



**Relations of Literary Form and Philosophical Purpose in Hume's Four Essays on Happiness**

Colin Heydt

*Hume Studies* Volume 33, Number 1, (2007) 3-19.

Your use of the HUME STUDIES archive indicates your acceptance of HUME STUDIES' Terms and Conditions of Use, available at

<http://www.humesociety.org/hs/about/terms.html>.

HUME STUDIES' Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the HUME STUDIES archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Each copy of any part of a HUME STUDIES transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

For more information on HUME STUDIES contact

[humestudies-info@humesociety.org](mailto:humestudies-info@humesociety.org)

<http://www.humesociety.org/hs/>

# Relations of Literary Form and Philosophical Purpose in Hume's Four Essays on Happiness

COLIN HEYDT

*Abstract:* This paper examines Hume's four essays on happiness: the "Epicurean," the "Stoic," the "Platonist," and the "Sceptic." I argue, first, that careful attention to how these essays are written shows that they do not simply argue for one position over others. They also elicit affective and imaginative responses in order to modify the reader's outlook and to improve the reader's understanding in service to moral ends. The analysis offers an improved reading of the essays and highlights the intimate connections between the purposes of philosophical writing and its manner of presentation. Secondly, I contend that appreciating how Hume's essays on happiness work on the reader demonstrates the insufficiency of Hume's categories of "anatomist" and "painter."

We come now to those things which are within our own power, and work upon the mind, and affect and govern the will and the appetite; whence they have great efficacy in altering the manners. And here philosophers should diligently inquire into the powers and energy of custom, exercise, habit, education, example, imitation, emulation, company, friendship, praise, reproof, exhortation, reputation, laws, books, studies, etc.; for these are the things which reign in men's morals. By these agents the mind is formed and subdued; and of these ingredients remedies are prepared, which, so far as human means can reach,

conduce to the preservation and recovery of the health of the mind. (Francis Bacon, *The Advancement of Knowledge*, Book VII, chapter 3, which addresses the “Georgics of the Mind”)

## I. Introduction

In philosophy, we often expend a great deal more energy determining what texts *say* rather than determining what texts *do*, that is, what functions they serve. This willingness to ignore what texts do reflects a basic agreement—at least in mainstream Anglo-American philosophy—about what philosophy is all about. Rather simply put, we live in an age which construes philosophy’s main purpose as the pursuit of truth. Scott Soames, for example, in characterizing analytic philosophy, renders one of its features as the “elevation of the goals of truth and knowledge over inspiration, moral uplift, and spiritual comfort.”<sup>1</sup>

This agreement about what philosophy is supposed to do yields agreement about how philosophy is supposed to be written. Articles and books in philosophy foster analytical distance through their choice of language, tone, and style. They discourage non-cognitive responses in their readers by eschewing anything (such as stories, inspirational language, or censure) that can elicit strong feelings.

Arthur Danto, in his paper “Philosophy as/and/of Literature,” examines the interrelations of literary form and conceptions of philosophical truth, and contends that, when we turn to forms of writing other than the “professional philosophy paper,” we “may also be turning to other conceptions of philosophical truth.” He illustrates this point with a discussion of Plato and Descartes:

A lot of what I have read on Plato reads much as though he . . . were . . . being coached to get a paper accepted by *The Philosophical Review*. And a good bit of the writing on Descartes is by way of chivying his argumentation into notations we are certain he would have adopted had he lived to appreciate their advantages, since it is now so clear where he went wrong. But in both cases it might at least have been asked whether what either writer is up to can that easily be separated from forms it may have seemed inevitable it be presented in, so that the dialogue or meditation flattened into conventional periodical prose might not in the process have lost something central to those ways of writing. The form in which the truth as they understood it must be grasped just might require a form of reading, hence a kind of relationship to those texts, altogether different from that appropriate to a paper, or to what we sometimes refer to as a ‘contribution.’ And this because something is intended to happen to the reader other than or in addition to being informed.<sup>2</sup>

This paper examines Hume's four essays on happiness,<sup>3</sup> each of which is written from different first-person perspectives, namely that of the Epicurean, the Stoic, the Platonist, and the Sceptic.<sup>4</sup> The unusual manner in which these pieces are written asks us to consider, in Danto's terms, what "form of reading" Hume's literary choices require from us, and, in turn, what this tells us about what he "is up to." To put it another way: what kind of relationship is Hume establishing with his readers, and to what end?

As we shall see, central to what these essays do is that they do *not* simply argue for one position over others. Instead, they also rely on the power of feeling and imagination to modify the reader's outlook and to improve the reader's understanding in service to moral ends. This helps to explain why Hume wrote the essays in the way that he did, provides a reading of the essays as a whole, highlights the intimate connections between the purposes of philosophical writing and its manner of presentation, and reveals some of the limitations inherent in the "philosophical paper."

Secondly, I show how analyzing these essays in the way that I do enables us to think more clearly about Hume as a "practical moralist." In particular, I contend that appreciating how Hume's essays on happiness affect the reader demonstrates the insufficiency of Hume's categories of "anatomist" and "painter"—categories that philosophers still commonly employ today to sort the different kinds of work done by Hume's texts.<sup>5</sup>

## II. Addisonian and Ciceronian Contexts

In considering how the essays are written and what moral ends they serve, two contexts are especially relevant: the Addisonian essay and Cicero's writings (especially *De Finibus*). Before turning to Hume's essays, I shall address each context in turn.

The British eighteenth century is rife with expectations that books can improve us. As Roy Porter puts it, "[e]nlighented thinking . . . shunned the scholastic: it wanted not just to understand the world but to influence it."<sup>6</sup> In Scotland, as numerous commentators have emphasized, many philosophers and intellectuals saw themselves as improving their readers.<sup>7</sup> Phillipson presents these thinkers as "practical moralists who had developed a formidable and complex casuistical armoury to instruct young men of middling rank in their duties as men and as citizens of a modern commercial polity."<sup>8</sup> They are misrepresented when seen principally as ethicists interested in theory and explanation in abstraction from moral practice.

Sher reminds us that Scottish professors of moral philosophy were "expected to teach natural religion and instill conventional moral and religious principles, as well as respect for the Hanoverian establishment and the 'constitution.'"<sup>9</sup> As

illustrating the ethos of these professors, he quotes James Beattie's statement that "I wish rather to form the taste, improve the manners, and establish the principles, of young men, than to make them profound metaphysicians; I wish, in a word, not to make Humes of them, or Leibnitzes, but rather, if that were possible, Addison's."<sup>10</sup>

Beattie's opposition of Hume and Addison reflects the contrast of substance and style between popular works like *The Spectator* and *The Tatler*, and Hume's more abstruse texts, such as the *Treatise*. The *Treatise's* third Book on morals, for example, famously elicited concerns from that great practical moralist Hutcheson that it lacked "Warmth in the Cause of Virtue." Hume replied that the *Treatise* was not meant to portray humanity as the "painter" or "moralist" would, that is, in such a way as to inspire the reader and inflame a love of virtue. Rather, he operated as an "anatomist" of the mind trying to reveal the secret springs and principles of moral life.<sup>11</sup>

Nevertheless, it has been frequently noted that Hume shifted his authorial strategy after the (relative) literary failure of the *Treatise*.<sup>12</sup> This shift in content, genre, and style raises questions about whether his newer works—especially the *Essays*—fit into a larger narrative of Addisonian "practical philosophy."<sup>13</sup>

In the expunged "Of Essay Writing" Hume contends that his goal in publishing his essays is to strengthen the connections between the learned and conversible worlds, both of which suffer from isolation.<sup>14</sup> The learned world, by being "shut up in Colleges and Cells" becomes "chimerical" in her conclusions as well as "unintelligible in her Stile and Manner of Delivery," which is to be expected from people who never consult experience in their reasonings (i.e., the experience relevant to moral reasonings—common life and conversation). The conversible world devolves into gossiping stories and idle remarks.<sup>15</sup>

Along with referencing Shaftesbury, Hume's interest in bringing the learned world into polite society would have clearly recalled Mr. Spectator's remark in Addison and Steele's *Spectator*: "It was said of Socrates, that he brought Philosophy down from Heaven, to inhabit among men; and I shall be ambitious to have it said of me, that I have brought Philosophy out of Closets and Libraries, Schools and Colleges, to dwell in Clubs and Assemblies, at Tea-Tables, and in Coffee-Houses."<sup>16</sup> Indeed, Hume's essays are often termed "Addisonian."<sup>18</sup> Presumably they have some title to this in that, though philosophically richer than Addison's, they 1) engage topics of interest to the common person, 2) are written in a polite style, in contrast to the *Treatise*, and 3) indicate a greater willingness to "civilize" rather than merely inform readers. And given Hume's interest in expanding his audience, it made sense to pattern his essays after Addison, since his and Steele's essays continued to be very popular with the British reading public.

Hume's four essays on happiness, which present the "different ideas of human life and of happiness" that "naturally form themselves in the world," not

only reflect this general, Addisonian literary program—they are also patterned specifically on another work, namely Cicero's *De Finibus*.<sup>18</sup> In that text, we get a series of dialogues in which defenders of the Epicurean, Stoic, and hybrid Platonic/Aristotelian positions on happiness, engage with "Cicero," a follower of the New Academy. "Cicero" presses each of his interlocutors through critical examination of a variety of positive or dogmatic positions. The results of those inquiries showed that, though there were reasons to assent to the various positions (some more than others), there were also reasons to hesitate to accept their principles. This approach tends to foster an eclecticism, in which the Academic sceptic takes attractive doctrines from a variety of sources.

Hume clearly follows a Ciceronian model in the four essays, both in content and in the goals pursued, but the essays differ from Cicero's work in an important way. Hume decides not to use a dialogue form, which marks a shift in literary strategy that affects the reader's relation to the text. The essays are written in the first-person—they are essentially philosophical monologues.<sup>19</sup> Though the speakers engage with each other's doctrines, conversation between them arises only in the mind of the reader. It is the reader who, in imagination, confronts each of the essayists with the others. It is, therefore, only through the reader's activity that the four essays provide the foundation of dialogue.

### III. The Four Essays on Happiness

#### A. *The Epicurean*

"The Epicurean" provides the first illustration of my general argument for the essays: that the manner in which they are written—particularly in the choice of genre (e.g., pastoral, exhortatory sermon, censorious sermon, philosophical essay)—is designed to get the reader to not only *understand*, but to *experience* each of the four different visions of happiness. This serves, as I will discuss later, Hume's goal for the essays as a group.

The Epicurean narrator begins by chastising the vanity of man—a vanity reflected in a turn away from nature. God-like (i.e., Stoic) happiness remains artificial and illusory. Natural happiness implies instead "ease, contentment, repose, and pleasure; not watchfulness, care, and fatigue."<sup>20</sup> The pleasures that constitute happiness are calm, unruffled, and anti-Dionysian. It is this state of mind that the text works to realize in the reader through its use of the pastoral genre, literary structure, and well-chosen descriptions.

It becomes apparent after the first three pages of polemic that this essay diverges wildly from analytic prose. It is at the end of this polemic that the narrator asks "But why do I apply to you, proud and ignorant sages, to shew me the road to happiness? Let me consult my own passions and inclinations. In them must I read the dictates of nature; not in your frivolous discourses."<sup>21</sup> At that point, the

Epicurean switches into the essay's dominant mode: *pastoral*—a pastoral that includes allegorical and mythological elements.<sup>22</sup> He invokes the presence of Pleasure, Virtue, Innocence, Damon (a probable reference to Virgil's *Eclogues*), and Caelia (perhaps conjuring Spencer's *Faerie Queen* I.X) as characters with whom he interacts in a loosely structured narrative.

The narrative commences when the Epicurean is approached by “the divine, the amiable Pleasure,” who is subsequently joined by her sister Virtue.<sup>23</sup> Conversation and feasting ensue. Damon joins them with his lyre and sings of the dangers of loving glory. Hours pass in the pleasures of sense and the joys of harmony and friendship, until the sun sinks and the narrator moves on to those pleasures which “admit not” of his friends' participation, that is, the pleasures of romance with his lover Caelia.<sup>24</sup> Finally, after the lovers' rapturous initial encounter, the narrator attempts to diffuse Caelia's anxieties about the transience of love and life by asking that she (and, implicitly, the reader) turn away from the “fruitless anxieties,” “vain projects,” and “uncertain speculations” that occupy our time and energy in this life.

The explicit themes in the essay include the value of simple pleasures (e.g., eating, drinking, conversation in all its senses), the necessity of gentle virtue for the stability of pleasure, and the importance of embracing the pleasures of the present in light of the transience of human life. The narrative generally rejects argumentation, however, in favor of literary techniques that achieve effects in other ways. The descriptions that fill the narrative, for instance, operate on the imagination. They consistently suggest naturalness and simplicity, and work to transport the reader into settings that promote “ease, contentment, repose, and pleasure.” There is feasting, conversation, music, caressing, beautiful sights and smells. Picturesque pastoral and Arcadian scenes—shady bowers, thick wood, a smooth and flowery path, a bed of roses—project safety, calm, and seclusion from the demands of the world.

In addition to narrative and descriptive content, formal features of the text also contribute to the essay's practical ends. The use of allegory, for example, enables the Epicurean to treat relations among concepts like pleasure and virtue in a narrative form, rather than forcing him to rely on arguments alone. In turn, the presentation of particular characters and events in the narration enables the possibility of reader responses (e.g., moral judgment and emotional reaction) generally unavailable to philosophical argument, because we can put ourselves imaginatively in the positions of the characters (even relatively flat, mythical or allegorical ones)—enjoying what they enjoy, sharing their anxieties, and so on.

Formal elements of the text also help to transform time for the reader into something that passes “unperceived along,” thereby promoting an Epicurean enjoyment of the present. The text is carefully paced such that it slows down the reader at the end of the essay through its paragraph structure—the last four

paragraphs get progressively longer, with the last paragraph being the longest of the essay. The narrative creates a more and more leisurely pace in order to “give ease to . . . anxious thoughts.”

We see here how the argument for a particular way of conceptualizing human happiness is carried on both at the level of the explicit content and at the level of form. The text brings the reader's imagination into pastoral settings, it employs mythical and allegorical narrative, which opens up greater possibility of affective response, and the pace of the writing encourages a mental unwinding, a slowing-down. Thus, the central point of the essay is not only to *tell* us about the Epicurean conception of happiness, but to get us to *experience* a sample of that happiness.

### **B. The Stoic**

In the second essay, one finds the same use of form and content to bring the reader to feel, rather than simply understand, Stoic happiness. The Stoic attempts to energize the reader and encourage him to realize the virtuous life. Hume here provides us with a rhetorical performance that might have satisfied Hutcheson's expectations for a work on morals.

The Stoic, or the “man of action and virtue,” emphasizes the necessity of labor for happiness. It is only by shaping ourselves as the artist shapes her materials that we can become something beautiful (“thou thyself shouldst . . . be the object of thy industry”), and thus a source of inspiration and happiness for ourselves. We are led in this labor by “virtuous example or wise exhortation,” which teaches us to govern our passions, reform our vices, and subdue the enemies within us.<sup>25</sup> It is especially exhortation that the Stoic employs in this essay.

How does the essay try to energize the reader into “action and virtue”? One of its most interesting stylistic features is the incessant use of questions. The employment of such questions in lieu of equivalent statements can serve numerous purposes, as the rhetorical tradition notes. Quintilian, for example, categorizes questions as “figures of thought” when they are employed to emphasize points rather than to acquire information (*Institutio Oratoria*, 9.2.7). He claims that questions used in this way make the “fire” of the orator's words frequently much greater than they would have been when in statement form.

Take the following example from Hume's essay: “While thou hast such an alluring object in view, shall that labour and attention, requisite to the attainment of thy end, ever seem burdensome and intolerable?”<sup>26</sup> The reader is, of course, asked to provide an answer to the question. As such, the reader engages actively with the text by responding to it. Both in content (the call to labor) and in form (rhetorical question rather than statement), the text encourages action.

Another interesting stylistic feature of the essay (and of “The Platonist”) is the Stoic's use of “thou” and “thy”. By the middle of the eighteenth century, “thou”

(like “ye” earlier) had been almost completely dropped from ordinary English usage in favor of “you.”<sup>27</sup> The exceptions to this rule were prayer and poetry. The use of that form of the pronoun thereby serves to identify both “The Stoic” and “The Platonist” as having a sermon-esque tone. In contrast to the allegory, narrative, and poetic pastoralism of “The Epicurean,” the Stoic employs a high, exhortatory rhetoric. While the former seduces, the latter exhorts.

### *C. The Platonist*

For the Platonist, or the man of contemplation and philosophical devotion, our minds are like streams which flow naturally to the ocean that is the boundless divinity, losing ourselves in the immensity of divine perfection. We (as rational souls) are “made for the contemplation of the Supreme Being, and of his works.”<sup>28</sup>

Unfortunately, the vanity of this world, bringing with it vice and folly, checks our natural course towards divinity. We become “furious and enraged” due to our inability to find genuine satisfaction in the pursuit of ignoble pleasures and popular applause.<sup>29</sup>

If the Epicurean seduces and the Stoic exhorts, the Platonist’s principle mode is one of censure. The two objects of censure in the essay are the voluptuary and the “haughty personage” who assumes the title of “a philosopher and man of morals.” The former succumbs to the pleasures of this world while the latter worships himself through the eyes of his “ignorant admirers.” By “pompous phrase and passionate expression,” both recommend that others imitate their lives and manners. They are thereby subject to “our censure,” because they have not only turned away from the creator—they have brought others to do the same.<sup>30</sup>

The Platonist tries to get us to look at the voluptuary and the so-called “philosopher” through his eyes, so that we will share in his condemnation—so that it will truly become “our censure.” In so doing, he clearly hopes to enliven our capacity to recognize the vanity of this life (in this respect, earnest censure strives to achieve the same ends as satire, but through different means).

“The Platonist” shares many formal features with “The Stoic,” though for somewhat different ends. Both employ the manner of sermons (“thou,” “thy”) and both rely on rhetorical questions to prompt the reader (“Can we then be so blind as not to discover an intelligence and a design in the exquisite and most stupendous contrivance of the universe? Can we be so stupid as not to feel the warmest raptures of worship and adoration, upon the contemplation of that intelligent being, so infinitely good and wise?”).<sup>31</sup>

Commentators often take this essay as the one from which Hume remained farthest. Both Immerwahr and Siebert defend this by observing that the essay is significantly shorter than the others (while “The Sceptic” is by far the longest).<sup>32</sup> Siebert notes that it is “to Hume’s credit that he does his best to give this position a fair

hearing, however little enthusiasm he brings to the task.”<sup>33</sup> Yet one possible argument for the failure of this essay relative to the others that has not been mentioned, and which relies on more than the respective lengths of the essays, is that the Platonist expends much more energy portraying particular ways of life as impoverished and ultimately unhappy than he does providing a positive image of happiness. If it's the case that “[t]he most perfect happiness, surely, must arise from the contemplation of the most perfect object,” we might expect the essay to direct the reader's attention to God.<sup>34</sup> Yet it is only in the final two paragraphs that the reader receives this kind of direction (it is notable that this is the point in the essay when the use of rhetorical questions increases considerably). Instead, the essay shows undesirable lives and asks us to censure them. There is, in other words, a more imperfect fit between means (style and philosophical content) and ends (providing the reader a glimpse of happiness as construed by the author) in this essay than we find in the others.

#### D. *The Sceptic*

The last essay is the most involved of the four, and contains an interesting omission at its opening: there is no summary of who the Sceptic represents. That is, while Hume provides the reader with pithy descriptions of the Epicurean (“man of elegance and pleasure”), the Stoic (“man of action and virtue”), and the Platonist (“man of contemplation”), we get none for the Sceptic. The Sceptic defends no particular end for man.<sup>35</sup>

Instead, the essay does two things that are relevant for our purposes. First, it opens by noting the philosopher's repeated failure (found clearly in the Sceptic's three predecessors) to appreciate the diversity of nature:

I have long entertained a suspicion, with regard to the decisions of philosophers upon all subjects, and found in myself a greater inclination to dispute, than assent to their conclusions. There is one mistake, to which they seem liable, almost without exception; they confine too much their principles, and make no account of that vast variety, which nature has so much affected in all her operations. When a philosopher has once laid hold of a favourite principle, which perhaps accounts for many natural effects, he extends the same principle over the whole creation, and reduces to it every phaenomenon, though by the most violent and absurd reasoning.<sup>36</sup>

Here, in a passage reminiscent of Montaigne (e.g., “On Experience”), the Sceptic shows how the pursuit of *the* highest end for human beings is a mistaken one.<sup>37</sup> We are too different. To claim a highest end for human beings *as such* erases essential moral differences for the sake of the pleasure of general conclusions.

The second goal of the essay is to deflate the practical pretensions of philosophy, namely pretensions to improve us through instruction. The Sceptic attacks the various consolations that philosophy has, at different times, purported to provide.<sup>38</sup> The “empire of philosophy” is weak, because it is temperament that determines how happy we will be and the fabric and constitution of our mind is not subject to choice or rational control in any substantial way.<sup>39</sup> Any general maxims philosophy procures for us (e.g., “To be happy, the *passion* must neither be too violent nor too remiss” or “(T)he happiest disposition of mind is the *virtuous*”) “have little influence, but so far as they affect our taste or sentiment.”<sup>40</sup>

One way in which philosophy can “affect our taste or sentiment” is by altering our view of the objects of the passions. The philosopher can, in other words, step in and suggest particular views, considerations, and circumstances which would otherwise have escaped us, and by that means, “he may either moderate or excite any particular passion.”<sup>41</sup> Two problems arise, however. The first is a dilemma: if these views of the object and situation are natural, they would have occurred by themselves without the help of philosophy, but if they are not natural, they will have little influence on the affections. As the author puts it, we can pretend to cure ourselves of love by viewing a mistress through a microscope just as well as we can by the artificial arguments of Seneca or Epictetus. The remembrance of the natural aspect and situation of the object will still recur and generate the affection. The reflections of philosophy are too subtle and distant to take place in common life or eradicate any affection.<sup>42</sup> The second defect of philosophical reasoning is that it commonly cannot extinguish our vicious passions without also extinguishing the virtuous ones thereby rendering the mind totally indifferent and inactive.

We are therefore left with two philosophical considerations from which moral effects can be expected: 1) “When we reflect on the shortness and uncertainty of life, how despicable seem all our pursuits of happiness?”<sup>43</sup> Such a reflection tends to “mortify all our passions,” though the ultimate effect seems to be to get us to focus on present pleasure.<sup>44</sup> And 2) philosophy can correct our natural propensity to compare our conditions with our superiors rather than with our inferiors. These seem rather paltry recompense for the efforts put into philosophy, as the Sceptic acknowledges.

The author ends by noting that the pleasures and goods of fortune, body, and mind are unequally distributed. This implies that there is a weak relation between virtue and happiness. The world shows a lack of moral purposiveness and providential ordering: “In a word, human life is more governed by fortune than by reason; is to be regarded more as a dull pastime than as a serious occupation; and is more influenced by particular humour, than by general principles.”<sup>45</sup>

The style of this essay is much less idiosyncratic than the others, and more closely resembles Hume’s typical piece. Siebert notes its similarity in style to the

second *Enquiry*.<sup>46</sup> It uses ordinary language and presents reasonably straightforward philosophical argument meant to undermine easy acceptance of Epicurean, Stoic, and Platonist anthropologies and ends.

Nevertheless, the style serves an important purpose. "The Sceptic" utilizes the resources of more traditional, detached philosophical prose in order to foster analytical distance. This distance, in turn, combined with the to-and-fro prompted by the first three essays, can promote contemplative moderation, which, as Jones contends, is the positive attitude the Sceptic advocates.<sup>47</sup> The force of the Sceptic's essay relies in part, then, on confronting a reader who has already been moved by the preceding three essays. Those essays create a feeling of confusion and tension in the reader more fully than would essays written in an analytic style, because by "trying out" the three different kinds of happiness, the reader recognizes more immediately both their *attractiveness* and their *incompatibility*. It is this confusion and tension that the Sceptic alleviates by undermining the pretensions of the three authors to be presenting *the* nature of human happiness, thereby promoting eclecticism and moderation.

#### IV. Conclusions

Though there is substantial debate about the details of what these essays aim at, where we can properly locate Hume's voice, and so on, a number of commentators agree about their broad point.<sup>48</sup> The four essays work as a group to defend Ciceronian moderation in the form of a sceptically-tinged eclecticism, in which we learn to detach ourselves from commitments to philosophical schools out of recognition that no one school can provide moral direction for us *qua* human being.<sup>49</sup> This is because what is largely responsible for determining our appropriate style of life is our temperament, which philosophy can alter in only limited ways. Since temperaments differ (as the essays themselves make apparent), philosophical schools represent appropriate lives for different temperaments. Our job is to determine our own temperaments well enough to be able to choose the lives best suited to them.

This paper addresses a question that has not been given the attention it deserves: *how* do the essays function to promote this moderation?<sup>50</sup> In contrast to a treatise or an analytic essay, the first three essays on happiness work to engage readers affectively, not only cognitively.<sup>51</sup> As I've shown here, each essay functions more or less imperfectly to impact the reader, in part through narrative, descriptive, and philosophical content, in part through literary and rhetorical devices. The literary form promotes moderation (at least in those readers gripped by it—not all will be) by getting readers to "feel," rather than merely "see," the truth that we cannot expect the life that is best for me to be best for everyone.<sup>52</sup> This truth serves to dam one of the important tributaries of fanaticism and zealotry.

This analysis of the essays not only provides us with an interpretation of the four essays and how they function, it also offers methods that can clarify discussion concerning whether and in what ways Hume works, post-*Treatise*, as a practical, Addisonian moralist. That discussion has been unnecessarily limited by the reliance on Hume's categories of "painter" and "anatomist," which are meant to explain what Hume is doing in particular texts.<sup>53</sup> Either those categories are understood too specifically or too generally. They are too specific to capture all the things a text might be doing in relation to a reader (e.g., promoting discernment, offering a moral taxonomy, prompting self-reflection), when the painter is understood as eliciting motivating feelings in readers and the anatomist as providing causal analysis (i.e., revealing "secret springs and principles").<sup>54</sup> When, alternatively, commentators take the painter's goal, more broadly, to be the improvement of the reader and the anatomist's goal as establishing the foundations of morals, reasoning, and criticism, the categories become too general.

A proper analysis of the four essays shows the need to move beyond the notions of "painter" or "anatomist." There is a sense in which the essays are practical and a sense in which they change our beliefs about the foundation of happiness. The essays work to elicit feeling from readers, but they also provide causal analysis (particularly concerning the ineffectiveness of philosophy). We gain little in such a case by describing what Hume is doing through appeal to "painting" or "anatomy." It is crippling to any interpretation of how Hume's texts work on readers when a commentator expends so much energy arguing about whether the text shows Hume as an anatomist or as a painter. Why, after all, should we assume that Hume's concepts are the proper instruments for understanding how his writing works? The analysis offered here indicates that progress on determining the extent of Hume's practical moralizing depends on commentators freeing themselves from the limitations of Hume's categories.

At this point, however, one might ask why, without an antecedent interest in Hume, we should care about his essays on happiness. The first feature of these essays that warrants interest in them is the philosophical content of the essays. In particular, the arguments for different accounts of human happiness and the exploration of the ways in which philosophy can aspire to be practical are important contributions to any debate about the nature of moral philosophy.

Secondly, and most importantly to this paper, the essays embody an interesting experiment in literary form that reveals some of the limitations in the traditional treatise and philosophical essay. The essays, in Danto's terms, demand to be read in ways different from traditional philosophical works, and this different manner of reading contributes to bringing about responses in readers that are unavailable to the typical piece of philosophical writing.

Contemporary professional philosophers remain so committed to the genres of treatise and "philosophical paper" that they can easily lose sight of how these

genres constrain what they *do* as writers. In particular, the treatise and philosophical essay serve a specific purpose—the promotion of understanding—and they do it so well that it can be easily forgotten that philosophy, especially moral philosophy, might serve other ends (and has done so in the past). Some of those ends are therapeutic, for example, improvement of the reader's conduct and character. In the case of Hume's essays, the more analytical last essay works with the earlier ones to foster moderation in some readers in a way that would not have been possible if Hume had simply composed an essay that expressed his own views on happiness. Through his use of the literary and rhetorical devices, Hume attempts to present more than an opportunity for improved understanding. He tries to coax the reader into moderation.

Studying these essays, then, reminds us of possibilities for what works of philosophy can do and how, when the intended ends are therapeutic, the way in which philosophy is written demands special attention. Hume's experiment with literary form ultimately reflects an experiment with the nature and point of philosophy.

## NOTES

I would like to thank the graduate students in my 2005 seminar at USF on Hume and Smith and audiences at the Eighteenth Century Scottish Studies Society conference in Montpellier and the 34th International Hume Conference in Boston, in August 2007, for helpful comments. In addition, the paper was much improved by feedback from anonymous referees and the editors at *Hume Studies*.

1 Scott Soames, "Analytic Philosophy in America," in *The Oxford Handbook of American Philosophy*, ed. Cheryl Misak (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming), chap. 21.

2 Arthur C. Danto, "Philosophy as/and/of Literature," *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 58.1 (1984): 7–8.

3 David Hume, *Essays: Moral, Political, and Literary*, ed. Eugene F. Miller (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1985), 138–80.

4 Here I disagree with James Moore's assertion that "The Sceptic" is written "unlike the others, in the first person," in his otherwise excellent essay: "The eclectic stoic, the mitigated skeptic" in *New Essays on David Hume*, ed. Emilio Mazza and Emanuele Ronchetti (Milan: FrancoAngeli, 2007), 133–69. All four essays include first-person reference and, in addition, second-person address.

5 David Hume, *The Letters of David Hume*, vol. 1, ed. J. Grieg (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1932), 32.

6 Roy Porter, *The Creation of the Modern World: The Untold Story of the British Enlightenment* (London: Norton, 2000), 194.

7 A sample of these works include: Nicholas T. Phillipson, “Adam Smith as Civic Moral-ist,” in *Wealth and Virtue: the Shaping of Political Economy in the Scottish Enlightenment*, ed. Istvan Hont and Michael Ignatieff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 179–202; Richard B. Sher, “Professors of Virtue: The Social History of the Edinburgh Moral Philosophy Chair in the Eighteenth Century,” in *Studies in the Philosophy of the Scottish Enlightenment*, ed. M. A. Stewart (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 87–126; Knud Haakonssen, Introduction to Thomas Reid *Practical Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 3–85; and Charles Griswold, Jr, *Adam Smith and the Virtues of Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

8 Phillipson, “Adam Smith as Civic Moral-ist,” 179.

9 Sher, “Professors of Virtue,” 88.

10 *Ibid.*, 126.

11 Hume, *The Letters of David Hume*, 1:32–3.

12 See, among many examples, Nicholas T. Phillipson, “Adam Smith as Civic Moral-ist,” 180; Mark A. Box, *The Suasive Art of David Hume* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990); Isabel Rivers, *Reason, Grace, and Sentiment*, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), chap. 4; John Immerwahr, “Hume’s Essays on Happiness,” *Hume Studies* 15.2 (1989), 307–24; and Richard Sher, *The Enlightenment and the Book* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 44–5.

13 A review of some relevant arguments in the secondary literature can be found in Kate Abramson’s “Happy to Unite, or Not?” in *Philosophy Compass* 1.3 (2006): 290–302.

14 In the first section of Hume’s *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, he remarks upon a similar distinction between “easy” and “abstruse” philosophy. The goals of “easy” philosophy, whose practitioners include Cicero, La Bruyere, and Addison, include improving moral discernment by placing “opposite characters in a proper context,” “alluring us into the paths of virtue by the views of glory and happiness,” and offering direction by precepts and examples. Abstruse philosophy, alternatively, is meant to form understanding rather than to cultivate manners. It discovers principles of mind and of moral judgment. It rescues learning from “airy sciences” that succor superstition by investigating of the limits of human understanding. See David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (Oxford Philosophical Texts), ed. Tom Beauchamp (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 87–9, and David Hume, *Enquiries concerning Human Understanding and concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, revised by Peter Nidditch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 5–7.

15 David Hume, “Of Essay Writing,” in *Essays: Moral, Political, and Literary*, ed. Eugene F. Miller (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1985), 534–5.

16 Richard Steele and Joseph Addison, *Selections from The Tatler and The Spectator* (London: Penguin Books, 1982), 210. This quote, which comes from *Spectator* #10, references Cicero. See also Shaftesbury, “The Moralists” in *Characteristicks* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2001), II.184: “We have immur’d her [Philosophy] (poor Lady!) in Colleges and Cells; and have set her servilely to such Works as those in the Mines. Empiricks, and pedantick Sophists are her chief Pupils.”

- 17 See, for example, Porter, *The Creation of the Modern World*, 197–201.
- 18 Hume, *Essays* ["The Epicurean"], 138.
- 19 In fact, these are the only set of philosophical monologues of which I am aware in the history of Western philosophy.
- 20 Hume, *Essays* ["The Epicurean"], 138.
- 21 *Ibid.*, 141.
- 22 Part of the rationale for this choice of genre can be found in Hume's essay "Of Simplicity and Refinement in Writing," where he endorses Fontenelle's view of pastorals, which argues that pastorals arise from and indulge the natural pleasure that men have in leisure and love.
- 23 Hume, *Essays* ["The Epicurean"], 141.
- 24 *Ibid.*, 144.
- 25 Hume, *Essays* ["The Stoic"], 152.
- 26 *Ibid.*, 149.
- 27 See Anne Carvey Johnson, "The Pronoun of Direct Address in Seventeenth-Century English," *American Speech* 41.4 (1966): 261–9, and William Evans, "'You' and 'Thou' in Northern England," *South Atlantic Bulletin* 34.4 (1969): 17–21.
- 28 Hume, *Essays* ["The Platonist"], 155–6.
- 29 *Ibid.*, 156.
- 30 *Ibid.*, 157.
- 31 *Ibid.*, 158.
- 32 Donald Siebert, *The Moral Animus of David Hume* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1990), 189.
- 33 *Ibid.*, 190.
- 34 Hume, *Essays* ["The Platonist"], 158.
- 35 The Sceptic is often taken to stand in for Hume. Generally, this seems correct, though the historical relations between Hume and scepticism can be quite complicated. For two excellent accounts of Hume's connection to the philosophical schools of antiquity, see James Moore, "The eclectic stoic, the mitigated skeptic"; and Luigi Turco, "Hutcheson and Hume in a Recent Polemic," in Mazza and Ronchetti, *New Essays on David Hume*, 171–98.
- 36 Hume, *Essays* ["The Sceptic"], 159.
- 37 Hume himself says to Hutcheson when attacking his reliance on final causes: "For pray, what is the End of Man? Is he created for Happiness or for Virtue? For this Life or for the next? For himself or for his Maker?" Hume, *The Letters of David Hume* 1:33.
- 38 As Siebert puts it: "To a degree, this essay is an attack on philosophy's pretensions to regulate conduct, to teach morality, or even to make men happy" (190).

39 Hume, *Essays* ["The Sceptic"], 169.

40 *Ibid.*, 168–9.

41 Hume, *Essays* ["The Sceptic"], 172.

42 *Ibid.*, 172.

43 *Ibid.*, 176.

44 *Ibid.*, 176.

45 *Ibid.*, 180.

46 Siebert, *The Moral Animus of David Hume*, 190.

47 Peter Jones, *Hume's Sentiments* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 1982), 160.

48 See as examples: Siebert, *The Moral Animus of David Hume*, chap. 4, and John Immerwahr, "Hume's Essays on Happiness." In a very interesting recent article on the four essays, James Harris, "Hume's Four Essays on Happiness and Their Place in the Move from Morals to Politics," in Mazza and Ronchetti, *New Essays on David Hume*, 223–35, contends that the Sceptic argues against an assumption of the first three essays "that a votary of any one conception of . . . human happiness might be able to convert us to his point of view by means of reasoning alone" (226). The Sceptic shows instead that "moral philosophy is bereft of the power to detach anyone from the conception of happiness dictated to him by the passions that chance, upbringing and education have saddled him with" (226). Harris employs this reading of the four essays to support a claim about Hume's philosophical career as a whole—that Hume rejects the "prevailing moralism of his day" with his denial that philosophy can improve us morally, while maintaining that philosophy can play a practical role in politics. Political philosophy can be practical in a way that moral philosophy cannot, because political philosophy is only concerned with the relations of means to ends (e.g., peace, stability, and prosperity), not with the ends themselves. There is much to agree with in Harris' account. Yet this reading of the essays seems to misrepresent the way in which the first three essays get re-considered in the face of the Sceptic's critique. It is not that the Epicurean, Stoic, and Platonist defend the practical role of moral philosophy. As my presentation of the essays indicates, they eschew argument and "reasoning alone" in favor of pastoralism, exhortation, and censure. So, though the Sceptic does indeed attack grandiose pretensions of moral philosophy to be 'medicine for the mind,' and though this may tell us important things about Hume's overall project, the real object of criticism in the earlier accounts is in the scope of their claims concerning happiness. The Epicurean, Stoic, and Platonist fail, on my account, not because they think too highly of moral philosophy, but because they take their own ideal for a human life to be applicable to everyone.

49 Immerwahr states it well: "Reading [the four essays] 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" (320).

50 Immerwahr, like other commentators (Siebert is a partial exception), tends to focus on the argumentative content of the essays, which is helpful. But without attending more carefully to the formal features of the essays, the manner in which the essays function to further Hume's goals can be lost.

51 Livingston notes, correctly in my view though without further comment, that the four essays "are so contrived that the reader experiences the seeds of each position in himself." Donald Livingston, *Hume's Philosophy of Common Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 40.

52 Hume, *Essays* ["The Sceptic"], 176. The essays cannot be expected to create moderation where it doesn't exist—philosophy will never be that powerful. What it can do is "fortify" (177) a temper with the germ of moderation already in it.

53 Abramson's "Happy to Unite, or Not?" details the extensive debates concerning Hume's categories of anatomist and painter and shows how commonly scholars rely on those categories.

54 See Colin Heydt, "'A Delicate and an Accurate Pencil': Adam Smith, Description, and Philosophy as Moral Education," *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 25.1 (2008), 57–74.

