a •theatrical• tragedy is an imitation, and imitation is always in itself agreeable. This factor serves to make the change of emotions go even more smoothly, and to convert the whole feeling into one uniform and strong enjoyment. When we are looking at paintings, objects of the greatest terror and distress *please* us, and please us more than the most beautiful objects that appear calm and emotionally neutral.¹

The •strongly negative• feeling stirs up the mind, and arouses a large stock of intensity and urgency that is all transformed into pleasure by the force of the dominant emotion. That is how the fiction in •theatrical• tragedy softens the •negative• emotion, not merely by weakening or diminishing the sorrow but by injecting a new feeling. •Negative emotions directed at •real states of affairs rather than at •ones in poetic fictions behave quite differently from this•. A real sorrow can be gradually lessened through time, until it totally disappears; but nowhere in the course of that lessening will it ever give *pleasure* (except in a stray case where a man who is sunk under lethargic idleness is roused out of that by his sorrow, •and experiences pleasure from the rousing•).

To confirm this theory, all I need do is to •give evidence that the mental mechanism it postulates is a feature of the human mind that shows up in other contexts as well. So I need to• produce other kinds of situation in which the subordinate emotion is converted into the dominant one and gives force to it, although the two are •different and even, sometimes, •opposite. •I shall present four of them•.

(1) It is built into our make-up that **novelty** arouses our minds and attracts our attention; and the emotions that it causes are always converted into whatever emotion the novel item evokes, so that that emotion comes to have extra force. Whatever emotion an event arouses—joy or sorrow, pride or shame, anger or good-will—it is sure to produce that emotion in greater intensity when the event is new or unusual. And although novelty is agreeable in itself, it strengthens the painful emotions as well as the agreeable ones.

¹ Painters have no qualms about representing distress and sorrow as well as any other emotion. But they seem not to linger on these melancholy feelings as much do the poets, who copy every human feeling but pass quickly over the agreeable ones. A painter represents only one instant; and if that contains enough emotion it is sure to affect and delight the spectator. But the poet needs a variety of scenes and incidents and feelings, and nothing can provide him with those except distress, terror, or anxiety. Complete joy and satisfaction bring *security*, which puts an end to action.

(2) If you wanted to affect a person greatly by your narration of some event, the best way to do this is through skillful delay, first arousing his **curiosity and impatience** and *then* letting him into the secret. That is how Iago proceeded in Shakespeare's famous scene; everyone who sees the play is aware that Othello's jealousy acquires additional force from his previous impatience, and that the subordinate emotion is here readily transformed into the dominant one.

(3) **Difficulties** increase emotions of every kind; and by arousing our attention and stirring up our active powers they produce an emotion that feeds into and thus strengthens the dominant emotion. For example, parents commonly love most the child whose sickly physical condition has caused them the greatest effort, trouble, and anxiety in rearing him. The agreeable sentiment of affection here gets extra force from the feelings of uneasiness caused by the child's infirmity. A second example: Nothing endears a friend to us so much as our sorrow over his death. The pleasure of his actual company doesn't strengthen our affection for him as much as that does. And other kinds of sorrow have a similar effect. Pliny the elder said something fine about this:

It is very remarkable that the last works of celebrated artists, ones that they left imperfect, are always valued the most. [He cites three examples.] These are valued even above the finished productions of those artists: We carefully study the broken outlines of the piece, the painter's half-formed idea; and our very grief for the fascinating hand that was stopped by death increases our pleasure still further.

(4) **Jealousy** is a painful emotion; yet the agreeable affection of *love* can't easily exist in its full tempestuous force unless some jealousy is mixed in with it. **Absence** is also

a great source of complaint among lovers, and gives them the greatest uneasiness; but nothing is more favourable to their mutual love than short intervals of absence. (If long intervals often prove fatal to love, that is only because in the course of time the lovers become accustomed to the absence and stop being made uneasy by it.) Jealousy and absence in love compose the *dolce peccante*—the sweet sinning—of the Italians, which they suppose so essential to all pleasure!

These instances (and many more might be collected) are enough to give us some insight into the analogy of nature—i.e. into the *general* psychological mechanisms that are at work in our reactions to theatrical tragedy and also in this quite wide variety of other events. The examples show us that the pleasure that poets, orators, and musicians give us by arousing grief, sorrow, indignation or compassion is not as extraordinary or paradoxical as it may at first sight appear. The force of imagination, the energy of expression, the power of numbers, the charms of imitation—all these are naturally of themselves delightful to the mind. And when the object presented also brings in some other feeling, our pleasure is further increased by the conversion of this subordinate emotion into the dominant one. Even if the other feeling is of a kind that is painful when aroused by the simple appearance of a real object, when it is aroused by the finer arts it is so smoothed, softened and gentled that it provides entertainment of the highest kind.

To confirm this reasoning, notice that when the pleasant emotions of the imagination do *not* predominate over those unpleasant emotions, a contrary effect follows. The former, being now subordinate, are converted into the latter, and *increase* the sufferer's pain and affliction.

Examples of this are *very* familiar to us. Who could ever think that a good way to comfort a grieving parent would be to exaggerate, with all the force of elocution, the irreparable

loss he has suffered from the death of a favourite child? The more power of imagination and expression you employ in a case like this, the more you *increase* the parent's despair and affliction.

The shame, confusion, and terror of Verres surely *increased* in proportion to the noble eloquence and vehemence of Cicero, as did also his pain and uneasiness. Those emotions were too strong for the pleasure arising from the beauties of elocution; and so, instead of the pleasures absorbing and converting the negative emotions, the reverse happened—the fear and shame etc. absorbed and converted the pleasures and were thus strengthened by them. The same driving mechanism is at work in Verres as in the rest of Cicero's audience, though it operates in them in the opposite direction.

[This next paragraph refers to Clarendon's history of the English civil war; the 'catastrophe' was the beheading of King Charles I.] Lord Clarendon, when his narrative is approaching the catastrophe of the royal party, assumes that it would make his narration infinitely disagreeable; so he hurries over the king's death, without giving us a single detail about it. He thinks it is too horrible a scene to be contemplated with any satisfaction—indeed, without the utmost pain and revulsion. Clarendon and his contemporary readers were too deeply enmeshed in those events, and felt a pain from subjects that an historian and a reader of a later time would regard as the most pathetic and most interesting, and therefore the most agreeable to read about.

An event represented in a theatrical tragedy may be too bloody and atrocious to provide pleasure. It may arouse feelings of horror that can't be softened into pleasure; and its being represented with great energy of expression only serves to increase our uneasiness. An example of this is an episode in the play *The Ambitious Stepmother*, where a

venerable old man who has been raised to the height of fury and despair rushes against a pillar, and bangs his head on it, smearing it all over with a mixture of blood and brains. The English theatre has far too many such shocking images.

Even the common feelings of compassion have to be softened by some agreeable feeling if they are to give thorough satisfaction to the audience. The unadorned misery of virtue suffering under the triumphant tyranny and oppression of vice is a disagreeable thing to watch, and all the masters of dramatic writing carefully avoid it. The audience won't leave the theatre in a state of entire satisfaction and contentment unless either the virtue converts itself into a noble courageous despair or the vice receives its proper punishment.

(Judged by this standard most painters seem to have made very poor choices of subject-matter. Because they worked so much for churches and convents, they have chiefly portrayed such horrible subjects as crucifixions and martyrdoms, where nothing appears but tortures, wounds, executions, and passive suffering, without any action or affection. [That last phrase seems to mean something like: 'Without the victim *doing* anything, as distinct from having things done to him/her; and without the artist expressing any of his own emotions in his portrayal of the events.'] When they turned their attention away from this ghastly Christian mythology, they often had recourse to Ovid. His fictions are agreeable and full of emotion, but they are still a poor choice because they are scarcely natural or probable enough for painting.)

I have discussed an inversion of the psychological mechanism that has been my main topic; I have illustrated it in connection with oratory and dramatic poetry; but we also see it at work in ordinary life. If the subordinate emotion intensifies to the point where it becomes dominant, it swallows up the feeling which it had previously nourished and increased. Too much jealousy extinguishes love; too

much difficulty makes us stop caring; too much sickness and infirmity disgusts a selfish and unkind parent.

What so disagreeable as the dismal, gloomy, disastrous stories with which melancholy people 'entertain' their

companions? When that happens, the unpleasant emotion is aroused *alone*, not accompanied by any spirit, genius, or eloquence; so it is purely unpleasant, not bringing with it anything that can soften it into pleasure or satisfaction.

The Standard of Taste

[For many of us these days, aesthetic ‘taste’ tends to mean something fairly narrow and somewhat shallow and subjective—‘in bad taste’, ‘not to my taste’, etc. Of someone who didn’t like Beethoven’s late quartets or Donne’s poetry or Mantegna’s paintings, there are various negative things we might say, but ‘He doesn’t have good *taste*’ isn’t one of them. Hume’s present topic, which he calls ‘taste’, is every kind of aesthetic reaction to works of art, including broad deep reasoned competence in evaluating such works. Not narrow. Not shallow.] The great variety of *taste* as well as of *opinion* that prevails in the world is too obvious not to have come to everyone’s attention. Men who never go far from home can see differences of taste within the narrow circle of people they are acquainted with—even when the people have been brought up under the same government and have early imbibed the same prejudices. Those who are in a position to take a broader view, in which they contemplate distant nations and remote ages, are even more surprised at how much difference and contrariety there is in people’s tastes. We are apt to call ‘barbarous’ anything that departs widely from our own taste and viewpoint; but we soon find that others will condemn us in the same way. And even the most arrogant and self-satisfied people, when they find to their surprise that others with different tastes are equally sure of themselves, eventually become hesitant in this contest of sentiment to claim positively that they are *right*. [A ‘sentiment’ could be a feeling, an opinion, or an attitude. In this essay the word nearly always means ‘feeling’, but ‘sentiment’ will be left untouched throughout.]

This variety of taste, which is obvious at a casual glance, turns out on examination to be even greater in reality than in appearance. Men often differ about beauty and ugliness of all kinds, even when they talk in the same way of what

kinds of things are beautiful and what *kinds* are ugly. Every language contains some words that imply blame, others that imply praise; and all those who use that language must agree in how they apply them. All the voices are united in applauding elegance, propriety, simplicity, spirit in writing; and in blaming pomposity, affectation, coldness and spurious glitter. But when critics get down to particular details, this seeming unanimity vanishes and they turn out to have given very different meanings to their words. In all matters of opinion and knowledge it’s the other way around: *there* the differences among men are more often found at the level of general propositions than in particular details, and really to be less than they appear to be. An explanation of the words usually ends the controversy, and the disputants are surprised to learn that basically they agreed in their judgment all the time when they were quarrelling.

·AN ASIDE ON MORAL DIFFERENCES·

Those who base morality on sentiment more than on reason are inclined to apply the former observation (about differences of taste) also to ethics, maintaining that in all questions concerning conduct and life-styles men really differ more than they appear to at first sight. It is indeed obvious that writers of all nations and all ages agree in applauding justice, humanity, magnanimity, prudence, truthfulness, and in blaming the opposite qualities. Even poets and other authors—from Homer down to Fénelon—whose works mainly aim to please the imagination are nevertheless found to instil the same moral precepts and to applaud/blame the same virtues/vices. This great unanimity is usually credited to the influence of plain reason, which in all these cases maintains similar sentiments in all men, and prevents the controversies

to which the abstract sciences are so much exposed. So far as the unanimity is real, we can accept this explanation of it as satisfactory. But we must also allow that some part of the seeming harmony in morals can be explained as arising from the very nature of language. The word 'virtue'—like its equivalent in every language—implies praise; and 'vice' implies blame. It would obviously be grossly improper to give a condemnatory meaning to a word whose general meaning is understood in a good sense; or to bestow applause where the 'generally accepted' idiom requires disapproval. When Homer delivers any *general* precepts, they will never be controverted by anyone; but when he draws *particular* pictures of how people behaved, and represents •heroism in Achilles and •prudence in Ulysses, it is obvious that he intermixes much more •ferocity in the former and much more •cunning and fraud in the latter than Fénelon would admit of. The Greek poet's Ulysses seems to delight in lies and fictions, and often employs them without having any need to, and even without their doing him any good. But his more scrupulous son, 'Telemachus', in 'the work *Télémarque* by the French epic writer 'Fénelon', risks the most imminent perils rather than depart from the most exact line of truth and truthfulness.

The admirers and followers of the Koran insist on the excellent moral precepts interspersed throughout that wild and absurd work. But presumably the Arabic words corresponding to the English 'fairness', 'justice', 'temperance', 'modesty', 'charity' were ones that always *had to* be taken in a good sense, this having been given to them by ordinary usage in Arabic; and it would have showed the greatest ignorance not of •morals but of •language to have used them with any epithets that didn't express applause and approval. But if we want to know whether the supposed prophet had *really* achieved a sound sentiment of morals, we should attend to

his narration! We shall soon find that he praises instances of treachery, inhumanity, cruelty, revenge and bigotry that are utterly incompatible with civilised society. No steady rule of right seems to be heeded there; and actions are blamed or praised only on the basis of whether they are hurtful or beneficial to the true believers.

There is really very little merit in pronouncing true general precepts in ethics. Someone who recommends a moral virtue really does nothing but what is implied in the terms—the names of the virtues—themselves. People who invented the word 'charity' and used it in a good sense inculcated the precept 'Be charitable' more clearly and much more effectively than any self-appointed law-maker or prophet putting 'Be charitable' into his writings. The words that imply a degree either of blame or of approval (along with the rest of their meaning) are less liable to be perverted or mistaken than any other words.

·END OF THE ASIDE ON MORAL DIFFERENCES·

It is natural for us to seek a *standard of taste*—a rule by which the various sentiments of men can be reconciled, or at least a decision reached that confirms one sentiment and condemns another.

One philosophical position cuts off all hopes of success in such an attempt, maintaining that it is impossible for there ever to be any standard of taste. 'I shall present the reasons given for this view, running to the end of the present paragraph'. There is a very wide difference between judgment and sentiment. All sentiment is right, because sentiment doesn't refer to anything beyond itself, and is always real whenever a man is conscious of it. But not all states of the understanding are right, because *they* refer to something beyond themselves—namely, real matter of fact—and they don't always square with that. A thousand men may have a thousand different opinions about some

one thing; but just exactly *one* of the opinions is true, and the only difficulty is to find out which one that is. As against that, a thousand different sentiments aroused by some one object are *all* right, because no sentiment represents what is really in the object, and so no sentiment runs any risk of being false. A sentiment does mark a certain conformity or relation between the object and the organs or faculties of the mind; but there is no chance of error there, because if that conformity didn't exist the sentiment wouldn't exist either. Beauty is not a quality in things themselves; it exists merely in the mind that contemplates them, and each mind perceives a different beauty. One person may even perceive ugliness where someone else senses beauty; and every individual ought to go along with his own sentiment, without trying to regulate those of others. To look for what is *really* beautiful or *really* ugly is as pointless as trying to settle what is *really* sweet and what is *really* bitter. A single object may be both sweet (to someone) and bitter (to someone else), depending on the condition of their taste-buds; and the proverb rightly declares that it is pointless to dispute about tastes. It is very natural, and even quite necessary, to extend this axiom to mental taste as well as bodily taste—i.e. to taste as expressed in 'That's a wonderful painting' as well as in 'That seems to have vinegar in it'. Common sense is often at variance with philosophy, especially with sceptical philosophy; but here is one case, at least, where the two come to the same conclusion.

But though this axiom, by turning into a proverb, seems to have gained the support of common sense, there is certainly a kind of common sense that opposes it, or at least serves to modify and restrain it. Someone who asserted an equality of genius and elegance between Ogilby and Milton, or between Bunyan and Addison, would be thought to be defending something as extravagant as declaring a mole-hill to be as

high as the Matterhorn or a pond as wide as the Atlantic. Perhaps there *are* people who prefer Ogilby and Bunyan, but no-one pays any attention to such a taste, and we don't hesitate to say that the sentiment of these purported critics is absurd and ridiculous. In that context the principle of the *natural equality of all tastes* is totally forgotten; we admit it on some occasions, where the objects seem nearly equal, but it seems like an extravagant paradox—or rather an obvious absurdity—when it is applied to objects that are so disproportioned [Hume's word] to one another.

[In this paragraph, 'composition' covers the composing of music, the writing of poetry or fine prose, painting, sculpting, etc.] Obviously, none of the rules of composition are fixed by *a priori* reasoning; they can't be regarded as abstract conclusions that the understanding has arrived at by studying the relations between ideas that are eternal and unchanging. They are based on the same thing that all the practical sciences are based on—*experience*. All they are is *general observations about what has been found—universally, in all countries and at all times—to please*. Many of the beauties of poetry and even of eloquence are based on falsehood and fiction, on exaggerations, metaphors, and bending words from their natural meanings. To check the imagination's outbursts, and reduce every expression to geometrical truth and exactness, would be utterly contrary to the laws of criticism; because it would produce a work of a kind that universal experience has shown to be the most insipid and disagreeable. But though poetry can never submit to exact truth, it must be confined by rules of art that are revealed to the author either by his genius or by observation. If some negligent or irregular writers have given pleasure, they have done so in spite of their transgressions of rule or order, not because of them. Their work has had other beauties that would be approved by sound criticism; and the force of these

beauties gives our minds a satisfaction that is greater than our distaste for the blemishes. and thus overpowers our censure. Ariosto pleases; but *not* by his monstrous and improbable fictions, or his bizarre mixture of the serious and comic styles, or the lack of coherence in his stories, or the continual interruptions of his narration. He charms by the force and clarity of his expression, by the readiness and variety of his inventions, and by his natural depiction of the emotions, especially those of the cheerful and amorous kind; and however greatly his faults may lessen our satisfaction, they can't entirely destroy it. And if our pleasure really did arise from the parts of his poem that we call faults, this would be no objection to criticism in general—i.e. it wouldn't be an objection to having •some rules of criticism under which some things are judged to be faulty•. It would be an objection only to the •particular rules of criticism that imply that the passages in question are faulty, thus representing them as universally blamable. If the passages in question are found to please, they can't be faulty, however surprising and inexplicable is the pleasure they produce.

But though all the *general* rules of art are based purely on experience—on the observation of the common sentiments of human nature—we mustn't imagine that *on every occasion* the feelings of men will square with these rules. Those finer emotions of the mind are very tender and delicate, and they won't come smoothly and precisely into play according to their general and established principles unless many circumstances are in their favour. These finer emotions are like the small springs that drive a pocket-watch: the slightest •interference from outside, or the slightest •internal disorder, disturbs their motion and throws the operation of the whole machine out of balance. If we want to try this out, testing the power •over our minds• of some beauty or ugliness, we must carefully choose a •suitable time and

place, and get our •imagination into the right condition and attitude. If we are to judge concerning the universal beauty •of some work of art•, we need

perfect serenity of mind,
a gathering together of our thoughts, and
proper attention to the work of art.

If any of these is lacking, our test won't be valid and we'll be unable to reach a conclusion. Or, anyway, the relation that nature has placed between the •form •of the work• and the •sentiment •of the observer• will be more obscure, and tracing it out and recognising it will require greater precision. Our best way of discovering its influence—i.e. discovering what works of art please the discriminating mind—will be *not* to investigate the operation of each particular beauty *but rather* to attend to which works of art have been admired through the centuries, surviving all the caprices of mode and fashion, all the mistakes of ignorance and envy.

The same Homer who pleased people at Athens and Rome two thousand years ago is still admired today in Paris and London. All the changes of climate, government, religion, and language haven't been able to obscure his glory. Authority or prejudice may create a temporary fashion in favour of a bad poet or orator, but his reputation won't ever be •lasting or •general. When his compositions are examined by •posterity or by •foreigners, the enchantment disappears and his faults appear in their true colours. It is different with a real genius: the longer *his* works endure and the more widely they are spread, the *more* sincere is the admiration that he meets with. Envy and jealousy play too large a part in a narrow circle, and even being personally acquainted with the artist may cause one to give his work less applause than it deserves. But when these obstructions are removed •by drawing the circle wider•, the beauties that are naturally fitted to arouse pleasant sentiments immediately display their energy and

maintain their power over the minds of men for as long as the world lasts.

So we find that amidst all the variety and caprice of taste there are certain general sources of approval or disapproval whose influence a careful eye can detect in all operations of the mind. Because of the original structure of the human constitution, some particular forms or qualities are apt to please and others to displease; and if they fail of their effect in any particular instance it is from some apparent defect or imperfection in the organ. A man in a fever wouldn't insist that his palate was a good judge of flavours; someone suffering from jaundice wouldn't claim to give a verdict regarding colours. For each creature there is a •sound state and a •defective state; and only the sound state can be supposed to give us a true standard of a taste and sentiment. If in the sound state of the organ there is a complete (or considerable) uniformity of sentiment among men, we can get from this an idea of perfect beauty; just as the appearance of objects in daylight to the eye of a healthy man is regarded as their true and real colour, although colour is agreed to be merely an image created by the senses.

[A little way below, Hume will speak of sensations or sense-impressions as 'external sentiments', in contrast to the 'internal sentiments' that are feelings of pleasure, disgust, amusement, wonder, horror, and so on. On page 15 he calls those feelings 'internal sensations', and this use of 'internal' is at work in the phrase 'organs of internal sensation' on the same page, and in the phrase 'internal organs', which we are about to come to. It means 'whatever structures of mind or body operate to give us feelings of pleasure, disgust, etc.']. Our internal organs are subject to defects—many occurrences of them, and of many kinds—that prevent or weaken the influence of the general sources that our sentiment of beauty or ugliness comes from. Though some objects are, because of the ·natural· structure of the mind, *naturally* apt to give pleasure, it

can't be expected that the pleasure will be equally felt in every individual. Particular incidents and situations occur that either •throw a false light on the objects or •block the true light from conveying to the imagination the appropriate sentiment and perception.

One obvious cause for many people's not feeling the appropriate sentiment of beauty is their lack of the *delicacy of imagination* that is needed to make someone capable of those finer emotions. Everyone claims to have this delicacy; everyone talks about it, and wants to reduce every kind of taste or sentiment to its standard. But my intention in this essay is to mingle some •light of the understanding with the •feelings of sentiment! So I should give a more accurate definition of *delicacy* than has previously been attempted. So as not to go too deep for my philosophical points, I shall have recourse to a noted story in *Don Quixote*.

[The story is Sancho Panza's account of two of his kinsmen who were invited to taste wine from a particular cask; one detected in it a taste of leather, the other a taste of iron; and they were both laughed at until the cask was emptied and found to have at the bottom an iron key with a leather thong attached to it.]

The mental taste ·that is the topic of this essay· greatly resembles the bodily taste ·that is the subject of Sancho Panza's story·, so it won't be hard for us to apply the story to our present topic. Sweet and bitter are not qualities in objects, but belong entirely to the external sentiments [= 'sensations'] ·of the taster·; it is even *more* certain that beauty and ugliness are not qualities in objects, but belong entirely to the internal sentiments [= 'feelings'] ·of readers, viewers, or hearers·. Yet it has to be accepted that certain qualities that *are* in objects are fitted by nature to produce those particular feelings. Now, these qualities are sometimes **(1)** present in an object only to a small degree, so that one's

taste is not affected with such tiny qualities; or they are **(2)** present all mixed up with other such qualities, so that one can't pick out all the particular flavours from the jumble in which they are presented. Where the organs are **(1)** so finely tuned that nothing escapes them, and at the same time **(2)** so exact that they perceive every ingredient in the mixture—that is what we call 'delicacy of taste', whether we use this phrase in its literal sense (·as in tasting wine·) or its metaphorical sense (·'tasting' works of art·). Here, then, the general rules of beauty are useful, because they are based on •established models and on •the observation of what qualities please (or displease) when they are presented **(2)** on their own and **(1)** in a high degree. When someone encounters those qualities **(1)** in a small degree and **(2)** as aspects of a complex composition, if his organs aren't affected with a sensible delight (or uneasiness), we regard him as having no claim to delicacy of taste. To produce these general rules, or well-tested patterns of composition, is like finding the key with the leather thong in Sancho Panza's story. The key with the thong justified the verdict of Sancho Panza's two kinsmen, and confounded the would-be judges of wine who had laughed at them. Even if the cask had never been emptied, it would still have been the case that the taste of the kinsmen was delicate and that of the others dull and sluggish; but it would have been harder to prove to every bystander that this was so. Similarly, even if the beauties of writing had never been tackled methodically and reduced to general principles, and even if no works had ever been generally acknowledged to be excellent models, *still* the different degrees of taste would have existed, and one man's judgment would have been better than another's; but it would have been harder to silence the bad critic, who—·in the absence of agreed rules and models·—could always insist upon his particular sentiment and refuse to submit to

his antagonist. But ·in the state of affairs that we actually have, where there *are* rules and models·, we can confront the bad critic and

- show him an accepted principle of art,
- illustrate this principle by examples which his own particular taste tell him are cases of the principle, and
- prove that the same principle can be applied to the present case, where he didn't perceive or feel its influence;

and when we do all that, he must conclude that basically the fault lies in himself and that he lacks the delicacy ·of taste· that is required for him to be conscious of every beauty and every blemish in any work of art.

It is ·generally· acknowledged that every sense or faculty shows itself to perfection when it perceives with exactness its tiniest objects, allowing nothing to escape its notice. The smaller the objects that an eye is sensitive to, the finer the eye and the more elaborate its structure. You don't test whether someone has a good palate by giving him food with strong flavours. Rather, you give him a mixture of small ingredients, where we are still aware of each part despite its smallness and its being mixed in with the rest. Similarly, our mental taste shows itself to perfection in a quick and acute perception of beauty and ugliness, and a man can't be satisfied with himself if he suspects that he has failed to notice some excellence (or some blemish) in a discourse. In this case the perfection of the sense or feeling is found to be united with the perfection of the man. A very delicate palate may often be a great inconvenience both to the man who has it and to his friends; but a delicate taste for wit or beauty must *always* be a desirable quality, because it is the source of all the finest and most innocent enjoyments of which human nature is capable. In this matter the sentiments of all mankind are agreed. Whenever you can become sure of

someone's delicacy of taste, it is sure to meet with approval; and the best way of being sure is to appeal to the models and principles that have been established by unanimous agreement across the world and down the centuries.

People naturally differ widely in how much delicacy of taste they have, but such differences aren't set in stone: in this respect one can *improve*. The best way to increase and improve one's delicacy of taste is practice in a particular art, and often experiencing or thinking about a particular sort of beauty. [By 'practice in a particular art' Hume seems to mean: practice in experiencing, thinking about, and judging works in a particular art-form. He could have written: 'practice in a particular art, *by which I mean* often experiencing' etc.] When objects of any kind are *first* presented to the eye or imagination, the sentiment that comes with them is obscure and confused, and the mind is largely unable to pronounce concerning their merits or defects. One's taste can't •perceive the various excellences of the work, much less •distinguish the particular character of each excellence and •ascertain its quality and degree. If one pronounces the work to be, as a whole, beautiful (or ugly), that is the most that can be expected; and a person who is unpractised in this art-form will be apt to express even *this* judgment with hesitation and caution. But when he gains experience with those objects, his feeling becomes more exact and fine-grained; he not only perceives the beauties and defects of each part, but also marks the distinguishing species of each quality [Hume's phrase] and assigns it suitable praise or blame. A clear and distinct sentiment stays with him throughout his survey of the objects; and he notes exactly the amount and kind of approval or displeasure that each part is naturally fitted to produce. The mist that previously seemed to hang over the object dissipates; the internal organ becomes more perfect in its operations, and can offer judgments, without danger of mistake, concerning

the merits of every work. In short, practice gives skill and dexterity in •carrying out any work, and gives equal skill and dexterity in •judging it.

Practice is so helpful to the discernment of beauty that before we can judge any work of importance we need to confront *that very work* more than once, carefully and deliberately surveying it in different lights. One's first experience of a work of art brings a flutter or hurry of thought, which gets in the way of the genuine sentiment of beauty. One doesn't notice how the parts of the work are inter-related; one doesn't pick out very well the features that give the work its style. The various perfections and defects seem to be wrapped up in a sort of confusion, and present themselves to the imagination in a jumble. Not to mention that there is a florid and superficial kind of beauty that pleases at first, but after being found incompatible with a true expression of either reason or emotion, soon becomes cloying and boring, and is then scornfully rejected or at least valued much less highly.

To continue in the practice of contemplating any kind of beauty, one often has to compare different sorts and degrees of excellence, and to estimate their proportion to each other. A man who has had no opportunity to compare the different kinds of beauty is indeed totally unqualified to give an opinion about any object presented to him. It is only through comparisons that we develop a fixed, established terminology for expressing praise and blame, and learn how to make the intensity of our praise or blame *appropriate*. A slap-dash painting may contain a certain glow of colours and accuracy of imitation; these are beauties, as far as they go, and would affect the mind of a peasant or an Indian with the highest admiration. A very crude popular song may have a certain amount of harmony (in its music) or of nature (in its words), and its music would be found harsh or its

lyrics uninteresting only by someone who is familiar with superior beauties. A great inferiority of beauty gives pain to someone who is familiar with the highest excellence of the kind in question, and for that reason is declared to be an ugliness. . . . Only someone who is accustomed to seeing, examining, and evaluating various works that have been admired at different times and in different nations can rate the merits of a work exhibited to his view, and give it its proper rank among the productions of genius.

If a critic is to do this thoroughly, he must keep his mind free from all *prejudice*, allowing nothing to enter into his consideration but the one particular work that he is examining. Every work of art, in order to produce its proper effect on the mind, must be surveyed from a certain point of view, and won't be fully appreciated by people whose situation—real or imaginary—doesn't fit with the one that the work requires. An orator addresses a particular audience, and must take account of their particular ways of thinking, interests, opinions, emotions and prejudices; otherwise he won't succeed in his aim of governing their decisions and inflaming their feelings. Suppose, even, that his intended audience are hostile to him—unreasonably hostile—he mustn't overlook this disadvantage; he must try to soothe their feelings and come to be in their good graces before he starts in on the subject of his speech. A critic of a different time or nation, reading this speech, can't form a true judgment of the oration unless he •has all these circumstances before his mind and •places himself in the same situation as the audience. Similarly, when any work is offered to the public, even if I am a friend or an enemy of the author, •as a critic• I must set aside this friendship or enmity and, considering myself as a man in general, try to forget myself as an individual and my personal circumstances. A person influenced by prejudice doesn't

comply with this condition, but obstinately maintains his natural position without getting himself into the point of view that the performance requires. If the work is aimed at people of a different age or nation from his own, he makes no allowance for *their* special views and prejudices. Instead, full of the customs of his own time and place, he rashly condemns what seemed admirable in the eyes of all the people for whom the discourse was intended. If the work was done for the public, he never sufficiently enlarges his grasp or forgets his bias as a friend or enemy, as a rival or •friendly• commentator. In this way his sentiments are perverted, and the beauties and blemishes •of the work he is judging• don't affect him in the way they would have done if he had forced his imagination to stay under control and had forgotten *himself* for a moment. So his taste evidently departs from the true standard, and consequently loses all credit and authority.

It's well known that when the •understanding is at work, prejudice destroys sound judgment and perverts all operations of the intellectual faculties. Well, prejudice is just as contrary to good •taste, and has just as much power to corrupt our sentiment of beauty •as to distort our judgments on matters of fact•. It is a matter of **good sense** to check the influence of prejudice in both cases; and in this respect, as well as in many others, •reason is required for the operations of •taste (if indeed it isn't an essential part of taste). •I now mention three of the ways in which understanding, intellect, comes into the exercise of taste•.

(1) In all the most notable productions of genius, the parts of a work are inter-related •in significant ways•; and its beauties and blemishes can't be perceived by someone whose thought is not capacious enough to take in all those parts, holding them together in a single thought, in order to perceive the texture and uniformity of the whole. (2) Every work of art

has a certain end or purpose which it is designed to achieve, and is to be judged as more or less perfect depending on how much or little it is fitted to attain this end. Eloquence aims to persuade, history aims to instruct, poetry aims to please by means of the emotions and the imagination. We must keep these ends constantly in mind when we survey any performance, and we must be able to judge how suitable the means are for their respective purposes. **(3)** Also, every kind of composition—even the most poetic—is nothing but a chain of propositions and reasonings; not always perfectly precise and valid, but still *plausible*, however much disguised by the colouring of the imagination. The personages in tragedy and epic poetry must be represented as reasoning, thinking, concluding, and acting suitably to their character and circumstances; and a poet can't succeed in such a delicate undertaking unless he employs judgment as well as taste and invention. And good judgment is not only needed *in addition to* good taste; it is needed *for* good taste. The

- excellence of faculties that contributes to the improvement of reason,
- clearness of conception,
- exactness in making distinctions, and
- liveliness of uptake

are all essential to the operations of true taste and always accompany it. If a man who has experience in some art-form also has *good* sense, he will almost certainly be a *good* judge of beauties in that art-form; and if a man doesn't have a sound understanding, he will almost certainly not have good taste.

Thus, though the principles of taste are universal and nearly if not entirely the same in all men, few are qualified to give judgment on any work of art or set up their own sentiment as the standard of beauty. The *organs of internal sensation* [see note on page 11] are seldom so perfect as to

allow the general principles their full play and produce a feeling that corresponds to those principles. They either struggle with some defect, or are outright spoiled by some disorder, and so they arouse a sentiment that may be declared *wrong*. A critic who has no delicacy judges without attending to any fine details, and is affected only by the large-scale obvious qualities of the object; the finer touches pass unnoticed and disregarded. If he isn't aided by practice, his verdict is confused and hesitant. If he hasn't made *relevant* comparisons, he will admire the most frivolous beauties—ones that really ought to count as defects. When he is influenced by prejudice, *all* his natural sentiments are perverted. When good sense is lacking, he isn't qualified to discern the highest and most excellent beauties of design and reasoning. Virtually everyone labours under some of these imperfections; so there are very few true judges in the finer arts, even during the most civilised ages. For a critic to be entitled to the label 'true judge', he must have

- strong sense, united to delicate sentiment, improved by
- practice, perfected by
- comparison, and
- cleared of all prejudice.

The true standard of taste and beauty is the agreed verdict of people like that, wherever they are to be found.

But where *are* such critics to be found? What signs can we know them by? How are we to distinguish them from fakes? These questions are troubling, and seem to throw us back into the same uncertainty that we have been trying to escape from in the course of this essay.

But these are questions of *fact*, not of *sentiment*. Whether any particular person *is* endowed with good sense and a delicate imagination that is free from prejudice may often be the subject of dispute, and be liable to great discussion and enquiry. But all mankind will agree that such a character is valuable and admirable. When these doubts

occur, men can only do what they do with *other* disputable questions that are submitted to the understanding: they must •produce the best arguments that their ingenuity suggests to them; they must •acknowledge that a true and decisive standard exists somewhere, namely real existence and matter of fact; and they must •be patient with people who differ from them in their appeals to this standard. All I need for my present purpose is to have proved that the taste of all individuals is not on an equal footing, and that there are some men—however hard it may be to say *which* men—whom everyone will acknowledge to have a preference above others.

But the difficulty of finding the standard of taste, even in particular cases, isn't as great as it's said to be. In *theory* we may readily accept that there is a sure criterion in •science [see Glossary] and deny that there is one for •sentiment, but in *practice* we find that the criterion for science is harder to pin down than the one for sentiment. Theories of abstract philosophy, systems of profound theology, have held sway during one age and then later been universally exploded: their absurdity has been detected; other theories and systems have taken their place, and then they in turn were supplanted by their successors. We have never known anything more open to the revolutions of chance and fashion than these purported decisions of science. The case is not the same with the beauties of eloquence and poetry. Well-done expressions of passion and nature are sure after a little time to earn public applause which they maintain for ever. Aristotle and Plato and Epicurus and Descartes may successively yield to each other; but Terence and Virgil maintain an undisputed sway over the minds of men in general. The abstract philosophy of Cicero isn't believed today; the power of his oratory still wins our admiration.

Though men of delicate taste are rare, they can easily be picked out in society by the soundness of their understanding and how much abler they are than the rest of mankind. Because of the high status they have acquired, their lively approval of any work of art tends to become the general view. Many men when left to themselves have only a faint and hesitant perception of beauty, and yet they can enjoy any fine stroke that is pointed out to them. Every convert to the admiration of the real poet or orator is the cause of some new conversion. Prejudices may come out on top for a while, but they never *unite* in celebrating any rival to the true genius, and eventually they give way to the force of nature and sound sentiment. Thus, though a civilised nation may easily be mistaken in which philosopher they choose to admire, they have never been found to err for long in their affection for a favourite writer of epics or tragedies.

But despite all our attempts to fix a standard of taste, and to reconcile people's clashing intuitions, two sources of differences have been left standing; they aren't enough to smudge all the boundaries of beauty and ugliness, but they often produce differences in *how much* a work is approved or disapproved. One is the different temperaments of particular men; the other the particular manners and opinions of our age and country. The general principles of taste are the same across mankind; when men vary in their judgments, there can often be seen to be some defect or malfunction in the faculties •on one side or the other•, arising from prejudice, from lack of practice, or from lack of delicacy; and in such cases we have good reason to approve one taste and condemn the other. But when the parties to the disagreement differ in their internal frame or external situation in a way that brings no discredit on either and provides no basis for preferring one above the other, then a certain degree of divergence in judgment is unavoidable, and it's no use our looking

for a standard by which we can reconcile the conflicting sentiments.

Amorous and tender images will get through to the feelings of a young man whose emotions are warm more than they will to the feelings of an older man who takes pleasure in wise philosophical reflections concerning the conduct of life and moderation of the emotions. At twenty Ovid may be the favourite author, Horace at forty, and perhaps Tacitus at fifty. In such a case it would be useless for us to try to enter into the sentiments of others, divesting ourselves of the propensities that are natural to us. We choose favourite authors as we choose friends, from a conformity of mood and disposition. Gaiety or emotion, sentiment or reflection—whichever of these most predominates in our make-up gives us a special sympathy [see Glossary] with the writer who resembles us.

One person is more pleased with the sublime, another with the tender, a third with light-hearted wit. One is acutely aware of blemishes and cares enormously about correctness; another has a more lively feeling for beauties, and pardons twenty absurdities and defects because of one little episode in the work that is inspiring or deeply touching. The ear of this man is entirely turned towards conciseness and energy, that man is delighted with a rich and harmonious expression. Simplicity draws one, ornament draws another. Comedy, tragedy, satire, odes—each has its partisans who prefer that particular type of writing to all others. It is plainly an error in a critic to give his approval to only one sort or style of writing and condemn all the rest. But it is almost impossible not to feel some inclination in favour of the sort or style that suits our particular temperament and character. Such preferences are harmless and unavoidable, and it is never reasonable to argue about them because there is no standard by which such an argument could be decided.

For a similar reason, as readers we get more pleasure from •scenes and characters that resemble ones found in our own age or country than from •ones that describe a different set of customs. It takes some effort for us to reconcile ourselves to the simplicity of ancient ways of living, seeing princesses carrying water from the spring and kings and heroes preparing their own food. We may accept as a matter of theory that the representation of such ways of life is not a fault in the author or a flaw in the piece; but the fact remains that we are not so sensibly touched by them. That is why comedy is hard to transfer from one age or nation to another. A •Frenchman or •Englishman is not pleased with Terence's *Andria* or Machiavelli's *Clitia*, in each of which the fine lady at the centre of the play never once appears to the spectators, but is always kept behind the scenes—in a manner suitable for the dry humour of the ancient •Greeks and modern •Italians. A thoughtful and learned man can make allowance for these peculiarities of life-style, but a common audience can never rid themselves of •their usual ideas and sentiments far enough to be able to enjoy scenes that don't in the least fit •them.

At this point a thought occurs to me that may be useful in examining the famous controversy concerning ancient and modern learning, where we often find •one side excusing any seeming absurdity in the ancients on the grounds that that is how they lived back then, and •the other side refusing to accept this excuse, or at most allowing it as an excuse only for the •author, not for the •work. In my opinion, the parties to such disputes have seldom settled where the line between them should be drawn. Where any innocent oddities of life-style are represented, such as the ones I have mentioned, they ought certainly to be accepted; and a man who is shocked by them shows clearly that what he has is a *false delicacy* and refinement. The poet's monument, more

durable than brass, would fall to the ground like common brick or clay if men •didn't make some allowance for the continual changes of life-styles and customs, and •would accept only what fitted with the prevailing fashion. Must we throw aside the pictures of our ancestors because of their ruffs and hooped skirts? But where the ideas of morality and decency alter from one age to another, and where vicious behaviour is described without proper indications of blame and disapproval, it should be granted that this disfigures the poem and is a real ugliness in it. I can't enter into such sentiments, and it wouldn't be right for me to do so; and however I may excuse the •poet, on the grounds that at his time such things were accepted, I can never enjoy the •poem. The lack of humanity and decency that is so conspicuous in the characters drawn by a number of the ancient poets—even sometimes by Homer and the Greek tragedians—greatly reduces the value of their grand performances, and gives modern authors an advantage over them. We aren't interested in the adventures and feelings of such rough heroes; we are displeased to find the boundary between vice and virtue so thoroughly smudged; and, however thoroughly we excuse the writer on account of his prejudices, we can't get ourselves to enter into his feelings or have any affection for characters whom we clearly see to be blamable.

The case is not the same with moral principles as with speculative [see Glossary] opinions of any kind. The latter are continually being changed and overthrown. The son accepts a different system from the father. Indeed, very few people can boast of great constancy and uniformity in their own speculative opinions. Speculative errors that are found in the literary works of any age or country don't detract much from the value of those works. To get us to enter into all the opinions that prevailed at that time, and to enjoy the

sentiments or conclusions derived from them, all that is needed is •a certain turn of thought or imagination—•e.g. getting into the frame of mind of someone who thinks he can foretell the future from the entrails of slaughtered animals, or who thinks that one's fate in the after-life depends on whether one has had a proper funeral. But to change our judgments on conduct, and arouse in us sentiments of approval or blame, love or hatred, different from the ones that long custom has made familiar to us—*that* requires •a very violent effort. And when a man is confident of the rightness of the moral standard that he judges by, he is rightly protective of it, and won't pervert the sentiments of his heart for a moment—•e.g. getting into the frame of mind of someone who thinks he ought to murder his daughter in order to persuade the gods to put wind into the sails of his ships—•at the behest of any writer whatsoever.

Of all speculative errors, the ones about religion are the most excusable in works of genius; and it is never right to judge the civilisedness or wisdom of any people—or even of individual persons—by the grossness or refinement of their theological beliefs. In religious matters, which are supposed to be right out of reach of human reason, men *don't listen* to the good sense that directs them in the ordinary events of life. For that reason, all the absurdities of the pagan system of theology must be overlooked by any critic who claims to have sound judgment on ancient poetry; and *our* posterity in their turn must be equally lenient to •us, their forefathers. No religious principles can ever be charged as a fault in any poet, as long as they remain merely *principles*, and don't take such strong possession of his heart as to lay him open to the charge of bigotry or superstition. Where *that* happens, the religious principles muddle the sentiments of morality, and alter the natural boundaries of vice and virtue. So they are eternal blemishes, according to the principle I have laid

down, and they can't be justified on the plea that those were the prejudices and false opinions of the age.

It is essential to the Roman catholic religion to inspire a violent hatred of every other worship, and to represent all pagans, Mahometans, and heretics as the objects of divine wrath and vengeance. Such sentiments, though they are in reality very blameable, are considered as virtues by the zealots of that communion, and are represented in their tragedies and epic poems as a kind of divine heroism. This bigotry has disfigured two very fine tragedies of the French theatre, ·Corneille's· *Polieucte* and ·Racine's· *Athalie*, where an intemperate zeal for particular styles of worship is presented with all the pomp imaginable and forms the predominant character of the heroes. 'What is this?' says the sublime Joad to Josabet when he finds her in conversation with Mathan, the priest of Baal. 'Does the daughter of David speak to this traitor? Are you not afraid that the earth will open and pour forth flames to devour you both? Or that these holy walls will fall and crush you together? What

is his purpose? Why does that enemy of God come here, poisoning the air we breathe with his horrid presence?' Such sentiments are received with great applause in the theatres of Paris; but in London the spectators wouldn't like it any more than they would like hearing Achilles tell Agamemnon that he was a dog in his forehead and a deer in his heart, or Jupiter threaten to thrash Juno if she will not be quiet!

Religious principles are also a blemish in any literary work where they are raised to the pitch of superstition, and force their way into every sentiment, however remote it is from any connection with religion. It is no excuse for the poet that the customs of his country had burdened life with so many religious ceremonies and observances that every part of it lay under that yoke. It must for ever be ridiculous in Petrarch to compare his mistress Laura to Jesus Christ. Nor is it less ridiculous in that agreeable libertine Boccaccio very seriously to give thanks to God almighty, and to the ladies, for their assistance in defending him against his enemies.

Suicide

[(a) In this essay Hume speaks of 'God', but also of 'the Almighty', 'the Deity', and 'Providence'. The present version uses 'God' for all these. (b) Hume uses 'criminal' and 'lawful' to mean 'morally wrong' and 'morally permissible' respectively; he is *not* talking about the law of the land.] One considerable advantage that arises from philosophy is the wonderful antidote it provides against superstition and false religion. The other remedies against that pestilent disease are all useless, or at least unreliable. Most purposes of life are well served by •plain good sense and practical skills, but •these have no effect on superstition and false religion. History, as well as daily experience, provide examples of men with great abilities in practical affairs who have all their lives crouched under slavery to the crudest superstition. Even gaiety and sweetness of temper, which help to cure every other wound, provide no remedy for such a virulent poison. We can see this especially in the fair sex: they are richly endowed by nature, but feel many of their joys being blasted by this insistent intruder. But once philosophy has gained possession of the mind, superstition is effectively excluded; it is fair to say that philosophy has a more complete victory over •this enemy than over •most of the vices and imperfections to which human nature is prone. Love or anger, ambition or greed, have their root in personal character and feelings, which •even• the soundest reason can hardly ever fully correct; but because superstition is based on false opinion, it must immediately vanish when true philosophy has inspired sounder views concerning higher powers. In this case, the contest between the disease and the medicine is a more even one; and nothing can prevent the medicine—•philosophy— from winning, provided that it isn't a tricked-up tissue of falsehoods.

There's no need for me here to glorify the merits of philosophy by displaying the pernicious tendency of the vice—•superstition—of which it cures the human mind; •for the evils of superstition have been known for centuries•. Cicero says:

The superstitious man is miserable in every scene, in every incident in life. Even *sleep*, which banishes all the other cares of unhappy mortals, brings him new things to be terrified of, when he looks back on his dreams and reads them as predictions of future calamities.

I would add that although death alone can finally end his misery, he doesn't dare to escape into its shelter, but prolongs his miserable existence because of his absurd fear that he might offend •God•, his maker, if he uses the power that he has been given by that beneficent being—I mean, the power to end his own life•. The gifts of God and nature are snatched from us by this cruel enemy, •superstition•. At a time when one step—•one small action—would remove us from the regions of pain and sorrow, superstition's threats •deter us from taking that step, and• chain us down to a hated existence that is made miserable more by superstition than by anything else.

There are people who have been brought by life's calamities to the point of needing to take this fatal remedy, and have had their suicide attempt fail because of the interference of well-meaning friends. Very few of them can steel themselves to try a second time. We have such a great horror of death that when •the prospect of• it presents itself to a man in any form other than the one he has tried to get used to, it acquires new terrors and overcomes his feeble courage.

But when the menaces of •superstition are added to this •natural timidity, it's not surprising that this inhuman tyrant deprives men of all power over their lives, considering that it even deprive us of many pleasures and enjoyments that we are strongly inclined to pursue. Let us here try to restore men to the liberty they were born with, by examining all the common arguments against suicide and showing that, according to the views of all the ancient philosophers, suicide can be free from every charge of guilt or blame.

If suicide is criminal, it must be an infraction of our duty either **(1)** to God, **(2)** to our neighbour, or **(3)** to ourselves. ·Let us examine these in turn·.

(1) The following considerations may be enough to show that suicide doesn't conflict with our duty to God. In order to govern the •material world, the almighty creator has established general and unchanging laws by which all bodies, from the greatest planet to the smallest particle of matter, are kept in their proper places and kept behaving as they ought. To govern the •animal world, God has equipped all living creatures with bodily and mental powers—with senses, passions, appetites, memory, and judgment—by which they are driven or regulated in the course of life they are destined to pursue. These two distinct governments—of the ·inanimate· material world and the animal world—continually encroach upon each other; each of them sometimes blocks and sometimes helps the operations of the other. The nature and qualities of the bodies in the environment limit what men and other animals can do, and affect how they do it; for example, a river brings a traveller to a halt because he can't get across. And, ·in the other direction·, the activities of ·men and other· animals are constantly affecting the qualities and behaviour of those bodies; for example, men alter the course of a river so that it will drive a machine that serves their purposes. But though the provinces of the material and animal powers are

not kept entirely separate, this doesn't lead to any discord or disorder in the created world. On the contrary, •the mixing, combining and contrasting of all the various powers of inanimate bodies and living creatures gives rise to •the surprising harmony and proportion that provide the best evidence for the existence of a supremely wise God.

No individual event shows God's providence; what shows it are the general and unchanging laws that he has established from the beginning of time. Every event can be said to be, in a sense, God's work; all events come from the powers he has equipped his creatures with. Consider

- a house that falls by its own weight, and
- a house destroyed by the hands of men.

These are equally cases of something being brought to ruin by God's providence. The powers of a human being are as much God's workmanship as are the laws of motion and gravitation. When the passions are at work, judgment dictates and the limbs obey—this is all the operation of God; and his government of the universe depends upon these animate sources of energy as well as upon the inanimate ones. All events are equally important in the eyes of that infinite being who takes in at a glance the furthest regions of space and the remotest periods of time. There is no event, however important to us, that God has •exempted from the general laws that govern the universe, and •set aside to be directly managed by him in some other way. The rise and fall of states and empires depends on the smallest whims or passions of individual men; and the lives of men are shortened or lengthened by the smallest accident of air or diet, sunshine or tempest. Nature carries right on ·through all this·; and if general laws *are* ever broken by particular volitions on God's part, it is in some way that we don't notice. Just as on the one hand the elements and other inanimate parts of the creation carry on their action without regard to

the particular interests and situations of men, so also men are allowed to use their own judgment and discretion dealing with the various upsets in the material world, and may use all the powers they have to provide for their ease, happiness, or survival.

Now, consider a man who is tired of life and hunted by pain and misery, and who bravely overcomes his natural terror of death and makes his escape from this cruel scene ·by taking his own life·. We are told that this man has made God indignant by encroaching on the office of God's providence and disturbing the order of the universe. What are we make of this? [God's 'office' is his role, his job, the work that is allotted to him (by himself, as it happens).] Are we to say that God has in some special way kept the disposal of the lives of men for himself—·for his personal attention·—rather than leaving that outcome, like most others, to be settled by the general laws by which the universe is governed? No—that is plainly false; the lives of •men depend on the same laws as the lives of all •other animals, which are subjected to the general laws of matter and motion. The fall of a tower, or a drink of poison, will destroy a man just as well as the lowliest animal; a flood indiscriminately sweeps away *everything* that comes within reach of its fury. Well, then, since men's lives always depend on the general laws of matter and motion, are we to say that it is a crime for a man to end his own life because it is *always* criminal to encroach upon these laws or disturb their operation? That seems absurd; all animals—men included—are entrusted to their own prudence and skill for their conduct in the world. They are fully authorized to alter any operations of nature as far as they can. Without that they couldn't survive for a moment: every action, every move someone makes, makes a difference to how some part of the material world is arranged, and diverts the general laws of motion from their ordinary course

(·like diverting a river·). Putting these conclusions together, then, we find that human life depends upon the general laws of matter and motion, and that you don't encroach on God's office when you disturb or alter these general laws. Doesn't it follow that everyone is free to end his own life when he wishes to do so? Can't he lawfully use this power that nature has conferred on him?

If we are to stop this from being the obviously right conclusion we must show a reason why a man's •general permission to intervene in nature doesn't apply to the •particular case ·of intervention to end his own life·. Is it because human life is so important that when someone cuts his own life short this is a case where the human desire to take care of one's own interests has carried someone far out of bounds? No! A man's life has no more importance to the universe than an oyster's. And even if it *were* enormously important, the facts about human nature and our place in the universe bring the ending of our lives within the scope of our planning; we are repeatedly forced to make decisions that affect when we shall die.

Suppose that the disposal of human life is up to God alone, so that anyone who commits suicide is encroaching on God's rights. In that case, acting for the •preservation of one's life would be just as criminal as acting for its •destruction. In fending off a stone that is falling on my head *I disturb the course of nature*: I trespass on God's territory by making my life longer than he intended it to be, this intention being expressed by the general laws of matter and motion to which he had subjected my life.

A hair, a fly, an insect can destroy this mighty being whose life is ·supposedly· of such importance. If •something depends on such insignificant causes as those, isn't it reasonable to suppose that human prudence may lawfully dispose of •it? It wouldn't be a crime for me to divert the

Nile or Danube from its course, if I could. So where is the crime of diverting a few ounces of blood from their natural channel?

[From here on, Hume writes as if he were proposing to commit suicide, and arguing with an opponent. In fact, he lived for twenty more years; and he went to his death (from an illness) with a calm serenity that is admired by everyone.]

Do you picture me as discontented with God or cursing the day I was born, because I leave life behind, putting an end to an existence that would make me miserable if it lasted any longer? I am far from having such feelings! What is at issue here is not how I feel but what I believe. I am convinced of a certain matter of fact that even you admit is possible, namely that human life can be unhappy; and I am also convinced that if I stay alive much longer my life won't be worth living. But so far from *complaining* against God, I *thank* him for the good that I have already enjoyed, and for the power he has given me to escape the bad times that threaten me. You foolishly imagine that you don't have such a power, and that you must stay alive even if you are loaded with pain and sickness, with shame and poverty—so *you* are the one who has reason to complain against God!

Don't you teach that when anything bad happens to me I ought to be resigned to my fate? And don't you maintain this even when the bad things come through the malice of my enemies, because the actions of men are God's work as much as the actions of inanimate beings? Well, then, when I fall on my own sword, my death comes to me from God's hands just as it would if it had involved a lion, a precipice, or a fever.

When you require me to submit to my fate in every calamity that comes my way, you aren't forbidding me to avoid or escape the calamity, if I can, by skill and hard work. Well, why may I not employ one remedy as well as

another—i.e. employ suicide rather than some other kind of avoidance?

If my life isn't *mine*, it would be criminal for me to put it in danger as well as to end it. In that case, it wouldn't be right to praise as 'a hero' someone who is led by friendship or the desire for glory to put his own life in danger. . . .

No being has any power or ability that it doesn't get from God; and no being, however wild and weird its actions are, can interfere with God's plans or disorder the universe. Those actions are God's work just as much as is the 'normal' chain of events that they interfere with; and whichever one of the two prevails—the 'normal' course of events or an action that interferes with it—we can infer that just because it *did* prevail it is what God wanted. It makes no difference whether or not the agent is animate, whether or not it is a thinking being: its power still comes from God and is included in the order he has laid down for the world. When the horror of pain conquers the love of life, and when a voluntary action gets in ahead of the effects of blind causes, this is a consequence of the powers and sources of energy that God has implanted in his creatures. The divine plan is still intact, and out of reach of any harm from humans.

It is impious, says the old **Roman** superstition, to divert rivers from their course, or interfere in any other way with processes that should be left to nature. It is impious, says the **French** superstition, to inoculate against small-pox by voluntarily producing fevers and illnesses, thus trespassing on God's territory. It is impious, says the **modern European** superstition, to rebel against God by ending our own life. So why isn't it impious to build houses, plough fields, sail upon the ocean? In *all* these actions we use our powers of mind and body to make some difference in the course of nature, and in *none* of them do we do anything more than that. So they are all equally innocent or equally criminal.

You may say:

When a soldier has been stationed as a sentinel in a particular place, if he deserts his post without being ordered to do so he is guilty of a crime. Well, God has stationed you in a particular place, like a sentinel, and if you desert your post without being recalled, you are also guilty of rebellion against God, and have made him displeased with you.

What makes you think that God has placed me in this station? It seems to me that I owe my birth to a long chain of causes, many of which involved voluntary human actions. 'But God guided all these causes', 'I hear you say', 'including those voluntary actions: nothing happens in the universe without his consent and co-operation.' But in that case my death, even if I bring it about voluntarily, happens only with God's consent; and whenever I find pain or sorrow so hard to bear that I am tired of life, I can conclude that I am being clearly and explicitly recalled from my post.

It is surely God who has placed me right here right now; but can't I leave the room when I want to, without being open to the charge of deserting my post or station? When I am dead, the principles [see Glossary] of which I am composed will still play their part in the universe, and will be just as useful to it as they were when they composed this individual creature. From the universe's point of view, the difference will be no greater than that between my being indoors and my being outdoors. The former change is more important *to me* than the latter, but not to *the universe*.

The idea that a created being could disturb the order of the world, or intrude into God's affairs, is a kind of *blasphemy*: it credits the created being with having powers and abilities that •it didn't get from its creator, and that •aren't subject to his government and authority. No doubt a man can displease God by disturbing *society*, but he hasn't

any chance of disturbing the way *the world* is governed. As for the anti-social actions that displease God: how do we know that they do? We know it from the way he has constructed human nature—from our feeling of remorse if we ourselves have been guilty of such actions, and our blame and disapproval when we observe them in others.

(2) So much for the thesis that suicide is criminal because it infringes on our duty to *God*. Now let us turn to the question of whether suicide is a breach of our duty to *our fellow-man* and to *society*.

A man who retires from life doesn't harm society: he only ceases to do good, and if *that* counts as doing harm, it is the very mildest form of harm-doing.

All our obligations to do good to society seem to involve doing something *in return*: I get the benefits of society, so I ought to promote its interests. But when I withdraw myself altogether from society, can I still be obliged to serve it? And even if our obligations to do good did last for ever, they certainly have some limits; I am not obliged to do a small good to society at the expense of a great harm to myself; so why should I prolong a miserable existence because of some trivial advantage that the public may perhaps receive from me? Suppose I am old and unwell: can't I lawfully resign from whatever jobs I have, and spend all my time coping with these calamities and doing what I can to reduce the miseries of my remaining years? If so, why isn't it lawful for me to cut short these miseries at once by •suicide•, an action that does no more harm to society?

•Now try three other suppositions•. Suppose that

- I am no longer able to do any good for society, or that
- I am a burden to society, or that
- my life is getting in the way of some other person's being much more useful to society.

In such cases it must be not only •lawful but •praiseworthy

for me to take my own life. And most people who are at all tempted to commit suicide are in some such situation; those who have health, or power, or authority, usually have better reason to be on good terms with the world.

Suppose the following:

A man is engaged in a conspiracy to bring about something that will be in the public interest. He is arrested as a suspect, is threatened with torture on the rack; and knows from his own weakness that if he is tortured he will tell the authorities who the other conspirators are and what they are planning.

Could that man do better for the public interest than by putting a quick end to a miserable life? [He cites an historical example, giving no details.]

Again, suppose that a felon has been justly condemned to a shameful death: can we think of *any* reason why he ought not to get in ahead of his punishment by taking his own life, thus saving himself from all the anguish of seeing death approaching him? He doesn't encroach on God's preserves any more than did the judge who ordered his execution; and his voluntary death is as advantageous to society as it is to him, because it rids society of a pernicious member.

(3) After the questions of my duty to God and my duty to society, we turn to the question of my duty to myself. Suicide can *often* be consistent with self-interest and with one's duty to oneself; this can't be questioned by anyone who accepts that age, sickness, or misfortune may make life a burden that is even worse than annihilation. I don't believe that anyone ever threw away his life while it was worth keeping. Our natural horror of death is too great to be overcome by small motives. It may happen that a man takes his own life although his state of health or fortune didn't seem to require this remedy, but we can be sure that he was cursed with such an incurable depravity or depression as must poison all enjoyment and make him as miserable as if he had been loaded with the most grievous misfortunes.

If suicide is a crime, only cowardice can drive us to it. If it is not a crime, both prudence and courage should lead us to rid ourselves of existence when it becomes a burden. If that time comes, suicide is our only way to be useful to society—setting an example which, if imitated, would preserve to everyone his chance for happiness in life, and effectively free him from all risk of misery.²

² It would be easy to prove that suicide is as lawful under Christianity as it was to the heathens. There isn't a single text of scripture prohibiting it. That great and infallible rule of faith and practice, which must control all philosophy and human reasoning, has left us free in this matter of cutting our lives short. Scripture does recommend that we resign ourselves to [= 'patiently put up with'] our fate; but that refers only to troubles that are unavoidable, not to ones that can be remedied by prudence or courage. 'Thou shalt not kill'—the sixth of Moses' ten commandments—is obviously meant to condemn only the killing of *others* over whose life we have no legitimate authority. Like most of scripture's commands, this one must be modified by reason and common sense; that is clear from the conduct of judges who condemn criminals to death, despite the letter of the law laid down in the sixth commandment. But even if this commandment were quite explicitly a condemnation of suicide, it wouldn't have any authority now; for *all* the law of Moses is abolished by Christianity, except when it is supported by the law of nature. And I have already tried to show that suicide is not prohibited by that law: in all cases, Christians and heathens are on precisely the same footing. . . . The power of committing suicide is regarded by the Roman writer Pliny as an advantage that men have even above God. [Hume quotes the Latin.]

The Immortality of the Soul

By the mere light of reason it seems difficult to prove that the soul is immortal; the arguments for immortality are usually based either on **(1)** metaphysical themes, or **(2)** moral ones, or **(3)** physical [see Glossary] ones. But in reality it is the Gospel, and that alone, that has brought life and immortality to light [Hume's exact phrase].

(1) Metaphysicians often assume that the soul is immaterial, and that thought couldn't possibly belong to a material substance. But we are taught by *sound* metaphysics that the notion of *substance* is wholly confused and imperfect, and that our only idea of any •substance is the idea of a •collection of particular qualities inhering in an unknown *something*. So matter and spirit [= 'soul' = 'mind'] are fundamentally equally unknown, and we can't find out what qualities either of them has. We are also taught that questions about causes and effects can't ever be answered *a priori*—i.e. just by •thinking—and that •experience is our only basis for judgments about causes. So if we are to discover whether

a suitably structured portion of matter can be the cause of thought,

we'll have to discover this through •experience. Abstract •reasonings can't settle any question of fact or existence, •such as the question of whether matter ever thinks. •But the unsettled nature of that question isn't the sole reason for doubting that the soul is immortal. Suppose we knew that a spiritual (•and thus immaterial) substance is spread all through the universe, . . . and is the only thing that has thoughts; we would still have reason to conclude *from analogy* that nature uses •this spiritual stuff• in the way she uses the other kind of stuff, matter. She uses matter as a kind of paste or clay: works it up into a variety of forms

and things, dismantles each of these after a while, and then makes something new from its substance. Thus, the same material substance can successively compose the •bodies of many different animals; and so—•our analogical reasoning leads us to conclude—•the same spiritual substance may compose their •minds, in which case the •consciousness of •human and other• animals, i.e. the •system of thought that they formed during life, may always be dissolved by death. As for the new thing that nature makes out of the spiritual stuff that was for a while x's mind: x has no stake in that, and no reason to care about it. Even those who are perfectly sure that the soul is mortal have never denied that the stuff the soul is made out of is immortal. . . .

In the ordinary course of nature, •anything that can be brought into existence can be driven out of existence, or—putting the same thing the other way around—•anything that can't go out of existence didn't ever come into existence. (I say 'the *ordinary* course of nature' because I am setting aside the possibility of God's intervening in the laws of nature—which is something that science and philosophy should always set aside!) Thus, if the soul is immortal it existed before our birth •as well as after our death•; and if the before-birth existence is none of *our* concern, then the same holds for the existence after death. Animals undoubtedly feel, think, love, hate, will, and even reason, though less well than men do; are *their* souls also immaterial and immortal?

(2) Let us now consider the **moral** arguments, chiefly the ones that appeal to God's justice, which is supposed to be further interested in the future punishment of the vicious and reward of the virtuous ['future' here means 'after our death']. These arguments are based on the assumption that God has

attributes other than the ones he has put into play in this universe—the only universe we know. From what do we infer the existence of these further attributes?

We can safely say that

•If we know that God has actually done x, then x is best;

but it is very dangerous for us to assert that

•If x seems to us best, then God must do x.

How often would this reasoning fail us with regard to the present world?

But if *any* of nature's purposes are clear to us, we can say that (so far as we can judge by natural reason) the whole scope and intention of man's creation is limited to the present life. When anyone looks beyond that ·to the after-life·, how weak his concerns about it are! Any beliefs he has involving this floating idea of the after-life are less steady, and have less effect on his behaviour, than the flimsiest guess about some matter of fact relating to everyday life. I am saying this about how men think and feel on the basis of the •natural ·in-born· inherent structure of their mind and passions. Some people do have strange terrors with regard to the after-life, but those terrors would quickly vanish if they weren't •artificially fed by indoctrination. And what about the indoctrinators? What is *their* motive? It is only to earn a living, and to acquire power and riches, in *this* world. That they work so hard and zealously at this is, therefore, evidence against them!

If after the end of this life there will be an after-life that is infinitely more important than this one, how cruel and wicked and unfair it is of nature to make the present life the only one that we naturally care about or know anything about! Would a kindly and wise being engage in such a barbarous deceit?

All through nature we find that an animal's •abilities are exactly proportioned to •what it needs to do. Man's reason makes him much superior to the other animals, and his needs are proportionately greater than theirs: his whole time, and his whole ability, activity, courage, and passion, are kept busy protecting him from the ·potential· miseries of his present condition, and they are often—indeed nearly *always*—inadequate for the business assigned them. . . .

The powers of men are no more superior to their wants, considered merely in this life, than those of foxes and hares are compared to *their* wants and to the span of their lives. The inference from parity of reason is therefore obvious—·the inference, that is, to the conclusion that men don't have any powers that are superfluous to their needs in this life and so are probably needed in the after-life·.

On the theory that the soul is *mortal*, it is easy to explain why women's abilities are less than men's. It is because their domestic life requires no higher capacities of mind or body than they actually have. But this fact becomes absolutely insignificant—it *vanishes*—on the religious theory, according to which the two sexes have equally large tasks, so that their powers of reason and perseverance ought also to have been equal; and—·coming back to my previous theme·—the powers of both sexes ought to have been infinitely greater than they actually are.

Every effect implies a cause, which implies another, ·and so on backwards· until we reach the first cause of all, which is God. Therefore, everything that happens is ordered to happen by him, ·so that· nothing can be the object of his punishment or vengeance.

By what •rule are punishments and rewards distributed? What is the divine •standard of merit and demerit? Shall we suppose that God has the same sentiments—·the same kinds of feelings and attitudes·—as *humans*? That is a very

bold hypothesis; but we have no conception of any sentiments other than human ones. ·So, whatever sentiments we suppose God to have, let us apply *human* feelings and attitudes to the system of rewards and punishments that is standardly attributed to God·. If we try to apply standards of approval and blame other than human ones, we'll get into a total muddle. What teaches us that there is any such thing as a moral distinction, if not our own sentiments?

·We shall find that the system in question, judged by the human standard, fails in at least four ways·. [Hume's presentation of this material is slightly re-ordered in what follows.]

(a) According to human sentiments, essential parts of individual merit include the person's being

sensible,
brave,
well mannered,
hard working,
prudent,
intellectually brilliant.

Shall we then construct a •heaven for poets and heroes, like the •elysium of ancient mythology? Why confine all rewards to one kind of virtue?

(b) Heaven and hell involve two distinct sorts of men, good men and bad men; but the vast majority of us ·don't fall cleanly into either category, and instead· float between vice and virtue. Suppose you went all over the place with the intention of giving a good supper to the righteous, and a thorough beating to the wicked: you would often be at a loss how to choose, finding that the merits and the demerits of most men and women scarcely add up to righteousness or to wickedness.

(c) *Our* ideas of goodness and justice condemn any punishment that has no proper end or purpose. We aren't willing to inflict punishment on a criminal *just* because of our sense

that he is to blame and deserve to be punished. (Perhaps this isn't true of a victim of the crime, though it may hold for him too if he is a good-natured man.) And we have this attitude to the infliction of the ordinary punishments that human law inflicts, which are trivial ·compared with what God is said to have in store for the wicked·. When judges and juries harden their hearts against the sentiments of humanity, it is only because of their thoughts about what is needed in the public interest. [Hume illustrates juridical mercy through a story from ancient Rome, based on a passage in Suetonius which he seems to have misunderstood. Then, after a fairly savage side-swipe at 'bigoted priests', he sums up his point about our thinking that punishment is wrong unless it has an end or purpose, by saying that this attitude of ours condemns the system of punishment attributed to God, because 'no end can be served by punishment after the whole scene is closed'.]

(d) According to our ideas, punishment should bear some proportion to the offence. Why then would there be •eternal punishment for the •short-term offences of a frail creature like man? Our moral ideas come mostly from our thoughts about the interests of human society. Those interests are short-term and minor; ought they to be guarded by punishments that are eternal and infinite? The ·eternal· damnation of one man is an infinitely greater evil in the universe than the overthrow of a billion kingdoms.

·The view that there will be a life after death goes with the view that our present life is a probationary state—one in which we are tested to see if we are fit for what is to come·. Nature handles human lives as though it *wanted* to refute this notion of a probationary state, by making human infancy so frail and mortal, with half of mankind dying before they are rational creatures ·and thus fit for testing·.

(3) Physical arguments from the analogy of nature are the only philosophical [here = 'scientific'] considerations that should be brought to bear on the question of the immortality of the soul, or indeed any other factual question. And they count heavily in favour of the *mortality* of the soul.

Where any two items x and y are so closely connected that all alterations we have ever seen in x are accompanied by corresponding alterations in y, we ought to conclude—by all the rules of analogy—that when x undergoes still greater alterations, so that it is totally dissolved, a total dissolution of y will follow.

Sleep, a very small effect on the body, is accompanied by a temporary extinction—or at least a great confusion—in the soul. That is one pointer to the body-mind analogy that runs through the course of a whole human life. A person's body and mind match one another in respect of

- their weakness in infancy,
- their vigour in manhood,
- their similar disorders in sickness, and
- their gradual decay in old age.

There seems to be no escape from the final step: body and mind match one another in respect of

- their dissolution in death.

The last symptoms that the mind reveals in itself are disorder, weakness, insensibility, and coma, the fore-runners of its annihilation. As the body continues to collapse, the effects on the mind grow until they totally extinguish it. *Totally* extinguish? Yes.: Judging analogically by how things usually go in nature, no life-form can stay in existence when transferred to a condition of life very different from the one it began in. Trees die in the water, fish in the air, animals in the earth. Even such a minor difference as a change of climate is often fatal. What reason do we have, then, to imagine that an immense alteration such as is made on the

soul by the collapse of its body and all its organs of thought and sensation can happen without the dissolution of the whole? Soul and body have everything in common. The organs of one are all organs of the other; so the existence of one must depend on the existence of the other.

It is generally agreed that the souls of animals are mortal; and they are so like the souls of men that the argument from analogy—to the mortality of human souls—is very strong. *Are they so alike? Yes!* Animals' souls resemble ours as closely as their bodies resemble ours, and the latter resemblance is so strong that no-one rejects the argument drawn from comparative anatomy. [That last clause is taken verbatim from Hume.] So the only theory on this topic that philosophy can listen to is the doctrine of metempsychosis. [That is the doctrine that souls can shift from body to body. Hume's point may be this:

If you approach the question of the soul's immortality in a philosophical or scientific spirit, taking account of all the analogies between bodies and minds, you'll have to conclude that all souls are mortal. So your only way to hold onto the immortality of the soul, while still being 'philosophical' enough to know about the existence of those analogies, is to declare them *irrelevant*; don't be ignorant of them, and don't try to argue that they are weaker than they seem; just *ignore* them and go the whole hog with the doctrine of metempsychosis, which ignores them.

If that is what Hume is saying, he is saying it with contempt. But this interpretation is conjectural; you may be able to come up with a better suggestion about what is going on here.]

Nothing in this world is perpetual; everything, however firm it may seem, is continually changing; the world itself shows signs of frailty and dissolution. With those facts in mind, consider the thesis that one single life-form, seemingly the frailest of all and the one that is subject to the greatest disorders, is immortal and indestructible! That thesis flies in the face of all the analogies; it is a rash and irresponsible leap in the dark.

Those who accept the religious theory of the immortality of the soul ought to be troubled by the question of what to do about the infinite number of posthumous existences, i.e. of souls whose bodies have died. It may be that every planet in every solar system is inhabited by •intelligent mortal beings. (We have no evidence against that, and no support for any other specific thesis about how such beings are distributed through the universe.) For each generation of •these, then, a new universe must be created beyond the bounds of the present universe; unless there was created at the outset a single universe so enormously large that it could hold this continual influx of beings. Should any philosophical or scientific system accept such bold suppositions as that, with no better excuse than that they are *possible*?

Consider the question

Are Agamemnon, Thersites, Hannibal, Varro, and every stupid clown that ever existed in Italy, Scythia, Bactria or Guinea, now *alive*?

Can anyone think that this weird question could be answered in the affirmative on the basis of a study of nature? Clearly not, which is why we don't find people defending the immortality thesis in any way but through appeal to revelation. . . . Given that we have no mental states before our body is put together, it is natural and reasonable to expect that we won't have any after it goes to pieces.

Our horror of annihilation might be **(a)** a consequence of our love of happiness rather than **(b)** a basic passion. •That is, our horror at the thought of our extinction may reflect **(a)** regret at the happiness we will miss rather than **(b)** a fundamental underived fear of going out of existence•.

But if **(b)** is the case, this strengthens the argument for the *mortality* of the soul: nature doesn't do things in vain, so she wouldn't give us a horror of an outcome that was •impossible—•which is what our extinction would be if the soul were immortal•. 'But would she give us a horror of an outcome that was •unavoidable—•which is what our extinction would be if the soul were mortal•? Yes, she very well might, if the human species couldn't survive without having that horror. •Our extinction is inevitable; but if we weren't afraid of it our lives would be worse, and much shorter•.

Any doctrine is suspect if it is favoured by our passions. The hopes and fears that gave rise to this doctrine •of the soul's immortality• are very obvious.

In any controversy, the defender of the negative thesis has an infinite advantage. If the proposition under debate concerns something that is out of the common experienced course of nature, that fact alone is almost—perhaps *entirely*—decisive against it. What arguments or analogies can we use to prove some state of affairs that no-one ever saw and that in no way resembles any that ever *was* seen? Who will put so much trust in a purported philosophy that he'll take its word for something so marvellous? For that, some new sort of logic is needed, and some new faculties of the mind to enable us to understand the logic!

The only way we can know this great and important truth •that our souls are immortal• is through God's revealing it to us; a fact that illustrates as well as anything could mankind's infinite obligations to divine revelation.