

FOUR ESSAYS

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

David Hume

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

First launched: July 2006

Last amended: January 2008

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Glossary

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

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

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

science: organised knowledge of any kind.

soul: mind; it has no religious significance here.

speculative: having to do with matters of fact.

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

Tragedy

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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