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# Hume's Essays on Happiness

*John Immerwahr*

The second volume of Hume's *Essays, Moral and Political* (1742) includes a set of four pieces on the *sects, that naturally form themselves in the world*. These essays, "The Epicurean," "The Stoic," "The Platonist," and "The Sceptic," refer to the ancient philosophical schools, but their main purpose, according to Hume, is to describe four different ideas of human life and of happiness.<sup>1</sup> There is little discussion of these works in the Hume literature, but Hume himself seemed to be rather fond of them.<sup>2</sup> Although several early essays were dropped from later editions, this set reappears in every version of the *Essays*. Hume also invested unusual care in crafting these essays, "polishing the sentences with such precision," according to Green and Grose, "that the subsequent editions made scarcely an alteration in their language."<sup>3</sup> In this article I will argue that these essays do play a significant role in Hume's overall philosophical strategy, and that a close reading of them helps us fill out important aspects of Hume's moral philosophy.

## **An Attractive Reading of the Four Essays**

In one of the few detailed discussions of these essays, Robert Fogelin presents one reading that has a good deal of initial plausibility.<sup>4</sup> Fogelin's interpretation has several main points. First, he dismisses the importance of the first three essays and asserts that "despite certain particular points of agreement," these essays are "not expressive of Hume's own position."<sup>5</sup> Secondly, he argues that the final essay, "The Sceptic," does represent Hume's own position, and that in this essay Hume presents himself "under the thinnest possible disguise."<sup>6</sup> In effect, Fogelin's interpretation is that "The Sceptic" can be profitably read in isolation from the first three. Finally, Fogelin sees "The Sceptic" as having roughly the same function as the *Treatise of Human Nature*. He sees "The Sceptic" as another technical philosophical work where Hume tries, in a somewhat different way, to work out the relationship between scepticism, morality, and the passions.

It is not hard to see what makes this type of interpretation plausible. On stylistic grounds alone, there are reasons to dismiss the first three essays and focus attention primarily on "The Sceptic." The first three are quite brief and are written in a rhetorical and flowery style, whereas "The Sceptic" is longer (as long as the other three essays combined) and returns to Hume's normal prose style. Substantively,

there are many doctrines in "The Sceptic" which, as Fogelin correctly points out, are reminiscent of Hume's other philosophical works.

### An Alternative Reading

Despite the plausibility of this reading, I will defend an alternative interpretation. First, I will argue that the essays are intended to be read as a set. The four essays constitute a philosophical dialogue that consists of four closely related speeches; it is misleading to read one of the speeches out of the context of the dialogue as a whole. Secondly, I will try to show that **none** of the speakers represents Hume's own position. From Hume's point of view, all of the speeches make important points but also contain significant errors. Finally, I will argue that the purpose of these popular essays is different from the goal of technical philosophical works such as the *Treatise*. While the *Treatise* is intended to describe and analyze human nature, the purpose of these essays is therapeutic rather than analytic; they are designed to change rather than to inform the reader. In the next three sections I discuss these claims in detail.

### I. Hume's First Dialogue

Taken together, the four essays can be read as Hume's first (but by no means last) effort in dialogue writing. The evidence that they were intended by Hume as a dialogue is drawn from what Hume says about them, from internal evidence, and from a comparison with their classical model, the dialogues of Cicero.

For the most part, Hume wanted his readers to see his *Essays* as stand-alone pieces. In the Advertisement for the first volume Hume warns his readers that they must not look for *any Connexion among these Essays, but must consider each of them as a Work apart*.<sup>7</sup> But both in the Advertisement to the second volume (where the essays on happiness are included) and in a footnote to "The Epicurean," Hume signals to his readers that these four are to be taken as a group.<sup>8</sup>

The content of the essays suggests that they be read as a dialogue. Each of the essays is written in first-person speech, and it is very clear that each speaker is aware of what has gone on before and is directing his remarks to previous speakers. In the first of the four essays, for example, the Epicurean speaks of the pleasures of wine, of fruit, and of roses (par. 9). The next speaker, the Stoic, speaks directly to the Epicurean on this point: *In vain do you seek repose from beds of roses: In vain do you hope for enjoyment from the most delicious wines and fruits* (par. 9). The Platonist in turn directly attacks the Stoic's focus on human perfection: *Thou art thyself thy own idol: Thou worshipping thy imaginary perfections* (par. 5). The Sceptic addresses his points to all three of his predecessors.

The classification of the essays as a dialogue becomes even clearer when we look at the work of Cicero, Hume's favourite classical author.<sup>9</sup> At one point, Cicero distinguishes between two kinds of dialogue, the first of which he describes as "rhetorical" and the second as "dialectical."<sup>10</sup> A dialectical work resembles a conversation, where characters talk back and forth, making points and counterpoints in rapid succession (rather like Berkeley's *Three Dialogues*). In a rhetorical dialogue, each character gives an uninterrupted set speech.<sup>11</sup> In these four essays, Hume has created a rhetorical dialogue where each essay is the set speech of one character. All that is missing is the introductory scene-setting material usually found in Cicero's dialogues. Specifically, the model for the four essays is Cicero's *De finibus bonorum et malorum*. We know from Hume's letters of this period that he was very interested in this work, and the parallels between *De finibus* and the four essays are significant.<sup>12</sup> In both works a Sceptic, a Stoic, and an Epicurean give monologues on the nature of human happiness (Hume includes the Platonist as a fourth character).

There are, too, similarities between the four essays and Hume's masterwork, *The Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*. Like the four essays, the *Dialogues* are based on a specific Ciceronian model (*De natura deorum*).<sup>13</sup> Interestingly, the four essays and the *Dialogues* share the same set of characters. In the *Dialogues*, Philo resembles the Sceptic and Demea is indistinguishable from the Platonist. Both Cleanthes (named after the ancient Stoic) and the speaker in "The Stoic" share a fascination with machines where a *master workman who puts those several parts together; moves them according to just harmony and proportion; and produces true felicity as the result of their conspiring order* (par. 6).<sup>14</sup> There is no Epicurean in the *Dialogues*, but Philo does present a version of Epicureanism in Part VIII.

## II. Who Speaks for Hume?

Reading these four essays as a dialogue raises the question of which character, if any, speaks for Hume. A quick look at the literature on the *Dialogues* suggests that picking Hume's spokesperson from a set of characters is not necessarily an easy task.<sup>15</sup> There are complications here as well. Hume's early biographer, John Hill Burton, was convinced that Hume's "heart and sympathy" were with the Stoic,<sup>16</sup> while modern commentators such as Jones and Fogelin tend to agree with Green and Grose's view that despite a few "points of divergence" Hume was in agreement with the Sceptic.<sup>17</sup> Hume's own brief description of the essays in the Advertisement seems to put distance between the author and all of the characters:

*'Tis proper to inform the READER, that, in those ESSAYS, intituled, the Epicurean, Stoic, &c., a certain Character is personated; and therefore, no Offence ought to be taken at any Sentiments contain'd in them.*<sup>18</sup>

Fortunately, the task is made somewhat easier by a comparison between the essays and the *Treatise*. The *Essays* were published just a few years after the *Treatise* was completed, and we know from Hume's letters that he worked on the *Essays* and the last book of the *Treatise* simultaneously.<sup>19</sup> Comparing the essays with parallel passages in the *Treatise* can thus give us some idea of what in the essays is and is not coherent with Hume's views.

When compared with each other and with the *Treatise*, a strong case can be made that none of the four speeches completely captures Hume's position. In order to see this we will need to discuss each of the speeches in some detail.

### The Epicurean

The first speech is given to the Epicurean, *The man of elegance and pleasure* (title, n. 1). The Epicurean's oration focuses on the centrality of nature to the achievement of pleasure and happiness. The Epicurean denies the power of human beings to create artificial life styles that are truly pleasurable:

*You pretend to make me happy by reason, and by rules of art. You must, then, create me anew by rules of art. For on my original frame and structure does my happiness depend.* (par. 4)

The Epicurean's solution is to focus on natural pleasures such as food, drink, companionship, love and sex.

The Epicurean is criticized by the other speakers (and by some commentators) for recommending a life of debauchery.<sup>20</sup> But this is a parody of the Epicurean's position. One of the main points here is that the Epicurean position itself has the resources to move beyond short-run hedonism. The Epicurean quickly learns that a non-discriminating pursuit of pleasure backfires, and that pleasure must be pursued in moderation and within a social context (par. 9).

Much of what the Epicurean says is compatible with Hume's own views. In his epistemology, for example, Hume constantly stresses the idea that nature ultimately controls what we will believe. Just as *nature breaks the force of all sceptical arguments in time*, the Epicurean believes that nature breaks the force of unnatural and artificial paths to happiness.<sup>21</sup>

Indeed, the tone of "The Epicurean" is similar to the last pages of Book I of the *Treatise*. Both Hume and the Epicurean find that whatever we say in the study, human nature soon reasserts itself. Hume's cure for philosophical *melancholy and delirium* — *I dine, I play a game of back-gammon, I converse, and am merry with my friends* (T 269) — sounds much like the moderate pleasures favoured by the Epicurean.

Although there is much in the Epicurean's speech that is compatible with Hume's point of view, the Epicurean's position is very different from that of the *Treatise* on the crucial distinction between what is "natural" and what is "original." The Epicurean tends to use these words interchangeably; by contrast, Hume thinks that they are quite different. Hume points out, for example, that although the causes of the passions be *plainly natural, we shall find upon examination, that they are not original* (T 281).

In fact, Hume seems to distinguish between three levels of naturalness and artificiality. Some of our sentiments and passions are original in the sense that they are not dependent on art and civilization but would exist even among men in a *rude and more natural condition* (T 479). Other qualities such as justice are artificial in the sense that they are invented and learned in a social context, but still natural in a larger sense in that they are *obvious and absolutely necessary* (T 484) features of the human condition. Hume distinguishes these artificial but natural qualities from a third category of things that are not only artificial but *arbitrary* (T 484). This category would presumably include the *monkish virtues* (*celibacy, fasting, penance, mortification, etc.*) that Hume discusses in a later work. Although these virtues can be inculcated by bad education, they have no real basis and in reality are vices rather than virtues.<sup>22</sup>

In terms of the *Treatise*, then, the main flaw of the Epicurean's position is that he believes that everything that is not natural is arbitrary. He ignores the fact that mankind is an *inventive species* (T 484), capable of creating a wide range of life options that depend on art and industry but that are still grounded in human nature in a way that allows him to give himself true pleasure and happiness.

### The Stoic

The Stoic rejects the hedonism of the Epicurean and emphasizes the contribution that *art and industry* (par. 1) make to human happiness. The Stoic compares the contribution of human industry to physical well-being with the contribution of artificial virtues to human happiness:

*Wouldest thou return to the raw herbage for thy food, to the open sky for thy covering, and to stones and clubs for thy defense against the ravenous animals of the desert? Then also return to thy savage manners ... and sink thyself below those animals, whose condition thou admirest, and wouldest so fondly imitate.* (par. 2)

The Stoic's main contribution to the debate is thus a correction of part of the Epicurean's mistake about the artificial and the original. The Stoic correctly, from Hume's point of view, understands that human inventiveness has a tremendous impact on human happiness.

Although the Stoic adds a useful perspective, he misses an important point about nature and artifice. From Hume's point of view, the Stoic goes to the other extreme and underestimates the importance of man's original constitution. The Stoic and the Epicurean commit different variations of the same mistake. The Epicurean believes that everything artificial is arbitrary, while the Stoic believes that nothing artificial is arbitrary. Neither sees that some artificial lifestyles are arbitrary, others are not.

The Stoic's failure to discriminate the arbitrary from the artificial is particularly apparent in his discussion of hunting. For the Stoic, the passion for hunting is one more piece of evidence that *labor itself is the chief ingredient of human happiness*:

*See the hardy hunters ... hasten to the forest. They leave behind, in their own houses, and in the neighbouring plains, animals of every kind, whose flesh furnishes the most delicious fare ... Laborious man disdains so easy a purchase.* (par. 7)

The Stoic's point is that the pleasure of the chase alone brings the happiness, and that this happiness has nothing to do with what is pursued. He believes that *vigorous industry [can] give pleasure to the pursuit even of the most worthless prey* (par. 8).

The non-Humean character of the Stoic's analysis is revealed when we compare this discussion with a cognate passage in the *Treatise*. Hume agrees that people will ignore a greater gain somewhere else just to have the pleasure of hunting something:

*the same person, who over-looks a ten times greater profit in any other subject, is pleas'd to bring home half a dozen wood-cocks or plovers, after having employ'd several hours in hunting after them.* (T 452)

But Hume's discussion in the *Treatise* makes it very clear that the Stoic has not got it quite right. For the Stoic, the labor of the chase is all that is required, and the value of the prey is insignificant. For Hume, pursuit of something worthless would be an arbitrary experience; the object of the chase must also have utility. Someone can enjoy hunting for pheasants (even though it would be much easier to buy them) but he or she will not enjoy hunting worthless prey such as *crows or magpies* (T 451). The pleasure results, Hume says, not from either the game or the object alone, but proceeds from *both these causes united, tho' separately they have no effect* (T 452). The Stoic thus fails to see that an arbitrary practice (hunting for worthless prey) is not satisfying.

The Stoic's false quest for perfection thus takes him too far from the natural. As the Epicurean has already pointed out, the Stoic ends up despising *external objects*. Although he may be able to maintain this posture toward the external world, it ultimately collapses: *The mind, unsupported by its proper objects, sinks into the deepest sorrow and dejection* (par. 6). Hume makes the same point in a number of other places. In an earlier essay in the same volume, for example, Hume points out that the Stoic search for perfection inevitably ends up by despising the most valuable parts of human nature. He condemns that *Grave philosophic Endeavor after Perfection, which, under Pretext of reforming Prejudices and Errors, strikes at all the most endearing Sentiments of the Heart, and all the most useful Byasses and Instincts, which can govern a human Creature*.<sup>23</sup>

### The Platonist

The Platonist, the *man of contemplation, and philosophical devotion* (n. 1), offers a powerful critique of the position taken by the Stoic. The Platonist accepts the Stoic's emphasis on perfection and excellence, but he argues that the Stoic has not taken the analysis far enough. If one is going to admire perfection, says the Platonist, one should not stop at human perfection. If one is going to focus on superior qualities, one ought go all the way to the divine source. Admiring human perfection is, by this measure, a form of idolatry:

*The most perfect happiness, surely, must arise from the contemplation of the most perfect object. But what is more perfect than beauty and virtue? And where is beauty to be found equal to that of the universe? Or virtue, which can be compared to the benevolence and justice of the Deity?* (par. 7)

This essay is the shortest of the four, and it is clearly the one with which Hume is least sympathetic. It is also the hardest one to check against the *Treatise*.

My hypothesis is that Hume would say that the Platonist's account is logically correct, but psychologically defective. Abstractly considered, one should perhaps focus on divine perfection, but such considerations are too remote to have an impact on human life. Jumping ahead, I believe that Hume would accept the criticism that the Sceptic makes. *Philosophical devotion*, according to the Sceptic, *is the transitory effect of high spirits, great leisure, a fine genius, and a habit of study and contemplation* (par. 23), but it cannot provide a durable source of happiness:

*an abstract, invisible object, like that which natural religion alone presents us, cannot long actuate the mind, or be of any moment in life. To render the passion of continuance, we must find some method of affecting the senses and imagination, and must embrace some historical, as well as philosophical account of the divinity. Popular superstitions and observances are even found to be of use in this particular.* (par. 23)

### The Sceptic

The Sceptic's contribution is much longer and more fully developed than any of the other presentations. One of the central points is a different way of thinking about human happiness. The three other orators speak of happiness in terms of the particular object that is pursued; the Sceptic draws our attention to the passion itself. For the Sceptic, *objects have absolutely no worth or value in themselves. They derive their worth merely from the passion* (par. 18).

The Sceptic then argues that happiness depends on the **quality** of our passions, more than on the nature of their objects. One of the most important qualities that the Sceptic looks for has to do with the fierceness of our passions:

*To be happy, the passion must be benign and social; not rough or fierce. The affections of the latter kind are not near so agreeable to the feeling, as those of the former.* (par. 21)

Hume also tells us that to be happy our passion must be neither *too violent nor too remiss* (par. 20).

Although the Sceptic has an interesting definition of happiness, he is very pessimistic about our ability to do anything to obtain it. If we could change our passions and feelings at will, we would be invariably happy (par. 27). But unfortunately, according to the Sceptic, we have little control over our passions and thus little control over our happiness.

There is a great deal of similarity between Hume and the Sceptic on the definition of happiness. The Sceptic's theory that happiness requires passions that are not *rough or fierce* is very similar to Hume's account of the passions in the *Treatise*.

In the *Treatise*, Hume distinguishes between two kinds of passion which he calls *calm* and *violent*. He makes it very clear that calmness and violence are not measures of strength or intensity. Calm passions can be stronger than violent passions, and although calm passions are more likely to be associated with some objects than others, ultimately the calmness or violence of a passion is not a function of its object (T 276); they are rather measures of the quality of a passion. The main difference between calm and violent passions is how much *emotion* or *disorder* they produce in the mind (T 417).

The *Treatise* does not specifically identify happiness with a predominance of calm passions, but it is clear that Hume thinks the calm passions are preferable to the violent ones. Hume tells us that, *What we call strength of mind, implies the prevalence of the calm passions above the violent* (T 418).

Although the Sceptic is close to Hume on the **definition** of happiness, he differs about the **means** to obtain it. Hume, as we shall see, is much less pessimistic about the power of human beings to control their feelings.

Ironically, the Sceptic runs into problems on precisely the same point as did his predecessors. He, too, fails to understand the distinction between what is arbitrary and what is artificial. On this point, the Sceptic most resembles the Epicurean. The Sceptic's position, like that of the Epicurean, is that we can do very little to alter our original passions. The Sceptic constantly argues against the power of artifice to change the passions. *Nature has a prodigious influence*, according to the Sceptic, and it is seldom possible for people to change their characters, even by *the utmost art and industry* (par. 28). The two speakers make a number of very similar points. Compare, for example:

The Epicurean: *When by my will alone I can stop the blood, as it runs with impetuosity along its canals, then may I hope to change the course of my sentiments and passions.* (par. 5)

The Sceptic: *The fabric and constitution of our mind no more depends on our choice, than that of our body.* (par. 28)

This similarity between the two comes out most clearly in the Sceptic's discussion of the power of **artificial** philosophical reflection to influence the passion. The Sceptic is willing to admit that the habit of study *softens and humanizes the temper* (par. 30), and he is also

willing to concede that information about the objects of our passions can have a significant impact upon them. A man who is proud of a diamond he possesses, for example, will feel differently if he learns that it is a fake (par. 35). But the Sceptic is unwilling to admit that philosophical reflection can have any **direct** impact on happiness. The Sceptic's attack on the artificial is reminiscent of the approach taken by the Epicurean:

*A man may as well pretend to cure himself of love, by viewing his mistress through the artificial medium of a microscope or prospect, and beholding there the coarseness of her skin, and monstrous disproportion of her features, as hope to excite or moderate any passion by the artificial arguments of a SENECA or an EPICUREAN. (par. 36)*

The Sceptic's original position is that *The reflections of philosophy are too subtle and distant to take place in common life, or eradicate any affection* (par. 36). Like the Epicurean, the Sceptic takes our passions as a given, over which we have very little control. The artificial is dismissed as arbitrary and powerless.

Under pressure, the Sceptic is willing to concede that there are two conditions where philosophy, as such, can *mortify* the passions (par. 47). The first condition is that some people may find comfort in a realization of the shortness of life, but no sooner does the Sceptic make this concession than he also points out that a realization of life's shortness is liable to have negative rather than positive effects. He then concedes that some people may take comfort by comparing their lot to that of others, and he appears willing to concede that this is at least one example where philosophical reflection can increase happiness. Here again, however, the Sceptic takes back as much as he gives and qualifies his concession by saying that viewing the misery of others may *rather produce sorrow than comfort. Such is the imperfection, concludes the Sceptic, even of the best of these philosophical topics of consolation* (par. 51).

A look at the *Treatise*, however, tells us that by Hume's standards the Sceptic is much too pessimistic about the power of philosophical reflection to change and soften the passions. This can be seen most clearly by contrasting Hume and the Sceptic on the role of comparisons, the one area where the Sceptic is willing to concede a limited impact of reflection on the passions. While the Sceptic tends to downplay the power of comparisons to make us happy, the *Treatise* gives an extremely rich account of the role of comparisons in the formation of the passions. Hume shows in some detail the fallacy of the Sceptic's belief that comparing ourselves with others may produce sorrow rather than

comfort, and he works out a complex theory of *contrary sensations arising in the beholder* to explain why the suffering of others almost invariably produces some happiness in ourselves (T 375ff.).

The difference between Hume and the Sceptic is partly a matter of whether the "glass is half full or half empty." While both concede the influence of the understanding on the emotions, the Sceptic minimizes and trivializes this while Hume stresses its importance and gives us a rich account of it. Hume, in other words, does not share the Sceptic's distrust of the power of human artifice to change our feelings. There is an important footnote at this point which argues that *The Sceptic, perhaps, carries the matter too far, when he limits all philosophical topics and reflections to these two* (par. 51, n. 1). In an extremely lengthy discussion (the longest footnote in the *Essays*) Hume corrects the Sceptic and lists a *few examples* of reflections that can *tranquillize and soften all the passions*. On my view, this footnote represents Hume's own position, and highlights the differences between Hume's views and those of the Sceptic.

The point of this footnote is to correct the mistake that all of the four participants make. None is clear about the correct relation of nature and artifice. The footnote strikes a more balanced position: reflection and study can sometimes *tranquillize* the passions, but they must work with nature, not independently of it. Just as Hume tells us in the *Treatise* that even those with the strongest character must sometimes *yield to the sollicitations of [violent] passion and desire* (T 418), the footnote reminds us that even the most careful student of human nature can become caught up by the passions so that the *philosopher is lost in the man*. But external aids can help, and the study of philosophy can have a big impact. At the end of the footnote, Hume strikes a moderate position, midway between the pessimism of the Epicurean and the Sceptic, and the optimism of the Platonist and Stoic:

*By habit and study acquire that philosophical temper which both gives force to reflection, and by rendering a great part of your happiness independent, takes off the edge from all disorderly passions, and tranquillizes the mind. Despise not these helps; but confide not too much in them neither; unless nature has been favourable in the temper, with which she has endowed you.*

Thus all four of the essays draw on important principles that are defended in the *Treatise*, and all of them diverge significantly from the doctrine of the *Treatise* in other respects. Three of the essays focus too much on the object of passion, and not enough on the quality of passion, and all of the essays lose their way in sorting out the role of nature and

artifice. Two of the essays attribute too much power to humans to change their passions, and two attribute too little. Taking the *Treatise* as a standard, then, none of these participants completely speaks for Hume. For reasons we have yet to see, Hume stands apart from them all.

### III. Philosophy as Therapy

What is the purpose of this complex labyrinth? Why does Hume go to the trouble of working out four different speeches, all of which present what he considers to be incomplete views? One clue to this question is to be found in what Hume himself has to say about the purpose of his different kinds of philosophical writings.

In the introductory section of *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* Hume gives us a road map of the different philosophical styles he employs and what he hopes to achieve with them.<sup>24</sup> He begins by describing two different *species of philosophy*. One is what he calls *abstruse* (E 6) philosophy (such as, for example, the *Treatise*); the other species, which surely includes the four essays, is what Hume calls the *easy* (E 6) philosophy.

The most important difference between the two styles has to do with their function. The purpose of abstruse writing is to make us understand something; the function of easy writing is to change our feelings and actions. The purpose of an easy essay is thus therapeutic rather than analytic.<sup>25</sup> Such essays, according to Hume, are designed to make us *feel the difference between vice and virtue; they excite and regulate our sentiments* (E 6). The easy philosophy can have a powerful affect on us:

*It enters more into common life; moulds the heart and affections; and, by touching those principles which actuate men, reforms their conduct, and brings them nearer to that model of perfection which it describes. (E 7)*

How does Hume think that reading essays will work to help us *regulate our sentiments*? One of the clearest statements of his answer is in "Of the Delicacy of Taste and Passion." This brief work is the first piece in the *Essays* and serves as a general introduction to the whole set of essays. It is thus an appropriate vehicle for a statement of Hume's general theory of the therapeutic role of popular philosophy.

Although Hume uses slightly different terminology in the essay, his thesis can be stated in terms of the theory of passions in the *Treatise*.<sup>26</sup> Hume argues that some people have a delicate sense of what the *Treatise* calls *violent passions* (T 276); they are given to a wide range of grief and joy over the *accidents of life*.<sup>27</sup> Others have a delicate sense

of the calm passions, which means that they have a wide range of responses to objects such as beauty or deformity.

Hume makes two main points about the delicacy of calm and violent passions, both of which are related to the themes of the four essays on happiness. Hume's first point is that a delicacy of the calm passions is desirable and a delicacy of the violent passions is undesirable. Since the accidents of life are out of our control, those who respond dramatically to them will more frequently be unhappy than happy. But whether or not we encounter beauty is more often in our control, hence a delicacy of the calm passions is liable to ensure greater happiness than a less sensitive appreciation of beauty.

Hume's second point is that a delicacy of the calm passions decreases a delicacy of the violent passions. Strengthening our calm passions can weaken the violent ones. The path to happiness lies in strengthening the calm passions, and the way to do this is by *cultivating a relish in the liberal arts*.<sup>28</sup> As we read, study, and enlarge our view of the world, we enhance the calm passions and achieve greater happiness:

*Our judgment will strengthen by this exercise: We shall form juster notions of life: Many things, which please or afflict others, will appear to us too frivolous to engage our attention: And we shall lose by degrees that sensibility and delicacy of [violent] passion, which is so incommodious.*<sup>29</sup>

The sentiment here resembles that of the footnote to "The Sceptic." Philosophy and cultivation expand our perspective and can *tranquillize and soften all the passions*.

Hume's real position on happiness is no secret. Happiness is achieved by strengthening the calm passions, and the best way to do this is to cultivate taste, perspective, and understanding. Indeed, one important path to happiness would be to read well-written essays that enlarge our understanding of the world. In short, one cure for delicacy of passion is a healthy dose of reading just the type of essay that Hume writes.

### The Four Essays as "Medicine of the Mind"

We can now see how Hume expects the four essays to work. In the *Enquiry* Hume tells us that one of the techniques by which easy writing accomplishes its purpose is by placing *opposite characters in a proper contrast* (E 5). This is an accurate description of the four essays, where four opposite characters are contrasted. By working through the exercise of contrasting these opposite characters, our passions will become softened and regulated. Seeing different approaches, each described in

a sympathetic way, will widen our view and moderate our own passion. The primary function of the essays is not only to articulate a theory of happiness, but to moderate our passions by making us think about happiness in a certain way.

Seen in this light, Hume's strategy in the four essays on happiness is analogous to what he does in some of the more political pieces in the *Essays* and in the *History of England*. What Hume frequently tries to do in his political and historical writings is to show both sides of the issue and by so doing enhance the spirit of moderation and calmness in his reader. In another one of the Essays, "That Politics may be reduced to a Science," for example, Hume tries to cool partisan fervour by trying to get each side of the contemporary political debate to see the other's point of view. Here too, in other words, he is trying to calm our passions by placing *opposite characters in a proper contrast*. The goal of this is moderation:

*There are enow of zealots on both sides who kindle up the passions of their partizans, and under pretence of public good, pursue the interests and ends of their particular faction. For my part, I shall always be more fond of promoting moderation than zeal.*<sup>30</sup>

In fact, Hume's sympathies are probably closest to the Sceptic, but the question of which of the four essays has the correct view of human happiness is secondary to their function as an exercise to produce moderation. Indeed, in a later letter Hume implies that following any of these approaches would be superior to superstition and bigotry. He aligns himself with the view of the ancients that a follower of any of these sects would display *more Regularity in his Life and Manners, than ... the ignorant & illiterate*.<sup>31</sup> Any of these four positions, then, would be more moderate than what we usually find in the world, and the regimen of comparing all four will even further enhance moderation.

The four essays thus have a different goal from that of the *Treatise*. Reading them is intended to be a salutary intellectual exercise. The reader must work through four theories, each of which is attractive and moderate, but which expresses opposite points of view. The result of this should be to produce a greater spirit of moderation in the reader. The reader will move from dogmatism and its attendant violent passions to a more sceptical view, with its attendant calm passions.<sup>32</sup>

### Conclusion

This reading of the essays suggests a somewhat different relation between Hume's abstruse works (such as the *Treatise*) and his more popular essays (such as the essays on happiness).

We know from Hume's letters that during the years when he was projecting and writing the *Treatise* he was preoccupied by questions about human happiness. The Hellenistic search for happiness was, for Hume, a *Subject I think much on*.<sup>33</sup> We might therefore expect the *Treatise* to include an extended discussion of human happiness and the means to achieve it. Although Hume deals with virtue at some length, there is very little discussion of happiness. On the very last page of the *Treatise*, however, Hume tells us that this omission does not result from the inability of his system to tell us anything useful about this topic. On the contrary, he boasts that *the same system may help us to form a just notion of the happiness ... of virtue* (T 620). But Hume insists that the *Treatise* would not be an appropriate place for such a discussion, and tells us that we must look elsewhere for the answer to this question. *Such reflections*, he tells us, *require a work a-part, very different from the genius of the present* (T 620).

Where in Hume's works should we look for this promised discussion? If what I have said so far is correct, there are good reasons to believe that the *work a-part* that he refers to is precisely the *Essays* that he was just in the process of drafting. These four essays, as well as some of Hume's other *easy* works, may thus be our source for Hume's *practical morality* (T 621).

To put it all another way, this interpretation suggests that by one standard, the popular essays are more important for Hume than the abstruse philosophical works. As Hume himself says, the technical works are *subservient* to the popular works (T 620). While the abstruse works provide the anatomy that undergirds the popular essays, it is the popular essays that actually have an impact on human life. Hume may not be completely ironic, in other words, when he tells us that popular philosophy rightly deserves the *most durable as well as the justest fame* (E 7).

Hume, in disagreement with the Sceptic, does believe that philosophy is the *medicine of the mind* (par. 28). It is, as he says in another of his essays, *the sovereign antidote* to the miseries caused by superstition and false religion.<sup>34</sup> But the abstruse philosophy, such as the *Treatise*, is only the necessary background to this therapeutic work. It is the popular essays that provide the cure.

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1. David Hume, "The Epicurean," in *Essays, Moral, Political, and Literary*, ed. Eugene F. Miller (Indianapolis, 1987), n. 1. The four essays are reprinted in a number of editions, of which I consider Miller's to be the most useful. Further references will be to the paragraph number of each individual essay, in order to allow the reader to check the references in different editions. I am deeply indebted to Janice Kamrin and Geoffrey Rockwell for comments on an earlier draft of this paper.
2. One quite useful discussion is Peter Jones, "Art' and 'Moderation' in Hume's Essays," in *McGill Hume Studies*, ed. David Fate Norton and Nicholas Capaldi (San Diego, 1979), 161-80, esp. 172-9.
3. T. H. Green and T. H. Grose, "History of the Editions," in David Hume, *The Philosophical Works*, ed. T. H. Green and T. H. Grose, 4 vols. (Darmstadt, 1964), 3:45.
4. Robert J. Fogelin, *Hume's Scepticism in the Treatise of Human Nature* (London, 1985). Although I disagree with Fogelin's reading of the four essays, my differences are not crucial to Fogelin's overall argument.
5. Fogelin, 117.
6. Fogelin, 119.
7. Green and Grose (above, n. 3), 3:41.
8. Green and Grose, 3:46.
9. The fact that the essays are a dialogue modeled after Cicero's *De finibus bonorum et malorum* has also been noted by Jones (above, n. 2), 176.
10. The connection between Hume and Cicero has been discussed thoroughly. See for example, Christine Battersby, "The Dialogues as Original Imitation: Cicero and the Nature of Hume's Skepticism," in *McGill Hume Studies*, ed. David Fate Norton et al. Battersby also notes the connection between Cicero and the essays on happiness.
11. Cicero, *De finibus bonorum et malorum*, trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge, 1971), 98-9.
12. See letter 13 (1739) in *The Letters of David Hume*, ed. J. Y. T. Greig (Oxford, 1932), 1:35. Hume writes to Hutcheson, *You are a great Admirer of Cicero, as well as I am. Please to review the 4th Book, de finibus bonorum & malorum.*
13. See Norman Kemp Smith's introduction to David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, ed. Norman Kemp Smith (Indianapolis, 1947), 60ff.
14. The connection between Cleanthes and Cicero's Stoicism is also noted by J. M. Ross in his introduction to Cicero, *The Nature of the Gods*, trans. Horace C. P. McGregor (Baltimore, 1972), 60.

15. Although many commentators have followed Kemp Smith in identifying Philo with Hume, John Bricke argues that none of the characters can be identified with Hume. See "On the Interpretation of Hume's *Dialogues*," *Religious Studies* 2 (1975): 1-18. Bricke points out that finding passages that agree with Hume does not prove that a character speaks for Hume. My own reading of the four essays takes an approach which is similar to Bricke's reading of the *Dialogues*.
16. Quoted in Green and Grose (above, n. 3), 3:46.
17. Green and Grose, 3:47.
18. Green and Grose, 3:46.
19. Hume's letters of the summer of 1739 show that he is working simultaneously on finishing up Volume 3 of the *Treatise* and also drafting "papers" and sending them to Henry Home. See letters 11, 12, and 13 in *The Letters of David Hume* (above, n. 12).
20. Jones (above, n. 2) writes that "the Epicurean failed to see that a social environment was necessary to the enjoyment of his debauching" (p. 173). This comment misses the point that the Epicurean himself realizes that society and moderation are required for true pleasure. See par. 9.
21. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford, 1965), 187. Further references ("T") will be given in parentheses within the body of the text.
22. David Hume, *Enquiries Concerning the Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 2nd ed. (Oxford, 1972), 270. Further references to the *Enquiries* will be cited as "E".
23. David Hume, "Of Moral Prejudices," in *Essays* (above, n. 1), 539.
24. Although this material was published in 1748, a few years later than the *Treatise* (1740) and the *Essays* (1741-42), much of what he says is based on material developed in a letter to Hutcheson written in 1739. See letter 13 in *The Letters of David Hume* (above, n. 12). See also T 620-21.
25. This function of the easy writing is illustrated in a recent study by Robert Ginsberg of Hume's later essay "Of the Standard of Taste." Ginsberg argues that Hume's goal as an essayist is to be an "architect of reader experience" and he shows in detail that the purpose of the essay is not so much what it says but the impact it is intended to have on the reader. See "The Literary Structure and Strategy of Hume's Essay on the Standard of Taste," in *The Philosopher as Writer: The Eighteenth Century*, ed. Robert Ginsberg (London and Toronto, 1987).
26. "Of the Delicacy of Taste and Passion," in *Essays, Moral, Political, and Literary* (above, n. 1). As Miller points out in a footnote to this

essay, Hume's contrast between "taste" and "passion" is merely another way of expressing the distinction between calm and violent passions. When Hume speaks of "taste," for example, in the essay he refers to our response to "beauty and deformity," this is exactly how he introduces calm passions in the *Treatise*. See T 276.

27. *Essays*, 4.
28. *Essays*, 6.
29. *Essays*, 6.
30. *Essays*, 27.
31. Letter 72 (1751) in the *Letters of David Hume* (above, n. 12).
32. The connection between dogmatism and violent passions and moderate scepticism and calm passions is explicitly made in the *Enquiries* (above, n. 22), 161.
33. Letter 1 (1727) in the *Letters of David Hume* (above, n. 12). See also Hume's autobiographical self-diagnosis in letter 3.
34. David Hume, "Of Suicide," in *Essays* (above, n. 1), 577.