

The Reformation of Philosophy and the Cultivation of Taste: An
Interpretation of Hume's *Essays*

by

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This paper will, by way of an examination of Hume's *Essays*, endeavor to relate Hume's critique of philosophy and his efforts to supply a new foundation for the sciences to his endorsement of the study of liberal arts. Of particular relevance here is Hume's essay, "The Sceptic." The title of the essay immediately confronts the reader with a difficulty: does "the sceptic" designate the *topic* of the essay, the *posture* of the author of the essay, or both? Although the essay's title suggests that the essay itself might continue on to adumbrate the characterizing features of a particular philosophic school and its constituents—this essay does, after all, appear alongside essays entitled *The Platonist*, *The Stoic*, and *The Epicurean*—it is quickly made manifest that the essay will be concerned with articulating the grounds for skepticism *regarding* philosophy in general. What, then, are those deficiencies of philosophy which recommend a skeptical disposition towards the entire enterprise?

Hume's first and, perhaps, primary critique of the philosophers can be expressed as follows: Philosophers err in their failure to recognize the basic incongruity of the boundedness of human speculation on the one hand, and the vast multiplicity of nature's processes on the other. In its attempt to provide an articulation of the natural whole, philosophy in fact obfuscates nature through its demand that the great variety of natural phenomena be artificially organized under a small set of rational formulae.

The philosopher's treatment of human life serves as a test case for or, perhaps, as the most conspicuous instantiation of this error. According to Hume, the philosopher fails

to pay due notice to the great variety of inclinations manifest in *human* nature in his determined insistence that “his own pursuits are always...the most engaging, the objects of his passion the most valuable, and the road which he pursues the only one that leads to happiness” (Pg. 95). The philosopher’s failure to recognize the great diversity of human inclinations causes him to prematurely and dogmatically affirm the philosophic life as the best life, precisely because it is the life best suited to his *particular* temperament.

According to Hume’s analysis, philosophy yields but one principle that can be considered “certain and undoubted”: “There is nothing, in itself, valuable or despicable, desirable or hateful, beautiful or deformed; but that these attributes arise from the particular constitution and fabric of human sentiment and affection” (Pg. 97). It turns out, then, that the cardinal philosophic insight is precisely that which Hume faults the philosophers for overlooking in the opening paragraphs of the essay.

Hume likens the diversity of experiences of the “desirable and hateful, beautiful and deformed” to the diversity of judgments with respect to food, and to the privilege which a lover accords to his beloved, and a parent to his child. The insight into the subjectivity of such judgments—into the phenomenon of “taste”—compels us to wonder whether philosophy can make use of this insight in its onward march? Or, can philosophy as pursuit of the universal be modified so as to account for the particularity of human tastes?

Hume ventures an answer to this question, noting in the first place the fundamental difference between natural science and mathematics on the one hand and the “science” of the beautiful and the ugly on the other. To illustrate the point, Hume describes the cast of mind appropriate to the study of astronomy. He writes, “If I examine

the Ptolemaic and Copernican systems, I endeavor to give them, in my conception, the same relations that they bear towards each other in the heavens” (Pg. 99). In the case of natural science, there is a real, if elusive, standard against which the truth or falsity of the mind’s determinations can be brought into relation.

The relationship of the human spectator to the object is markedly different in the case of the beautiful and the ugly, the desirable and the odious. Unlike those natural bodies which are the object of natural science, aesthetic and moral “objects” cannot be studied with a disinterested gaze, since their very apprehension occasions pleasure and pain. The being of these objects depends upon their being a certain way for us—pleasure and pain, praise and blame always supervene with the experience of these aesthetic and moral objects.

Whereas the mind can make use of a natural standard in its pursuit of natural objects, the mind in pursuit of aesthetic objects must recognize that the attribution of aesthetic and moral significance is made possible as a result of the sentiment of the subject, and that “this sentiment must depend upon the *particular* fabric or structure of the mind, which enables such *particular* forms to operate in such a *particular* manner, and produces a sympathy or conformity between the mind and its objects” (Pg. 100, emphasis added). The repeated invocation particularity in this discussion once again gestures towards the earlier mentioned defect of philosophy—in its clumsy effort to apply universal principles to particular instances, it fails to recognize, and therefore to account for, the particular as particular.

To illustrate the insufficiency of an excessively ratiocinating or universalizing account of the beautiful—of an account which fails to collapse the sentiment of the

subject and the aesthetic object—Hume describes the mathematician who reads the *Aeneid* and succeeds in understanding every detail of Aeneas’ voyage yet manages to remain ignorant of its beauty. Hume writes, “He knew, therefore, every thing in the poem: but he was ignorant of its beauty, because the beauty, properly speaking, lies not in the poem, but in the sentiment or taste of the reader.” The mathematician is capable of understanding everything and nothing about the poem simultaneously. The beautiful will remain forever elusive to any inquirer who seeks to locate it in the character of the object alone without considering the way in which the object, if it is in fact an aesthetic object, is conditioned by the peculiar passions of the subject who assigns the epithet, “beautiful or deformed, desirable or odious.”

A turn to the passions ends up being the natural way forward in the wake of Hume’s treatment of philosophy’s shortcomings, since as Hume has already indicated, the passions are at the center of both phenomena that philosophy fails to capture: philosophy fails both to notice and to account for the phenomenon of taste, or in other words, for the multiplicity of human inclinations. Likewise, philosophy fails to account for the phenomenon of beauty because it seeks the principle of beauty in the object rather than in the subject. Philosophy’s failure on both accounts would seem to have much to do with its neglect of the passions—philosophy cannot account for the *particularity* of inclinations and tastes because it cannot account for the particularity of the passions, and philosophy cannot account for the beautiful, because it cannot account for the subjective passions which transform a common object into an aesthetic object.

So at this point in the essay, having already indicated the bankruptcy of every universalizing, object-oriented account of beauty, Hume’s focus shifts towards “passion”

and “enjoyment.” He writes, “All the difference, therefore, between one man and another, with regard to life, consists either in the passion, or in the enjoyment: and these differences are sufficient to produce the wide extremes of happiness and misery.” The character of passion and enjoyment is, then, apparently the key to understanding the very diversity of human inclinations that eludes the philosophers. Recall Hume’s earlier claim that the “infirmity” of philosophers is most conspicuous “in their reasonings concerning human life, and the methods of attaining happiness” (Pg. 95). This riddle can evidently be solved only through meditating on the play of particular passions and the objects towards which are affixed.

Despite the skeptical posture that Hume assumes towards the attempt to apply universal principles to human life, he nevertheless provides a general, if “imperfect sketch” of the passions as they relate to human happiness. According to him, happiness demands that our passions be neither too violent nor too remiss. In addition to this desideratum, enjoyment requires a suitable object. Hume writes, “But where the temper is the best disposed for any enjoyment, the object is often wanting: and in this respect, the passions, which pursue external objects, contribute not so much to happiness as those which rest in ourselves; since we are neither so certain of attaining such objects, nor so secure in possessing them. A passion for learning is preferable, with regard to happiness...” (Pg. 102). Even a moderate temper cannot guarantee enjoyment if that temper is directed towards objects outside of the self—an external focus creates a space for the intervention of fortune’s capricious hand.

Much of the remainder of the essay is concerned with enumerating the reasons for philosophy’s incapacity to *directly* bring about happiness through its instruction. Hume

imagines a man naturally endowed with a “perverse frame of mind” who possesses none of the social passions, is unmoved by an affection for virtue and humanity, and has no particular desire for the applause and esteem of other men. Regarding this unfortunate human type, Hume writes, “I know not how I should address myself to such a one, or by what arguments I should endeavour to reform him...My philosophy affords no remedy in such a case...but then I ask, if any other philosophy can afford a remedy...Experience will soon convince us of the contrary” (Pg. 104). On the basis of this understanding of the utter impotence of philosophic principles to serve as a catalyst for the transformation and refinement of the passions, Hume concludes, “I will venture to affirm, that, perhaps, the chief benefit which results from philosophy, arises in an indirect manner, and proceeds more from its secret insensible influence, than from its immediate application” (Pg. 104). Philosophy’s beneficial effects can be harvested only through *engaging* in philosophy, not through the appropriation of any philosophic doctrine.

To clarify this point, it will be necessary to say a bit more about the specific ways in which participating in philosophy can have a salutary effect upon the passions. Hume’s most explicit statement on the issue goes as follows:

It is certain, that a serious attention to the sciences and liberal arts softens and humanizes the temper, and cherishes those fine emotions, in which true virtue and honour consists. (Pg. 104-105)

Notice, in the first place, that Hume’s discussion has for the moment substituted out philosophy for the science and liberal arts more generally. Serious study of the arts and sciences, by tempering the violent passions, reinforces the virtues that make that life possible to begin with.

The discussion once again turns to address philosophy in particular. The difficulty with philosophy as a solution to the problem of human happiness is that, as beneficial as its indirect effects tend to be, philosophy rarely can rest satisfied with affecting circumstances *only* indirectly. Philosophy all too often transfigures itself into a set of rigid doctrines that, at best, have no effect upon the passions and, at worst, eradicate the good passions along with the bad, thereby standing in the way of the attainment of happiness. Let's begin with the first, benign case. If philosophy turns out to be merely useless it will be on account of the paradoxical nature of all philosophical prescriptions: every theoretical insight passed along as an antidote to the tempestuous passions must be either natural and obvious, or it must be unnatural. If the insight is natural and obvious, the philosophic investigation is simply unnecessary. If the insight is unnatural, it will be useless because incapable of altering the *natural* affections. These sorts of philosophic reflections will prove too remote from practical life to affect any genuine and permanent transformation.

Hume continues on to present a graver possibility still. Even if philosophers *were* able to advance insights capable of affecting human life, the general application of these principles would prove as toxic for the virtuous passions as they are for the vicious. “[Philosophic reflections] are, for the most part, general, and are applicable to all our affections. In vain do we hope to direct their influence only to one side...they will operate throughout, and spread an universal insensibility over the mind” (Pg. 107). It suffices to note that Hume's critique of philosophy always takes the form of a critique of philosophic doctrines.

It looks, therefore, as if his affirmation of philosophy as an activity distinct from the production of universal doctrines is, at bottom, an affirmation of *skeptical* philosophy, and, indeed, Hume's own way of proceeding appears to instantiate this approach. Recall that Hume asks his readers at the outset of the essay to esteem his "opinion" as little as he himself does. This is precisely the opposite disposition as that of the philosophers who are at the center of Hume's critique—those who have such confidence in their doctrines that they dogmatically attempt a universal application. In summary, Hume's skepticism of philosophy engenders, not a wholesale rejection of philosophy, but a critical preparatory step towards the establishment (or, perhaps, reestablishing) of a different way of philosophizing; an approach that is experientially furnished and self-questioning.

At this point, even despite the highly *qualified* character of his recommendation of the life of reflection, the reader may legitimately wonder whether Hume is guilty of reenacting the same error that he faults the philosophers for committing early on in the essay: Hasn't Hume just endorsed his *own* way of life as being the most conducive to happiness in the face of ample evidence that other men are capable of living happy lives without engaging in reflective pursuits? In defense of Hume, allow me to venture a provisional response to this objection: In the first place, Hume demurs from going so far as to say that the life of study is the pleasantest for everyone. It is only so for "some tempers."

A more significant point of difference between Hume and the dogmatic philosophers is that, while the others' endorsement of the philosophic life is premised upon an *ignorance* of the particular passions and their determinative role in bringing about particular enjoyment, Hume's endorsement of the philosophic life is made *on the*

basis of his awareness of the central importance of the passions—his recommendation of philosophy is premised on his claim that engaging in a life devoted to education can indirectly temper and refine the passions, thereby making them more conducive to happiness.

A remaining issue is of course that the life characterized by learning is available only to a small few, and philosophy is of no use to those who are not actively engaged in it. How ought the greater part of humanity to go about refining the passions? It appears as though participation in the liberal arts and sciences may produce an effect similar to that produced by skeptical philosophy. Indeed, skeptical philosophy, as recognizing the significance of passion and particular humor in human life, may very well be extended to actually *include* the arts more generally—Hume’s essays, at very least, would appear to have much in common (at least in their aim) with other works of artistic genius which also endeavor to capture the particular and passion filled character of human experience. An extension of philosophy such that it is able to incorporate the arts also extends the way of life that philosophy represents to a wider swath of humanity—indeed it extends philosophy so far as to, at least potentially, include what Hume calls the “conversable world” which participates in the arts.

Hume’s endorsement of the liberal arts more generally comes to light in relation to his emphasis on the great influence of fortune in human affairs. This point comes out most clearly in Hume’s essay, *Of the Delicacy of Taste and Passion*, in which he draws a distinction between these two different species of delicacy. The delicacy of passion, according to Hume, makes those who possess it “extremely sensible to all the accidents of life, and gives them a lively joy upon every prosperous event, as well as a piercing

grief when they meet with misfortune and adversity” (Pg. 10). This quality gives rise to a volatile temper, very much subject to the whims of particular circumstances. Hume insists that there is no one who would not rather possess a “cool and sedate temper,” since, “Good or ill fortune is very little at our disposal...Great pleasures are much less frequent than great pains” (Pg. 10). Because fortune is not under our command, it will always be well advised to hope for a moderate temper, but the acquisition of such a temper requires that those possessing delicacy of passion make efforts to pacify this peculiar sensibility.

Hume presents a second sensibility, “the delicacy of taste”, as parallel to the first and yet capable of moderating the former’s pernicious effects. Just as delicacy of passion produces a sensitivity to prosperity and adversity, those who possess delicacy of taste are characterized by an acute sensitivity to “beauty and deformity.” The cultivation of delicacy of taste, according to Hume, is the best antidote to delicacy of passion. He writes, “I am persuaded that nothing is so proper to cure us of this delicacy of passion as the cultivating of that higher and more refined taste, which enables us to judge of the characters of men, of the compositions of genius, and of the productions of the nobler arts...and this is a new reason for cultivating a relish in the liberal arts” (Pg. 11). This claim recalls Hume’s statement in *The Sceptic* that the chief triumph of *philosophy* is that “it insensibly refines the temper, and it points out to us those dispositions which we should endeavour to attain, by a constant *bent* of mind, and by repeated *habit*” (Pg. 105).

Cultivating delicacy of taste through engagement with the liberal arts guards men against the adversities of fortune in two slightly different ways: it tempers the extreme passions which threaten to render life intolerable in the face of misfortune, and it requires

us to turn our gaze towards and find satisfaction in works of genius, which are themselves not subject to the cruel determinations of fortune.

This brief digression was intended to expose the kinship between Hume's description of the effect that engagement in the philosophic life has on the passions in *The Sceptic*, and his description of the effect that participation in the liberal arts more generally has upon the same in *Of the Delicacy of Taste and Passion*. The concurrence of these two accounts suggests, to this reader at least, that if Hume does not already regard philosophy and the arts to be intimately related, he certainly appears to be engaged in a project to diminish whatever distance remains between the two. This effort is related to what appears to be a larger project to reform moral philosophy so as to equip it to be capable of addressing human life in all of its particularity. The particularity of human life owes to the particularity of the passions and the objects of those passions, and these passions are as much responsible for the experience of moral beauty as they are for the experience of any other sort of beauty. As such, ethical thinking must be brought into relation with aesthetic thinking, and towards the end of establishing this relationship, the skeptical philosophic approach to human life must become extended to include the study and practice of the arts, the *mimetic* representation of the very passions which set ethical life into motion.

Related to this *philosophic* project to bridge the theoretical gap between moral philosophy and the arts is another *social* project that Hume undertakes to negotiate between the "learned" and "conversable" worlds. The learned world includes the solitary men who are engaged in difficult operations of the mind, while the conversable world includes those who are characterized by "a sociable disposition, and a taste for pleasure,

an inclination for the easier and more gentle exercises of the understanding, for obvious reflections on human affairs” (Pg. 1). The detachment of each of these worlds from the other has a dual effect: It results in the impoverishment of the conversable world and in the utter irrelevance of the learned world, mired down as it is in a theoretical morass of its own making. In short, a conversable world insulated from learning is a world that has nothing to converse about, and a learned world that is sheltered from common life is a world in which genuine learning has either ceased or ceased to be good for life.

That the elimination of the space between these two worlds is a central aim of Hume’s essays is announced in his essay, aptly titled, *Of Essay Writing*. Hume writes,

It is to be hoped that this league betwixt the learned and conversable worlds...will be still further improved to their mutual advantage; and to that end, I know nothing more advantageous than such *Essays* as these with which I endeavor to entertain the public. (Pg. 2)

Hume’s entertaining and accessible essays endeavor to bridge the distance separating these two worlds by stimulating intelligent conversation among the conversable.

These sorts of essays can elevate the minds of those engaged in common life, thus preparing the conversable world for the cultivation of the higher arts which temper the vulgar passions and contribute to the virtuous disposition. A conversable world that is engaged with the liberal arts together with a learned world that recognizes the theoretical need—a need particularly salient for moral philosophy—to meditate on the particularity of common life establishes a fertile ground upon which a reformed, skeptical philosophy which both benefits and benefits from society might blossom and augment the enjoyment of the learned and the conversable alike.