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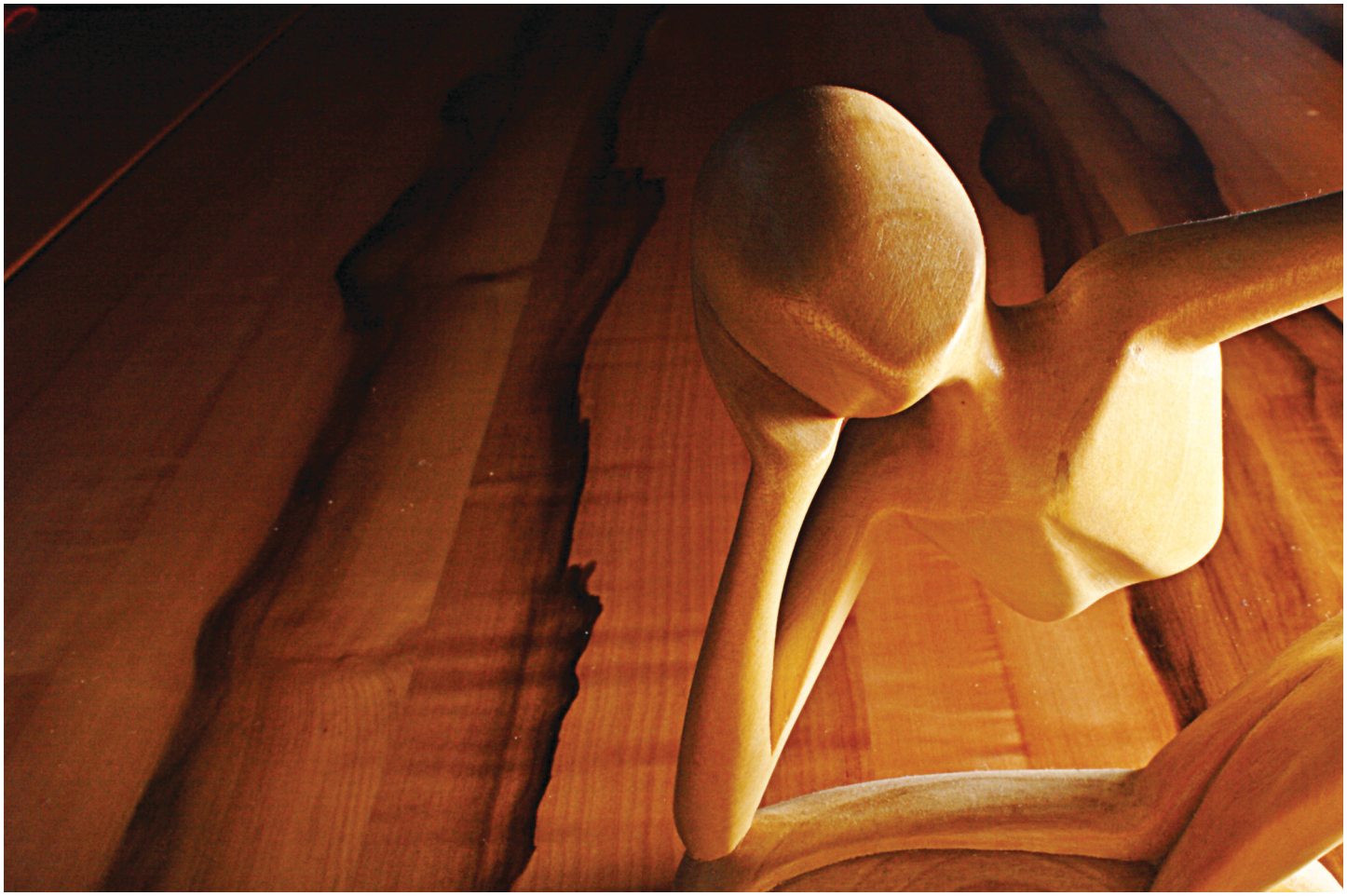
David Hume



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Introduction

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This OpenLearn course provides a sample of Level 2 study in Arts and Humanities.

Learning Outcomes

After studying this course, you should be able to:

- understand the debates in the late Enlightenment concerning suicide, immortality, the nature of evidence, the existence of God and related topics
- understand some characteristic shifts and continuities in the move from Enlightenment ideals towards Romantic ones
- feel confident that study can transform a centuries-old text into an enjoyable, informative, articulate and reasoned discussion of a familiar topic
- examine set readings and appreciate some of its necessary background information.

1 Prelude: Hume's death

In mid-August 1776 crowds formed outside the family home of David Hume. Hume was a pivotal figure in the Scottish Enlightenment, and his imminent death was widely anticipated. The crowds were anxious to know how he was facing up to his coming demise.

Hume is best known today as a historian (through his *History of England* of 1754–62) and a philosopher. His *Treatise of Human Nature* is regarded by many as one of the most significant philosophical works to have been written in English. But when it originally appeared in 1739 it had, in Hume's words, 'fallen dead-born from the press' (Hume, 1962, p. 305). Hume attributed this lack of commercial success to an overly academic style, and set about publishing a more reader-friendly version in the form of two *Enquiries* in 1748 and 1751 (Hume, 1975). He dithered over whether or not to include some new material in the first of these, eventually choosing to do so in a chapter called 'On miracles'. The choice led to instant notoriety. In the chapter he argued that no reasonable person should believe in miracles, particularly not the miracles described in religious scripture. (To his regret, few at the time bothered to read the other parts of the *Enquiries*.)

As a result of that chapter, along with several later essays, Hume became infamous in his day as a critic of 'religious superstition'. His views on religion were rarely published openly, but this did not prevent them becoming known (and often distorted). In 1755 he nearly went too far. In an essay called 'Of the Immortality of the Soul' (which you will be asked to read later in this course) he cast doubt on a doctrine that was, and is, central to most religions: that we survive the death of our bodies. After consulting with some eminent reviewers, his publisher withdrew the essay from the printers. A few pre-publication copies escaped into the public arena all the same, and Hume's scandalous reputation was sealed. The reason people gathered at his home in 1776 was to see if 'the great infidel' would succumb to the promise of an afterlife by recanting his unpopular views.

Samuel Johnson (1709–84) was a defender of the solace provided by thoughts of an afterlife, and had anticipated this moment as early as 1768. His biographer James Boswell (1740–95) reports the following exchange:

> *Boswell:* David Hume said to me he was no more uneasy to think he should *not be* after this life, than that he *had not been* before he began to exist.
>
> *Johnson:* Sir, if he really thinks so, his perceptions are disturbed; he is mad. If he does not think so, he lies. He may tell you he holds his finger in the flame of a candle, without feeling pain; would you believe him? When he dies, he at least gives up all that he has.

Figure 1 Joseph Wright of Derby, The Old Man and Death, 1773, oil on canvas, 101.6 x 127 cm, Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford. Photo: reproduced by courtesy of Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, CT, Ella Gallup Sumner and Mary Catlin Sumner Collection

Many would regard fear at his approaching death as indicating Hume to be disingenuous in his scepticism about religion: to deny God was to risk damnation. But Hume had in fact dismissed many years earlier the supposition that mortal fear indicated belief in an afterlife (see section 4), claiming it should properly be seen as attachment to one's present and only existence.

Fear of death is the theme of the painting by Wright of Derby (1734–97). The skeleton, presumably taken from an anatomical print, would have been more alarming, or at least less funny, two centuries ago, but the fear on the man's face is clear enough. The painting is based on a fable by Aesop called *Death and the Woodsman*, as adapted in one of a popular series of poems by Jean de la Fontaine (1621–95). The moral of the painting is expressed in the final lines of the poem:

A poor woodsman, covered in foliage,

Burdened by branches and years,

Groaning and bent, walks in heavy steps,

Struggling to reach his smoky cottage.

Finally, out of energy and in great pain,

He lays down his load and ponders his misery.

'What pleasure have I had since entering this world?

Is anyone on this globe worse off?

So often without bread, never any rest!'

His wife, his children, soldiers, tax officers,
Debt, and drudgery
Complete for him this image of misfortune.
He calls on Death, who comes without delay,
Asking what is required.
'I want you', he says, 'to help me
Reload this wood. Then you can go.'
Death cures all;
But let us not hurry things along.
Sooner to suffer than to die,
That is the maxim of men.

(*Fontaine, 1946, pp. 19–21; trans. Barber and Poirier*)

> *Boswell:* Foote, Sir, told me that when he was very ill he was not afraid to die.
>
> *Johnson:* It is not true, Sir. Hold a pistol to Foote's breast, or to Hume's breast, and threaten to kill them, and you'll see how they behave.
>
> (*Boswell, 1986, p. 148*)

Eight years later, Boswell travelled to Hume's house with 'a strong curiosity to be satisfied if he persisted in disbelieving a future state even when he had death before his eyes' (Wain, 1990, p. 247).

Boswell found Hume to be:

> lean, ghastly, and quite of an earthy appearance. He was dressed in a suit of grey cloth with white metal buttons, and a kind of scratch wig. He was quite different from the plump figure which he used to present … He seemed to be placid and even cheerful … He said he was just approaching to his end … He then said flatly that the morality of every religion was bad, and, I really thought, was not jocular when he said that when he heard a man was religious, he concluded he was a rascal … I asked him if it was not possible that there might be a future state. He answered it was possible that a piece of coal put upon the fire would not burn; and he added that it was a most unreasonable fancy that we should exist for ever … I left him with impressions which disturbed me for some time.
>
> (Wain, 1990, pp. 247–50)

The economist Adam Smith (1723–90) was a close friend and colleague of Hume, and reported the same high spirits in letters first to Hume himself (22 August 1776):

> You have, in a declining state of health, under an exhausting disease, for more than two years together now looked at the approach of death with a steady cheerfulness such as very few men have been able to maintain for a few hours, though otherwise in the most perfect health.
>
> (*Mossner and Ross, 1987, p.206*)

and later to Hume's literary executor, William Strahan (9 November 1776):

His symptoms, however, soon returned with their usual violence, and from that moment he gave up all thoughts of recovery, but submitted with the utmost cheerfulness, and the most perfect complacency and resignation. Upon his return to Edinburgh, though he found himself much weaker, yet his cheerfulness never abated and he continued to divert himself, as usual, with correcting his own works for a new edition, with reading books of amusement, with the conversation of his friends; and, sometimes in the evening, with a party at his favourite game of whist. His cheerfulness was so great, and his conversation and amusements run so much in their usual strain, that, notwithstanding all bad symptoms, many people could not believe he was dying. 'I shall tell your friend, Colonel Edmondstone,' said Doctor Dundas to him one day, 'that I left you much better, and in a fair way of recovery.' 'Doctor,' said he, 'as I believe you would not choose to tell anything but the truth, you had better tell him that I am dying as fast as my enemies, if I have any, could wish, and as easily and cheerfully as my best friends could desire.' …

I told him that, though I was sensible how very much he was weakened, and that appearances were in many respects very bad, yet his cheerfulness was still so great, the spirit of life seemed still to be so very strong in him, that I could not help entertaining some faint hopes. He answered, 'Your hopes are groundless. An habitual diarrhoea of more than a year's standing, would be a very bad disease at any age: at my age it is a mortal one. When I lie down in the evening, I feel myself weaker than when I rose in the morning; and when I rise in the morning, weaker than when I lay down in the evening. I am sensible, besides, that some of my vital parts are affected, so that I must soon die.'

'Well,' said I, 'if it must be so you have at least the satisfaction of leaving all your friends, your brother's family in particular, in great prosperity.' He said that he felt that satisfaction so sensibly, that when he was reading, a few days before, Lucian's *Dialogues of the Dead*, among all the excuses which are alleged to Charon for not entering readily into his boat he could not find one that fitted him; he had no house to finish, he had no daughter to provide for, he had no enemies upon whom he wished to revenge himself. 'I could not well imagine', said he, 'what excuse I could make to Charon in order to obtain a little delay. I have done everything of consequence which I ever meant to do, and I could at no time expect to leave my relations and friends in a better situation than that in which I am now likely to leave them; I, therefore, have all reason to die contented.' He then diverted himself with inventing several jocular excuses, which he supposed he might make to Charon, and with imagining the very surly answers which it might suit the character of Charon to return to them. 'Upon further consideration', said he, 'I thought I might say to him: "Good Charon, I have been correcting my works for a new edition. Allow me a little time, that I may see how the public receives the alterations." But Charon would answer, "When you have seen the effect of these, you will be for making other alterations. There will be no end of such excuses; so, honest friend, please step into the boat." But I might still urge, "Have a little patience, good Charon. I have been endeavouring to open the eyes of the public. If I live a few years longer, I may have the satisfaction of seeing the downfall of some of the prevailing systems of superstition." But Charon would then lose all temper and decency. "You loitering rogue, that will not happen these many hundred years. Do you fancy I will grant you a lease for so long a term? Get into the boat this instant, you lazy loitering rogue."

(Mossner and Ross, 1987, pp. 217–21)

Charon is a character in Greek mythology (later recorded and satirised by the Greek writer Lucian) who ferries often reluctant souls across the river Styx to Hades on their journey to an afterlife.

Hume died shortly after this reported exchange.

See Plate 1 (portrait of David Hume by Allan Ramsay, 1713–84), which relates to the comment below.

Lord Charlemont said of Hume: 'Nature, I believe, never formed any man more unlike his real character than David Hume … The powers of physiognomy were baffled by his countenance; neither could the most skilful in that science pretend to discover the smallest trace of the faculties of his mind in the unmeaning features of his visage. His face was broad and fat, his mouth wide and without any other expression than that of imbecility. His eyes vacant and spiritless, and the corpulence of his whole person was far better fitted to communicate the idea of a turtle-eating alderman than of a refined philosopher' (quoted in Warburton, 2002, p. 41).

Spiritless though his eyes may have been, his vacant stare had disturbing effects. The **philosophe** d'Alembert advised him in 1766: 'It is not necessary to gaze intently at the people you are speaking to … it might play you a nasty trick'. It did. After a collapse in their friendship, Rousseau wrote of Hume: 'The external features and the demeanour of *le bon* David denote a good man. But where, Great God, did this good man get those eyes with which he transfixes his friends?' Hume's 'ardent and mocking' stare so unnerved Rousseau on their last evening together, he claimed, that he attempted to stare back but fell into a 'giddy and confused state', leading to their split. Hume claimed to be unaware of his habit (quotations in this paragraph Mossner, 1980, pp. 477, 529, 522 respectively).

Click to view Plate 1: Allan Ramsay, *David Hume*, 1766, oil on canvas, 76.2 x 63.5 cm, Scottish National Portrait Gallery, Edinburgh. Photo: SNPG/Bridgeman Art Library

Hume's reportedly high spirits in the face of death struck a dissonant chord with many of his religious opponents. Johnson insisted to Boswell that Hume must have been pretending to be cheerful (Boswell, 1971, p.155). The following comment on Adam Smith's letter to Strahan was sent anonymously to the *Weekly Magazine, or Edinburgh Amusement* (*1777*, vol.36, pp. 139–41):

> Doubtless the doctor [i.e. Smith] intends a panegyric upon his friend; but in truth the publication of his frolicsome behavior in dying is a satire which must expose Mr Hume's memory to the pity, if not to the contempt, of the truly wise … From the doctor's narrative of Mr Hume's dying behavior, a Christian cannot easily allow that the concluding eulogy of his character fairly follows. [In his letter, Smith had described Hume as 'approaching as nearly to the idea of a perfectly wise and virtuous man, as perhaps the nature of human frailty will permit'.] … It is an affecting picture the doctor exhibits to view. A man of distinguished intellectual powers acting the fool at his end – dying indecently humorous – … dying in a manner that betrayed the darkest ignorance of an *Indian savage* … Can anything be more frivolous, more childish, more indecently wanton and presumptuous in a dying man, perceiving himself on the verge of time, than Mr Hume's sportful dialogue with Charon? … We are told that Mr Hume was quite resigned. Resigned! To what? Not to the will of God … How miserable the

> comforter, who could minister no other consolation to his dying friend, than that he was to leave his friends in great prosperity!… Compare together a sceptical philosopher and a scripture saint in dying, and see the abject meanness into which the one sinks, the grandeur, in hope of everlasting glory, to which the other rises.

Reacting to the same letter by Smith, the Bishop of Norwich, George Horne (1730–92), wrote anonymously to Adam Smith in 1777. Though addressed to individuals, such letters were in effect public statements (this one was eventually published in Horne, 1806, pp. xvii–xxi):

> You have been lately employed in embalming a philosopher - his *body*, I believe I must say, for concerning the other part of him, neither you nor he seem to have entertained an idea, sleeping or waking …
>
> Sir, friend as I am to freedom of opinion, … I am rather sorry, methinks, that men should judge so *variously* of Mr Hume's philosophical speculations. For since the design of them is to banish out of the world every idea of truth and comfort, salvation and immortality, a future state, and the providence and even existence of God, it seems a pity that we cannot be all of a mind about them, though we might have formerly liked to hear the author crack a joke, over a bottle, in his lifetime. And I would have been well pleased to have been informed by you, Sir, that, before his death, he had ceased to number among his happy effusions tracts of this kind and tendency …
>
> Are *you* sure, and can you make *us* sure, that there really exist no such things as a God, and a future state of rewards and punishments? If so, all is well. Let us *then*, in our last hours, read Lucian, and play at whist, and droll upon [i.e. joke about] Charon and his boat; let us die as foolish and insensible, as much like our brother philosophers, the calves of the field and the asses of the desert, as we can … But if such things *be* [i.e. if God and a future state exist], as they most certainly are, is it right in you, Sir, to hold up to our view, as 'perfectly wise and virtuous', the *character* and *conduct* of one who seems to have been possessed with an incurable antipathy to all that is called religion; and who strained every nerve to explode, suppress, and extirpate the spirit of it among men, that its very name, if he could effect it, might no more be had in remembrance? Are we, do you imagine, to be reconciled to a character of this sort, and fall in love with it, because its owner was *good company*, and knew how to manage his *cards?* Low as the age is fallen, I will venture to hope it has grace enough yet left to resent such usage as this.

The vehemence and explicitness of these and other attacks on Hume's character is at odds with the charity often extended to those who have recently died. Ten years later Smith expressed his amazement at the reaction to Hume's temperament before his death, and to his own description of it in the letter to Strahan:

> A single, and as I thought, a very harmless sheet of paper which I happened to write concerning the death of our late friend, Mr Hume, brought upon me ten times more abuse than the very violent attack I had made upon the whole commercial system of Great Britain [i.e. Smith's *The Wealth of Nations*, 1776, a groundbreaking work in economics].
>
> (*Quoted in Scott, 1937, p. 283*)

2 From enlightenment to romanticism

2.1 Working through the section

This section examines Hume's reasons for being complacent in the face of death, as these are laid out in his suppressed essay of 1755, 'Of the Immortality of the Soul'. More generally, they examine some of the shifts in attitude concerning death and religious belief that were taking place in Europe at the end of the eighteenth century, through examination of this and other short essays.

These changes were wide ranging and driven by many factors. Religion touched every aspect of cultural life, as you will witness. The focus for the present course will be on debates surrounding the existence of God and an afterlife and the moral permissibility of suicide. These discussions are as fascinating today as they were then, but beyond this they shed light on the altering shape of the commitment to **reason**. Commitment to a particular conception of reason came under increasing strain as the century progressed, and this strain shows up well in the present context.

You will be looking at two short texts by David Hume (1711–76) Unlike the letters seen in the prelude, these pieces do not address one another explicitly. That said, many of the notions, arguments and assertions discussed were in the air at the time, and at a number of points they offer what are in effect replies to one another. Such disagreements will be highlighted in my commentary.

Opinions and disputes are as much a part of the cultural life of a society as paintings, music and literature. Just as portraits, operas and novels can be interpreted and evaluated, so can contributions to a debate. This was especially true during the mid-to-late eighteenth century, the culmination of the Age of Reason. At no time in European history has the importance of reasoned opinion been given greater recognition than it was then, save perhaps in classical antiquity, a period looked back on at the time with such admiration precisely because of this fact.

It was in the written medium that the precision required for these particular debates could be most readily achieved, so written texts will be our primary focus. But the images accompanying this course indicate the extent to which intellectual debates were given vivid expression in media other than the written word. If nothing else, they served to carry certain messages home. That is one way in which they will be used here, and you should not treat the images and the associated comments as mere decoration. These comments will occasionally offer interpretations of the images that are tentative or that do not necessarily capture what was central to the painter's intentions; their main purpose will be to supplement my commentary.

One of the few commitments the writers of this time had in common was the need to persuade their reader, not merely through the use of elegant turns of phrase but through transparent and effective reasoning. In view of this, any proper engagement with these texts must involve a suitable response to these attempts at reasoned persuasion. In several of the exercises I encourage you to enter the fray and develop your own opinion of the matter under discussion. By the end of your work on these sections you ought to be in a better position to understand, compare and assess the views presented and defended in the readings. In other words, you should have become a participant in the discussion.

The readings have not been selected as typical for their time and context. On the contrary, each departs from the prevalent norms in unpredictable and often surprising ways, and always at personal cost to the author. Hume's deviation from religious norms cost him dearly in his professional life in Scotland, which was heavily Calvinist.

Their atypicality does not prevent the readings from being used as vehicles for the appreciation of tendencies in that period. Studying cultural history would be a dull process if it consisted of being given a checklist of themes to mark off against a series of typical cultural artefacts. The pieces you will be reading have been chosen because of their enduring value as contributions to a discussion; their service in the illustration and explanation of cultural trends would have been a happy by-product from the author's' perspectives.

Because our authors were writing more than 200 years ago, their style is likely to be unfamiliar. Eighteenth-century prose had different punctuation, spelling and grammatical rules, and sentences could be long, complex and mannered. Punctuation and spelling have been modernised in the anthology, but there is no getting around the other factors.

Exercise 1

You have been exposed to eighteenth-century English already in the letters in the prelude. Reread the letter from George Horne to Adam Smith. Aim to appreciate the prose itself and not merely to pick up the general drift of his remarks. A good test of your having done this is if you can read it out aloud as if saying it yourself, putting the stress in the appropriate places.

Hopefully you will come to enjoy this elegantly expressed diatribe (without necessarily agreeing with its claims). You would not be alone if you found it takes time to come to terms with stylistic conventions of the eighteenth century. You will have further practice.

You should eventually expect to become practised at confronting and interpreting historical documents without the crutch provided by a running commentary, but at this stage the strategy will be to ask you to read the original documents only *after* you have been told what to expect to find contained within them. This strategy may give rise to a temptation to rely on the commentary and read the primary material less thoroughly than you otherwise would. If you ever feel the force of such a temptation, do not succumb! It is your engagement with the texts themselves that matters; the commentary matters only to the extent that it helps you to do this in a rewarding way. The exercises are designed with this in mind, and can normally be tackled only after the relevant portion of text has been read.

3 The intellectual background

3.1 Introduction

Hume often assumes familiarity with views that were popular at the time of writing. To have done otherwise would have been tedious for the original readership. Many of these views are no longer so widespread, so in this section I want to describe three features of the eighteenth-century intellectual backdrop against which all the readings were written. The three features are: **empiricism** (a view about knowledge), **deism** (a view about religious belief), and the main **arguments for the existence of God**.

3.2 Empiricism

The Enlightenment is also known as the Age of Reason, but it was a very specific conception of reason that held sway. Seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe had seen a boom in knowledge brought about by the birth of modern science. This boom was accompanied by both optimism and a wish to identify what it was that investigators were suddenly getting right. What was it about science that made it so reasonable, and hence so successful?

See Plate 2 (*Lecture on the Orrery in which a Candle is used to create an Eclipse* by Joseph Wright of Derby), which relates to the comment below.

This painting shows a scientist (who perhaps intentionally resembles the physicist Isaac Newton, 1642–1727) giving a lecture using an orrery, a model of the solar system. Reverence for science is manifest in several ways. First, the demonstration, surrounded by the darkness of ignorance and prejudice, is giving off the light of knowledge. This distribution of light expresses what was seen as positive about science: its capacity to fight against ignorance and prejudice. (The metaphor of light was eventually adopted in the labels for the Age of Reason in all the main European languages, e.g. *le siecle des lumieres* in French, *Aufklarung* in German, *illuminismo* in Italian, and *Enlightenment* in English.) Second, the heads of the characters are themselves like planets rotating around the sun. This is perhaps intended to suggest optimism about the progress being made in the early scientific study of humanity itself. And third, the variety in age and sex of the people in the picture suggests that science could infiltrate and benefit the whole of society.

In many of Wright's paintings, including his *An Experiment on a Bird in the Air Pump* (1768), admiration of science was tempered by a fear of the power of this new knowledge, and uncertainty about the unquenchable thirst it could give rise to. In this instance, however, his representation seems to be wholly favourable.

Click to view Plate 2: Joseph Wright of Derby, *Lecture on the Orrery in which a Candle is used to create an Eclipse*, 1766, oil on canvas, 147.3 x 203 cm, Derby Museum and Art Gallery. Photo: reproduced by courtesy of Derby Museum and Art Gallery/Bridgeman Art Library/John Webb

Many hoped to be able to classify *all* opinion as either reasonable or unreasonable according to how it compared with scientific opinion. An opinion would be classified as reasonable if arrived at in the same fashion as scientific opinions; it would be classified as unreasonable if arrived at in some other, less reputable fashion (e.g. superstition, reliance on tradition, idle speculation, etc.). But before this splitting of opinions into the reasonable and the unreasonable could be achieved, an explanation was needed of scientific success. The hunt was on for the magic ingredient that constituted the essence of the scientific attitude.

The most popular account of what set this new scientific age apart from the pre-Enlightenment era was and is *empiricism* (a nineteenth-century term). The backbone of empiricism is a simple claim:

> *Empiricism* (*roughly characterised*)*:* opinions are reasonable if, and only if, they are supported by evidence that is ultimately grounded in experience.

'Experience', here, can mean everyday observation using one or more of the five senses, but it is also meant to include rigorous scientific experimentation. Respect for this principle is what supposedly sets the scientific age apart from the pre-scientific age. In that earlier age, unsupported speculation was purportedly rampant; since the scientific revolution, experience served to constrain such speculation.

Figure 2 Louis-Leopold Boilly, Les Cinq Sens (The Five Senses), 1823, colour lithograph, 21 x 18cm. Photo: © Leonard de Selva/CORBIS

Empiricists claimed that experience was the source of all genuine knowledge; claims that didn't ultimately spring from the senses were to be dismissed as fanciful. This caricatured personification (Figure 2) of the senses reveals how not everyone was so convinced of the effectiveness of scientific methods at yielding all the truth and only the truth.

Expressed more negatively, empiricists are claiming that we should refuse to accept as true anything that has not been observed to be true. By this criterion, many religious doctrines are no more than unsupported speculation. Empiricists often denounced them as such in the period under discussion.

Empiricism as expressed in the simplified statement above has some embarrassing consequences. Moral and mathematical platitudes (e.g. that torturing people for fun is morally objectionable, or that 55 plus 55 necessarily equals 110) do not seem to require observational support, yet few would be prepared to denounce these judgements as unreasonable. The evidence for these and other reasonable opinions must come from some other source than the senses.

Empiricists tried to get around this difficulty in a variety of ways. They were anxious not to create any excuses for a return to the unscientific guesswork of previous eras, but were

forced to acknowledge a limited role for reasoning that was not simply a response to experience. Though it would be interesting to look at the details of their efforts, this would take us too far afield. For our purposes it will be enough to sum up the empiricist agenda as follows: all opinions should be rejected unless backed up with evidence that is grounded *either* in experience *or* in one of some small number of permitted principles of abstract reasoning (e.g. mathematical principles).

Hume was empiricism's most eloquent advocate, as these uncompromising closing words of his *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748) show:

> When we run over libraries, persuaded of these [empiricist] principles, what havoc must we make? If we take in our hand any volume, of divinity or school metaphysics for instance, let us ask: *Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number? No. Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence? No*. Commit it then to the flames, for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion.
>
> (Hume, 1975, p. 165)

The reference to flames, here, is almost certainly just a dramatic device. Enlightenment thinkers were or ought to have been hostile to censorship of opinion. For one thing, they held that reason and not force should be what determines public opinion. For another, most of them had themselves suffered censorship or repercussions for having published unpopular ideas. In actual fact, Hume did on at least one occasion seek to suppress material he found objectionable: in 1764 he tried and failed to prevent the publication of a mocking review of a friend's book by Voltaire (Mossner, 1980, p. 412). But whether he really wanted to burn library books for failing to pass his test is not relevant to our concerns. What is relevant is just that, in Hume's view, such books are entirely without value.

The empiricists' uncompromising attitude had risks as well as benefits. The benefits were evident in the explosive growth in scientific knowledge of the world about us and increasingly of ourselves. The main risk was that, by setting such high standards on what can permissibly count as a reasonable belief, empiricists would end up having to abandon many dearly held beliefs. Opinions on topics that weren't susceptible to empirical (i.e. scientific, experience-based) investigation would need to be dropped, leaving us floundering in ignorance on many important matters.

Hume claimed that such scepticism is really just realism about our predicament. On a wide number of topics – whether the sun will rise tomorrow, whether we have souls, whether these souls survive the death of our bodies, whether the external world exists – he insisted that, though we are unable to stop ourselves holding opinions, these opinions are not ones to which we are properly entitled. Hume's philosophy was a high water mark for classical empiricism. Rightly or wrongly, most of those who came after him were not prepared to embrace his resulting scepticism. They began instead to search for and defend alternative sources of evidence – alternative to the evidence of the senses, that is. By the late eighteenth century, the empiricists' rigidity on this matter was beginning to unravel.

3.3 Deism

In the readings you will often come across allusions to the contrast between **revealed religion** and **natural religion** (or deism). The distinction turns on what the nature of the

evidence is for a particular religious outlook. Deism is a form of natural religion that was prevalent in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe.

The evidence underpinning revealed religion typically consists of a god supposedly revealing himself (or herself or itself) to an individual or small number of individuals, perhaps on a unique occasion. The report in scripture of, for example, a burning bush speaking to Moses, where the voice is said to have had a divine source, is revelatory evidence.

Natural religion, by contrast, is based exclusively on non-revelatory evidence. In particular, it does not call for acceptance of the testimony of a single individual, an organisation or a religious text. It is 'natural' in the sense that the evidence for it is available to all of us as reasoning and experiencing human beings; it is not a special privilege of some subset of humanity.

A helpful way to think of the difference is to imagine what it would be like if all bibles, all priests, all mullahs, all torahs and all holy relics, etc. disappeared overnight, along with all our memories of their ever having existed. Any evidence of God's existence and character that would survive such a disappearance is natural evidence, not revelatory evidence. Natural religion consists solely of doctrines that are supposedly supported by natural evidence. You may be wondering what evidence for God's existence would remain once mosques, churches, popes, rabbis, and so forth are set to one side. As it happens there are several traditional arguments for the existence of God that do not appeal to the trappings of established religion (see below). It is to these that deists looked in defending their views.

For our purposes we can divide the main religious perspectives available at the time into four:

1. *Atheists* denied that there was any god.
2. *Agnostics* denied that there is sufficient evidence for or against God's existence; they abstained from believing either in his existence or in his non-existence. Hume insisted he was an agnostic rather than an atheist.
3. *Deists* believed that we have natural, non-revelatory evidence of God's existence and nature. Several of the *philosophes* had deist leanings, Voltaire, d'Alembert, and Rousseau being the most notable among them. None had anything but scorn for revelatory evidence.
4. *Revealed religion* was adopted by those who accepted the testimony of scripture, and in particular of the Bible as interpreted by the established churches.

The Enlightenment movement as a whole was an accelerated part of a drift away from appeals to authority that has continued in western culture to this day. Entrusting oneself and one's opinions to the dictates of an institutional religion was anathema to such thinking. All the old authorities, including the Church, were held to be subject to the authority of reason tempered by experience. Inevitably, there were exceptions such as Samuel Johnson, quoted above, but it is undeniable that pressure on the Church was growing in this period.

3.4 Proving God's existence

Deists had at their disposal three traditional ways of arguing for the existence of God.

The most popular in the late eighteenth century was the **argument from design** (also known as the *teleological argument*, from the Greek word *telos*, meaning end or purpose).

This argument begins with an observation: the world around us is not chaotic but ordered and harmonious. Some examples: whenever the tide comes in it goes out again shortly after; without an ability to inhale air we could not survive, but we have lungs so we can; plants need to be pollinated to survive, and bees do it for them, benefiting in turn from the nectar. According to proponents of the argument from design, the only plausible explanation of all this observable order and harmony involves supposing that an intelligent, benign and all-powerful being – God, in other words – created the universe.

Notice that this argument does not depend on accepting the Gospels as true. This is what makes it useable by a deist. Someone who used it enthusiastically was Voltaire. In the following passage from a book introducing Newton's empirical discoveries to the French world (*Elements de la philosophie de Newton*, 1738), he suggests that Newton's law of gravitation was proof of God's presence in the world:

> The whole philosophy of Newton leads of necessity to the knowledge of a Supreme Being, who created everything, arranged all things of his own free will … If matter gravitates, as has been proved, it does not do so by virtue of its very nature, as it is extended by reason of its nature. Therefore it received gravitation from God. If the planets rotate through empty space in one direction rather than another, their creator's hand, acting with complete freedom, must have guided their course in that direction.
>
> (*Quoted in Hampson, 1968, p. 79*)

Voltaire's thought here is that God's will is evident in the fact that all of nature, without exception, obeys the simple laws discovered by Newton.

A second popular argument for God's existence was the **cosmological argument**. As with the argument from design, the hypothesis that God exists is adopted as the only plausible explanation of an observable phenomenon. This time the observable phenomenon is not order and harmony but motion in the material universe (or the 'cosmos'). Something must have made things move in the first place, and God is an obvious suspect. In this guise he is sometimes referred to as the 'first mover'.

According to a variant of the cosmological argument, God is needed to explain not only motion in the universe but the very existence of the universe. God, conceived of as the all-powerful creator, once again fits the bill.

The third traditional argument for the existence of God, known as the ***ontological argument***, was out of fashion at this time, perhaps because it did not rest upon empirical observation. It will not figure in these courses, but for the sake of completeness it goes like this: God is, by definition, a perfect being. He is 'that being than which no more perfect being can be conceived'. So he cannot possess anything but perfect properties. Since the property of not existing would be an imperfection, God cannot possess it. Therefore he must exist.

See Plate 3 (portrait of Isaac Newton by William Blake, 1757–1827), which relates to the comment below.

Painted a decade or more after the period with which these courses are concerned, Blake's portrait shows Newton at work modelling the cosmos, and unlike Wright's Orrery painting (Plate 2) is filled with religious intent. But this is not an easy work to interpret, and indeed there is no agreed way of reading Blake's intentions here.

On first examination it seems as though Blake is following Voltaire in claiming that we can discover God through Newton's laws using the argument from design. Nature, behind

Newton, is more powerful than he is, seeming to embody a higher being; this higher being is then represented on the page with Newton serving almost as a kind of magnifying glass. And on the page we see, in place of Newton's laws, a graphical representation of the Trinity.

But Blake is known to have been hostile to the widespread lionisation of Newton as the man who has revealed the underlying nature of reality. This suggests we should look for a different interpretation. A possible clue is in the way Newton is made to resemble Adam in Michelangelo's *Creation of Adam* (1508–12). As Newton is creating a diagram on the page, so God is creating Newton. But Newton is oblivious to all of this as he peers at his page; he is looking the wrong way. Were he to turn around and use his imagination, he would see his creator in nature. Instead he is reason's slave. Using his intellect and outer senses alone, he has sought to regiment nature into a tiny number of laws and measurements, erasing all trace of God in the process; and yet from his relatively puny 'Laws of Nature' he is desperately attempting to reproduce religious knowledge. Blake himself made the same claim in a related text: 'He who sees the Infinite in all things, sees God. He who sees the Ratio only, sees himself only' (*There is no Natural Religion*, 1788, quoted in Butlin, 1983, p. 7). Blake's position is the precise opposite of Voltaire's.

Click to view Plate 3: William Blake, *Isaac Newton*, c.1795, colour print finished in ink and watercolour on paper, Tate Gallery, London. Photo: © Tate, London 2002

4 Hume on life after death

4.1 Why was our immortality an issue?

When reading about Hume's death you may have been puzzled as to why people became so worked up about Hume's attitude. The question of what, if anything, happens after death is something most of us are at least curious about, just as most of us are curious to know what we will be doing in a few years' time. But curiosity cannot explain the venom evident in the condemnations of Hume.

The reason for the hostility can be approached by considering the opera *Don Giovanni*. The opera is, on the surface at least, a morality tale. The bulk of the opera consists of Don Giovanni refusing to acknowledge an unwelcome implication of his actions: eternal damnation. The narrative of the opera would be meaningless without the scene in which he is made to recognise his lifelong selfishness through confrontation with its consequences. The statue of Donna Anna's father is chosen as the symbol of his entrance into hell precisely because it is also symbolic of his reckless existence. This aspect of the story brings out what was so important about the assumption of an afterlife in a Christian context: the afterlife plays an important moral role. It is where accounts are settled and justice is done. Don Giovanni is made to pay for his sinful existence. If there were no afterlife, justice could not be done.

The mortality of the soul – the failure of the individual to survive beyond the demise of her or his body – would have been an intolerable supposition for many at the time because it would remove this scope for justice's execution. No longer could those who behaved wickedly in this life be made to suffer in the next; no longer could those who behaved well or who suffered in this life be rewarded or compensated in the next.

The disappearance of justice would be bad enough, but the perceived consequences of such a disappearance are likely to have compounded the anxiety and animosity of Hume's critics. For example, belief in the soul's mortality, were it to become widespread, would lead to a breakdown in the moral order as people lost the incentive to behave morally. Few would be willing to put up with suffering on earth without the prospect of reward in heaven. Another feature of Hume's position is that a less than perfectly just universe reflects poorly on God the creator. Hume's claim that when his body dies he would die with it was taken to suggest that God himself was incapable of acting justly.

Hume did not take himself to be insulting God's design, for the simple reason that he saw no reason to suppose God exists in the first place. This agnostic stance was argued for elsewhere by Hume, notably in *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (1750) and 'Of miracles' (in *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 1748). The first of these has become the classic statement of the case against the argument from design and the cosmological argument. We will not be considering Hume's broader **agnosticism** here, since it is not presupposed in 'Of the immortality of the soul'. In this essay Hume takes the unusual approach of granting that God exists, and then arguing that *even so* there are no grounds for the assumption that we survive bodily death.

Click to view Of the Immortality of the Soul

Exercise 2

Read the short opening paragraph of this essay. The essay has three subsections. Try to predict from this paragraph what the structure and conclusion of the essay will be.

Hume distinguishes and names three potential reasons for assuming that individuals survive the death of their bodies: a ‘metaphysical’ reason, a ‘moral’ reason and a ‘physical’ reason. He will present and refute these three reasons in turn, one per section. A fourth reason for assuming the existence of an afterlife is that this is what it says in the Bible. Hume's explicit conclusion, then, is that we should be grateful to the Gospels for revealing to us something that otherwise we would be ignorant of. You can confirm this by looking at the final paragraph.

Hume's explicit conclusion and what he *really* wants to claim – his implicit conclusion – are not the same thing. To understand what the implicit conclusion is, recall again how the Enlightenment was characterised by a shift away from revealed religion and towards either natural religion (especially deism) or outright agnosticism/atheism. It is against this background that Hume's essay should be read. Hume argues explicitly that there are no reasons *save those given to us by revelation* for believing in the immortality of the soul. To Hume's readership, many of whom would have shared his assumption that the only real competition is between natural religion and no religion, this is tantamount to saying that there are in fact no reasons at all for believing in life after death.

Hume pays no more than lip service to the possibility that we should take it on trust from the Bible that the soul is immortal, once in the opening paragraph and again in the final one. Readers of the final paragraph would have detected the ironic tone in Hume's claim that we are infinitely indebted to divine revelation (i.e. religion as revealed in the Bible) for letting us in on the ‘great and important truth’ of our immortality, which ‘no other medium could ascertain’.

With this subtlety recognised, Hume's essay can be read as an attempt to demonstrate our lack of evidence for the soul's immortality, or at least our lack of natural evidence, the only kind of evidence worth bothering with. Hume shows this, he thinks, by dividing the potential evidence into three kinds and refuting each in turn, one per section. We will be looking at sections II and III only.

Exercise 3

Begin reading section II. (Do not read section I, which is on ‘metaphysical reasons’ and concerns arguments based on the supposed independence of the mind from the body.) You will almost certainly find it difficult and obscure at this stage. The sole point of this exercise is for you to take note of this difficulty and obscurity. After five minutes, stop reading and go to the discussion below.

Hume was both a philosopher and a historian. In this essay he is being a philosopher. Philosophy is not written to be read as a novel is read. It can take the same time to work effectively through five pages of philosophy as it takes to read fifty or more pages of a novel. Hume's essay cannot be described as a poem, but it is similar in respect of its density and the level of concentration it calls for from its readership. This is one reason why these readings are short. We will be working through them with considerable attention to detail, paragraph by paragraph. Afterwards you will be asked to reread the essay from the beginning (again skipping section I) so as to get a sense of the whole.

It is common for those who are relatively new to philosophy to think that finding it difficult reflects somehow on them. Philosophy never gets easy, even for those who have spent an entire life at it. It is important not to let the difficulty everyone experiences stand in the way of your progress and enjoyment. Remember that you are at the very beginning of a process in which Hume's essay will appear to transform itself from an unstructured and barely comprehensible string of words into an articulate, well-organised and lucid discussion! That, at least, is the hope.

A final tip: you are advised when working through these two courses to take detailed notes, and to have a pen and a jotting pad for the exercises.

4.2 Moral grounds for thinking we are immortal

The moral reason (as Hume calls it) for thinking that there is an afterlife has already been touched on. God, being just, would surely see to it that we are punished or rewarded for our aberrant or commendable actions; this punishment or reward doesn't take place in this life, so it must take place after our body's demise. Here is a simple statement of the reasoning:

> *The moral argument for supposing there is an afterlife:* the universe as created by God is a just universe; in a just universe, actions are rewarded or punished adequately, but actions are not rewarded or punished adequately in this life; therefore, there must be some other life in which actions are rewarded or punished.

The final clause of this argument expresses the claim that Hume wishes to reject. So he must find a fault with the reasoning that leads to it.

Hume would have been happy to reject this reasoning by rejecting the assumption of God's existence that lies at his heart. But as already mentioned, he does not want to adopt this strategy in this essay. Instead he seeks to persuade those sympathetic to natural religion that even they should reject this argument for the immortality thesis.

Exercise 4

(a) Go to paragraph 7 and notice how little time Hume spends laying out the position he is about to criticise. This position would already have been familiar to his readership.

(b) How impressed are you by the moral reason for believing in an afterlife? Can you think of an objection to it that does not involve simply denying the existence of God?

The point of (b) is merely to help you appreciate the task that Hume has set himself. The reasoning is, at first sight, quite persuasive. If you came up with your own objections to it, compare them to Hume's own objections, to which we now turn.

Our task now is to interpret and assess Hume's objections to this attempt to justify a belief in an afterlife. He offers three distinct replies, though he does not number them as such.

His first objection is very short, and is set out in paragraph 8, just after he has given the truncated statement of the moral reason. It draws heavily on his empiricist assumption that one ought not to make judgements that go beyond what we can infer from experience. We should not make claims about God's attributes – such as that he is just – without evidence, and that evidence must come from experience. But what experience do we have of the justice of God?

Our experience of God's justice, confined as it is to our experiences in this life, is not particularly persuasive, Hume implies. Experience contains plenty of instances of what to us seem to be injustices. Though he does not give examples, he could have had in mind catastrophic events such as the Lisbon earthquake of 1755, ironically on All Soul's Day. On that day some 60,000 people died as a modern European capital was flattened, then swamped beneath a tidal wave, and finally engulfed in flames. 1755 was also the year Hume was writing his essay.

Exercise 5

Read paragraph 8. Which clause of my representation of the moral argument (above) is Hume calling into question, and how?

Hume is challenging the first clause by asking for evidence to support the assumption that God is just. God may well manifest his justice in an afterlife, but this is not something we have any experience of, and so not something we have a right to assume – and nothing we see in *this* life supports the assumption either.

Hume does not develop this first objection to the moral argument. Instead he moves quickly on to an independent and more developed response that does not call God's justice into question (paragraphs 9–11). In rough outline, this second objection is that almost everything about us seems to be directed towards this life and not a next life. In particular, the ‘structure of … [our] mind and passions’ make us ill-prepared for an afterlife in which we are punished or rewarded for our earlier actions. Hume infers, from these supposedly observable design flaws, that there is no afterlife.

To understand and evaluate this more developed response, we need to understand and evaluate his claim about our apparent design flaws, and his inference from this claim to the non-existence of an afterlife. We can begin with the claim, before looking at the inference.

In paragraph 9 Hume seeks to establish the truth of the claim that our minds and passions are ill-adapted to the existence of any afterlife. He asks us to notice how less persuaded we are by the ‘floating idea’ of a post-death existence than we are even by ‘common life’

facts (by which he could mean, perhaps, some trivial memory of what we did last week). So if there really is an afterlife, our minds are manifestly not equipped to recognise this fact. Moreover, our everyday concerns – our 'passions' – are not the concerns we ought to have if this life is but a preparation for eternity. We constantly let 'worldly' considerations govern our actions. Don Giovanni does not let the prospect of eternal damnation guide his actions. Instead he is guided by lust.

But, you may be thinking, some people *are* quite strongly persuaded of the existence of an afterlife, and seek to behave accordingly in this life. Perhaps you yourself are such a person. Hume acknowledges this fact and attempts to accommodate it. Such people, he says, have been effectively brainwashed (to use modern terminology) by the clergy. He even suggests, with some cheek, that the 'zeal and industry' of the clergy in seeking to gain 'power and riches in this world' by perpetrating their unsupported ideas prove that *even they* do not have much expectation of an afterlife.

Having established (he thinks) that our minds and passions could be counted as well designed only if there is no life beyond the present one, Hume goes on to infer from this that there *cannot be* an afterlife. He offers us two quite independent ways of making this inference, in paragraph 10 and paragraph 11 respectively.

In the moral argument, God's justice is used to show that there is an afterlife. In paragraph 10 Hume suggests that God's justice would really require the exact opposite: that there isn't an afterlife. A just god would only have designed our minds and passions to be the way they are if there is no afterlife. Doing otherwise would be cruel and deceptive. It would be unfair on Don Giovanni and the rest of us to be held so much to account for our God-given inclination to act as if there is no afterlife.

Figure 3 Johann Friedrich Bolt, after Vinzenz Kininger, title page from the printed music score of Don Giovanni, 1801, engraving, Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde, Vienna

The second version of the inference (paragraph 11) starts with the same assumption – that we are ill-equipped for an eternal existence – and reaches the same conclusion – that there is no afterlife – but it does so via a different route. The bridging assumption this time is that a creature's abilities are matched ('proportionate') to the tasks facing that creature. This is an observably true generalisation, showing up once again Hume's empiricist leanings. Hume notices that, for example, the tasks facing 'foxes and hares' are well served by these animals' abilities. Hares have no capacity to appreciate opera, but such appreciation would be superfluous to the requirements of a life as a hare. Since a match between tasks and abilities is true of all other creatures, it is reasonable to infer ('from parity of reason') that we humans, too, have abilities that are matched to the tasks facing us. The existence of an afterlife would be in violation of this observable truth, since the task of preparing for this afterlife would far outstrip our ability to carry it out effectively – something shown once again by the recklessness of Don Giovanni.

Softly spoken, intelligent, witty, kind and unpretentious, Hume was reportedly 'the darling of all the pretty women' of the Parisian *salons* in which much of the Enlightenment took place (Mme de Verdelin to Rousseau, quoted in Dufour and Plan, 1924–34, vol.11, p. 106). This did not stop him being – as we would put it today – sexist in his writing. You will find evidence of this in the second half of paragraph 11. He attempts to draw out still further the significance of the fact that abilities are generally suited to requirements. Women are less able than men, he asserts. This can only be because the demands placed on women are lower than those placed on men. An inequality of skills between the sexes is to be expected if the only life is this life, since women are well suited to the less onerous domestic sphere. But an inequality of skills makes no sense if both sexes have the same task to perform: to prepare for eternity. Once again, an 'observable truth' (inequality between the sexes in respect of capacities) is used to argue for the absence of an afterlife.

Exercise 6

Read paragraphs 9–11. Does the sexism of Hume's remark, noted above, undermine this second objection to the moral argument?

In my opinion it does not. Here are my two reasons. First, the expression of sexism may affect our assessment of Hume as a likeable fellow, but his likeability is entirely irrelevant to the quality of his arguments. Second, though Hume asserts that women are suited to the domestic sphere but otherwise less able than men, these assertions are not essential to his argument about capacities in nature matching the demands placed on them. They are merely part of a misguided effort to extend his argument. So the fact that these assertions are (I would argue) mistaken leaves his objection to the moral argument more or less intact.

In the remainder of section II (paragraphs 12–17), Hume presents the third and final objection to the moral argument. He proposes in paragraph 12 that we be guided by *our* conception of justice, not the imagined preferences of a deity, when we make judgements about what would count as appropriate punishment or reward. His point is simply that our conception is the only one we have. If God's conception of punishment is different from ours, then all bets are off since we would be ignorant of what that conception is. He makes the same point later (paragraph 17):

> To suppose measures of approbation and blame different from the human confounds every thing. Whence do we learn that there is such a thing as moral distinctions, but from our own sentiments?

Again and again, Hume reminds us that we must assess God's justness *by our own lights* or, as he often puts it, *by the lights of our own sentiments*. To do otherwise – to say that God's ways are a mystery – is to abandon the perspective of natural religion and move to mysticism. Mysticism is, if anything, even worse than revealed religion in Hume's eyes.

In paragraphs 13–16 he presents four features of just punishment (i.e. punishment that our sentiments regard as just), each of which is incompatible with a traditional Christian conception of an afterlife: that is, an afterlife equipped with facilities for eternal damnation for those of us who have been wicked in our first life, and eternal bliss for the rest. In the next exercise you are asked to extract these four features.

Exercise 7

Read paragraphs 12–17. In paragraphs 13–16, what are four features of punishment and reward that, according to our sentiments, speak against the existence of an afterlife as conceived in the Christian tradition, according to Hume? (Warning: paragraph 13 is quite elliptical and possibly confused; you may wish to come to it last.)

According to Hume, our sentiments tell us that:

1. Paragraph 13: the Christian virtue of unconditional love for one's God and neighbours is not the only virtue there is. There is also value in being a good poet or brave soldier. Yet it would be contrary to common sense to suppose that good poets or brave soldiers have their own special kinds of heaven.
2. Paragraph 14: punishment should serve a purpose; no purpose is served by punishing people after they have left this life.
3. Paragraph 15: punishment should be kept in proportion. Eternal damnation can never be in proportion to an offence committed in the present life. He makes the same point in paragraph 17: ‘The [eternal] damnation of one man is an infinitely greater evil in the universe, than the subversion of a thousand millions of kingdoms.’
4. Paragraph 16: punishment in the Christian tradition divides everyone up into the good and the bad without distinguishing degrees of desert within each group.

Figure 4 William Blake, *Capaneus the Blasphemer*, illustration to Dante's Divine Comedy, Hell Canto 14, 1824–7, pen, ink and watercolour, 37.4 x 52.7 cm, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Australia (Felton Bequest, 1920)

In Dante's Inferno (part of the Divine Comedy, c.1314), for which this image is an illustration, Dante (1265–1321) and Virgil (70–19 BC) travel through the different circles of hell and meet those who have committed a variety of sins. In the seventh circle they meet Capaneus, who boasted in his mortal life that even the great God Jove could not defeat him in war. For this he is now receiving his punishment: 'Eternal fire descended in such profusion [that] sand kindled like tinder under flint, and made the pain redouble' (Pinsky, 1994, p. 113). Hume claims (paragraph 15) that, according to our ordinary sentiments, an eternity of extreme pain is an overly harsh punishment for most human sins.

Classical allusions aside, paragraph 17 is mostly repetition, but in its closing sentence Hume notes a final aspect of our ordinary attitude towards punishment. We do not punish people if they are not responsible for their actions. Infants could not really be said to be responsible for their actions, and yet those that die – 'half of mankind' in those days – are supposedly assessed and either condemned or saved. The death of infants is, he thinks, an especially vivid illustration of why the moral argument fails.

4.3 Physical grounds for thinking we are immortal

In section III Hume discusses what he calls *physical* reasons for thinking there is an afterlife. A sensible guess as to what he means by a physical reason is that it is one based on observation and experience of the physical world. He begins by asserting that physical reasons are the ones he has most respect for. (This assertion is unsurprising: his objections to moral reasons, and the metaphysical reasons we skipped, turn on the allegation that they depend on claims that go beyond what is observable.) He goes on to claim, further, that all evidence that *is* based on observation – all 'physical' evidence – points not towards there being an afterlife, but rather towards our being fully mortal.

Before looking at how Hume seeks to vindicate this further claim, it will help to have a better appreciation of how he thinks we reason from experience. For although I have stressed the importance to Hume and his contemporaries of treating experience as the sole source of evidence, I have not said much about how reasoning from observation is supposed to work.

Consider how, whenever we have touched snow in the past, we have felt coldness. These past experiences tell us that the next time we touch snow, it will once again feel cold. Or at least that is what we think they tell us. That is because we are tacitly using what Hume calls the **rule of analogy**. (It later came to be called a *principle of induction*, but I will keep to Hume's terminology.) The rule of analogy is named but not explicitly stated by Hume in this essay. According to it:

> If all experiences of one type (e.g. seeing snow) have been followed by an experience of another type (e.g. feeling it to be cold) *in the past*, then experiences of the first type will be followed by experiences of the second type *in the future*.

It is thus a rule of reasoning that allows us to infer from what we observed already to what we have not yet observed.

It is no exaggeration to say that early empiricists held this rule of analogy, or some variant of it, to be the golden gateway to all genuine knowledge. The legitimacy of analogical reasoning is what, according to many, lay at the heart of the success of the scientific method. By conducting experiments and observing the results, scientists were able to make accurate predictions about the future, building theories on that basis. Hume too takes this rule of reasoning to be central to scientific advancement. He doesn't think rules of reasoning can get any more basic than this one. What we must now turn to is Hume's application of the rule to the question of our immortality.

In paragraphs 18–19, Hume makes his first application of the rule to the question of our mortality. It is also the most complex; be prepared to skip to the second application rather than become bogged down in this first application. The key passage is:

> Where any two objects are so closely connected that all alterations which we have ever seen in the one, are attended with proportionable [i.e. proportional] alterations in the other, we ought to conclude by all rules of analogy, that, when there are still greater alterations produced in the former, and it is totally dissolved, there follows a total dissolution of the latter.

The relevant ‘two objects’ are the mind and the body. Hume's basic idea is this. The mind and the body show ‘proportionable’ alterations: as the body grows feeble so does the mind (or soul), and so they can also be assumed to ‘dissolve’ (by which Hume appears to mean ‘to cease to exist’) together. From this he concludes that when the body ceases to function entirely, or ‘dissolves’, so does the mind. The complexity comes with trying to see how this is an application of the rule of analogy as I have stated it above.

To see that it is, consider what the relevant previous experiences are. Hume does not bother to say what he has in mind, but we can help him out here:

> The forward acceleration of a bicycle is proportional to the force applied to its pedals; elimination of this force leads to elimination of acceleration.
>
> The population size of the fish in a pond varies in proportion to the quantity of water; elimination of water leads to elimination of fish.

In all our previous experience, Hume is claiming, whenever alterations between two objects are 'proportionable', it is also the case that total dissolution of the one object is accompanied by total dissolution of the other. And now the rule of analogy tells us to infer that this will be the case in the future too. Thus, if all experiences of one type (e.g. alterations between two objects being proportional) have been followed by an experience of a second type (e.g. total dissolution of the one object being accompanied by total dissolution of the other) *in the past*, then experiences of the first type will be followed by experiences of the second type *in the future*.

The future case he has in mind is that of the soul when the body 'dissolves'. The proportionality or close interconnection observable between soul and body must mean that the dissolution of the body will be accompanied by the dissolution of the soul.

Exercise 8

Read to the end of paragraph 19. (*The next question is optional; you may prefer instead to jump straight to Hume's second application of the rule of analogy in paragraph 20, which I examine below.*) Why in paragraph 19 does Hume list some ways in which deterioration in the functioning of the body is often accompanied by deterioration in the functioning of the soul (or mind): in sleep, in infancy, in sickness and in ageing?

The sharpness of the human mind is observed always to match or be proportional to the robustness of the human body, he claims. By the rule of analogy, based on other examples that he doesn't make explicit (such as the bicycle or fish examples above), he thinks it reasonable to conclude that when the body declines completely, the mind (or soul) ceases to exist as well.

A second and more straightforward application of the rule of analogy can be found in paragraph 20. There are many observable situations in which transplanting something into a new and alien environment tends to kill it. We don't see fishes surviving away from water or trees thriving beneath water. In other words, a change to an organism's environment is always associated with a change in its capacity to thrive. The bigger the change in the environment, the more likely it is that the organism will cease to exist. Given this, says Hume, why should we expect the soul to be able to survive without its body? Loss of our bodies is the biggest change we could possibly undergo, making it more likely that we simply cease to exist entirely.

Exercise 9

Read up to the end of paragraph 20. (*The following question is optional unless you skipped the optional question in the previous exercise*.) Hume suggests in paragraph 20 that a purely spiritual, bodiless afterlife is even less plausible than metempsychosis, the transmigration of the soul from one body to another, perhaps across species boundaries. What are his grounds for this claim?

A change of environment is always detrimental to the thing moved. Moving to a new body is less of a change than ceasing to have any body at all. So it is more plausible that we could survive migration to another body than that we cease to be embodied at all. This is true even if the new body is an animal's, since animals' bodies bear many similarities to our own.

Figure 5 Jean-Baptiste Greuze, *The Paralytic*, 1763, oil on canvas, 115.5 x 146 cm, The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg. Photo: Scala

Metempsychosis (mentioned jestingly by Hume), in which souls migrate from body to body across species boundaries after each successive death, was one of several popular secular alternatives to Christian conceptions of the afterlife. Another is expressed in this painting: that we can live on in our children. The presence of the Bible on the left of the painting is swamped by the presence of the children. This doctrine of filial piety was even associated with a moral injunction: if you are good in this life (i.e. raise your children well), your survival into posterity will be all the more assured. This is explicit in the title Greuze gave to a preparatory study for the painting, 'The fruits of a good education'.

The remainder of section III contains three diverse objections to the theory that we survive beyond our death. The relation of these to the rest of the essay is slim, and Hume is occasionally only half-serious when he presents them. We can proceed through them quite quickly.

In paragraph 21 Hume asserts that supporters of the thesis that we have an afterlife have an accommodation crisis: the place where souls go will be populated by an ever-growing number of individuals. Ready replies to this thought were available at the time. Since souls are supposedly immaterial, by definition this means they do not occupy space so there would be no danger of overcrowding. Moreover, what justification had Hume for supposing that heaven or hell had a limited size?

In a different objection (paragraph 22), he suggests that our soul's non-existence prior to birth increases the probability of its non-existence after death. This is the opinion attributed to him by Boswell, as quoted above ('David Hume said to me he was no more uneasy to think he should *not be* after this life, than that he *had not been* before he began to exist.'). Hume offers some discussion of this in section I of his essay (paragraph 5),

which we are not focusing on. No further support is provided in the present paragraph, just a quotation from a classical source.

In paragraph 23 Hume is implicitly responding to an attitude that would have been common. Fear of death in a person was assumed to be evidence in favour of their belief in an afterlife in which non-believers are damned. Fear of death could therefore reveal a profession of agnosticism to be disingenuous. This, in part, is why people were so curious about whether Hume would recant his views on his deathbed.

Hume makes the point that belief in an afterlife is not the only available explanation of fear of death. This fear could be accounted for easily enough as attachment to happiness in this, the only, life. (In fact, he says, many of those who *do* believe in an afterlife should be placid, since for them our mortal death is not really the end of our existence.) In view of this claim, Hume went beyond the call of duty in dying with:

> great cheerfulness and good humour and with more real resignation to the necessary course of things than any whining Christian ever died with pretended resignation to the will of God.
>
> (*Adam Smith, letter to Alexander Wedderburn, 14 August 1776, quoted in Mossner and Ross, 1987, p. 203*)

Paragraph 23 ends with a speculation: it is a passionate *hope* to live on that irrationally gives rise in us to a belief that we *do* live on. Paragraph 24 merely repeats earlier material, and the ironic final paragraph has been discussed already.

Exercise 10

Finish reading to the end of the essay. How persuaded are you by his discussion of fear of death in paragraph 23?

You will almost certainly have come up with your own conclusion, but here is mine: Hume is unfair in suggesting that fear of death is incompatible with belief in an afterlife. Fear of death could easily be explained as fear of the possibility of an eternity of pain. It needn't be put down to an irrational attempt to match false hopes with false beliefs.

You should by now appreciate just how careful a writer Hume was. Aside from one or two light-hearted paragraphs near the end, not a single sentence is included that doesn't have an important purpose. Every paragraph develops his case in some unpredictable but thoughtful way. Repetition is minimal. That is why we have gone through the essay in such a painstaking way, paragraph by paragraph. All the same, it helps to step back and gain an appreciation of the whole essay, and in the next exercise you are asked to read it through in a single sitting.

Exercise 11

Reread 'Of the Immortality of the Soul' from beginning to end (omitting section I). Look out for the three objections to the moral reasoning in section II, and the role of Hume's appeals to experience as the final arbiter throughout the essay.

It is unlikely you will understand the point Hume is trying to make in every paragraph. But do make a mental note of how much of the essay you now more or less understand. When you have finished, recall your reaction to the exercise on p. 179. I hope this will reveal the extent to which an apparently obscure piece of writing may in fact contain a carefully constructed discussion, which careful study can render accessible.

5 Hume on suicide

5.1 The reception of Hume's views

‘Of suicide’ was received with the same degree of public hostility as his essay on immortality. Here is what an anonymous reviewer of the 1777 posthumous edition of both essays had to say in the *Monthly Review* (1784, vol. 70, pp. 427–8):

> Were a drunken libertine to throw out such nauseous stuff in the presence of his Bacchanalian companions, there might be some excuse for him; but were any man to advance such doctrines in the company of sober citizens, men of plain sense and decent manners, no person, we apprehend, would think him entitled to a serious reply, but would hear him with silent contempt.

This reviewer, unfortunately, is true to her or his word and does not provide a serious reply to Hume, preferring instead to hold up one or two statements in the essays and jeer:

> Mr Hume affirms that it is as clear as any purpose of nature can be that the whole scope and intention of man's creation is limited to the present life, and that those who inculcate the doctrine of a future state have no other motive but to gain a livelihood and to acquire power and riches in this world … The life of a man, he says, is of no greater importance to the universe than that of an oyster. It would be no crime, we are told, in any man, to divert the Nile or Danube from their courses, were he able to effect such purpose. Where then is the crime, Mr Hume asks, of turning a few ounces of blood from their natural channel?

The first sentence of this passage alludes to remarks made in ‘Of the immortality of the soul’ (paragraph 9), remarks that in fact play a relatively marginal role in the essay. The remainder of the passage cites claims in ‘Of suicide’ that are similarly peripheral.

Other commentators were equally disrespectful towards Hume the person, but more respectful of the need to respond at greater length to Hume's reasoning. In his lengthy tome, *A Full Inquiry into the Subject of Suicide*, Charles Moore describes Hume as ‘a more pernicious and destructive member of society than even the profligate and abandoned liver’ (1790, vol. 2, p. 54). In *The Dreadful Sin of Suicide: A Sermon*, George Clayton calls him a ‘source of incalculable evil’ (1812, p. 48n).

In the essay Hume claims that the act of taking one's own life should be ‘free from every imputation of guilt or blame’ (paragraph 4). Suicide, he argues, can be morally unobjectionable or even admirable. As the reviews suggest, this was a controversial claim: to commit suicide was generally regarded as sinful, and to attempt suicide was a criminal act. What was peculiarly unsettling about Hume's perspective was that he did not bother to reject the core religious assumptions from which hostility to suicide more commonly sprang. Hume was, we know, an agnostic, but his agnosticism does not figure in this essay. His claim is that suicide can be shown to be morally permissible *even after granting God's existence*. In this respect the present essay resembles the one we have already studied: admitting suicide to be morally permissible, like rejecting the doctrine of immortality, will not depend on denying the existence of God.

The essay does not have explicitly numbered sections as did the previous essay. This does not mean it lacks a structure. Rather, the structure is something for us to uncover as

we study it. As before, we will be working through the essay stage by stage. You will then be asked to read it through as a whole.

5.2 Philosophy, religion and everyday life

Perhaps because he is aware he will be stirring up trouble by publishing his views on this topic, Hume warms to his theme by talking in paragraphs 1–4 about how he conceives of the relation between philosophy, religious 'superstition' and ordinary life. The rest of the essay can be read independently of this opening, but these early ruminations are worth pausing over. They reveal subtleties in Hume's sceptical outlook that are drowned out in the more polemical parts of the two essays.

Hume is concerned with which of these three elements – philosophy, superstition, ordinary life – is most effective at dominating the other two. He is especially vocal about how philosophical reason is an 'antidote' to superstition, where this is clearly meant to include religious belief. But he also discusses the relation of both religion and philosophy to the views and emotions ('passions') that serve us so well in ordinary life -what he describes as 'plain good sense and the practice of the world'.

He notes with regret that religious superstition can and does distort our ordinary outlook, and in a 'pernicious' way. He gives one or two examples, including the example of superstition surrounding death and suicide. A clear statement of what he sees as the negative effects of religious beliefs on human happiness is found later in the essay (paragraph 12):

> It is impious, says the old Roman superstition, to divert rivers from their course, or invade the prerogatives of nature. It is impious says the French superstition, to inoculate for the smallpox, or usurp the business of providence by voluntarily producing distempers and maladies. It is impious, says the modern European superstition, to put a period to our own life and thereby rebel against our Creator.

The result of this pernicious influence of superstition on common sense is that dams don't get built, smallpox doesn't get eradicated, and those for whom it is rational to do so do not commit suicide. (Women in particular, he remarks, are particularly susceptible to superstition. It is not clear whether he is recommending they study philosophy, given that, as we saw earlier, he thought women have relatively poor powers of reasoning.)

Hume's position can be summarised as: *religious superstition can triumph over our ordinary views and emotions*. And since philosophy is a 'sovereign antidote' to religion, *philosophy can triumph over religious superstition*. We might therefore expect Hume to think that philosophy triumphs over the views and emotions that ordinarily serve us so well in life, as and when these fall short. But Hume surprises us here. Our emotions are curiously immune to the influence of reason, he says; and in other writings he insists that our ordinary views and expectations, the habits or customs of our minds, will not bend to accommodate philosophical reasoning (*A Treatise of Human Nature*, I.IV.1). The relationship between the three elements – philosophy, religious superstition, ordinary views and emotions – is not hierarchical after all. None of them dominates the other two. The situation is closer to the children's game in which each participant simultaneously brings a hand out from behind her or his back in the shape of either scissors, paper or stone. Scissors shred paper; paper smothers stone; and stone blunts scissors. Hume's view is that philosophy cuts through religion; religion distorts ordinary views and emotions;

and ordinary views and emotions are immune to revision through the application of reason.

Hume does not offer any lengthy reasons here for supposing that ordinary life is impermeable to philosophy. It is, however, a salient feature of his other work. Far from being a straightforward supporter of Enlightenment rationality, he was notoriously sceptical of the power of reason. For example, although you would never be able to guess it from the previous essay, he did *not* think the rule of analogy could be defended using reason. He thought this rule was simply something we blindly follow out of 'habit'; the philosophical indefensibility of the rule can never alter this habit. So his appeal to this rule is actually an appeal to our common sense, which he thinks incapable of being grounded in reason. Hume is a celebrator of ordinary life, which is perhaps why he is so keen to defend it against the perceived threat of religion.

Evidence of this fondness for ordinary life was reflected in his personality. Famously, he enjoyed recovering from philosophical reflection by playing cards or board games. In *A Treatise of Human Nature* Hume describes how playing games allows him to 'dispel the clouds' of scepticism, cure himself of 'philosophical melancholy and delirium', and 'obliterate the chimeras' that abstract reflection has led him to conjure up (I.IV.7; Hume, 1978, p. 269):

> I dine, I play a game of backgammon, I converse, and am merry with my friends; and when after three or four hours' amusement I would return to these speculations, they appear so cold and strained and ridiculous that I cannot find [it] in my heart to enter into them any farther.

This aspect of his personality divided those commenting on his death in the letters you read earlier. Adam Smith described the dying Hume as 'continu[ing] to divert himself, as usual, with … a party at his favourite game of whist' (quoted in section 1 above). The Bishop of Norwich lamented how low the age has fallen that we are to admire someone because he 'knew how to manage his *cards'* (also quoted above). The symbolism of backgammon and whist is that just as philosophy is an antidote to religion, ordinary life is an antidote to philosophy, and to sceptical paralysis in particular.

Click to view 'Of Suicide'

Exercise 12

Read paragraphs 1–2 of the essay on suicide. Identify sentences that express Hume's view that (1) philosophy cuts through religion, (2) religious superstition distorts ordinary views, and (3) ordinary emotional reactions are immune to philosophical reason.

There are several alternatives, but the following get his message across:

1. 'One considerable advantage that arises from philosophy consists in the sovereign antidote which it affords to superstition and false religion.'
2. 'History as well as daily experience afford instances of men endowed with the strongest capacity for business and affairs, who have all their lives crouched under slavery to the grossest superstition.'
3. 'Love or anger, ambition or avarice, have their root in the temper and affection, which the soundest reason is scarce ever able fully to correct.'

Paragraph 5 is where the essay really gets underway. In it Hume indicates the aim and structure of his argument and of the essay as a whole. Hume's stated aim is to persuade his reader that suicide is not 'criminal', i.e. is not morally objectionable. If suicide is morally objectionable, he insists, it must violate ('transgress') some duty we owe, either to God, to other people, or to ourselves. So the essay considers in turn our duties to (i) God, (ii) to others, and (iii) to ourselves, finding in each case that the act of suicide violates no such duty. Most of his energy is directed towards considering our duties to God. Duties to others and to ourselves receive relatively short shrift near the end.

Exercise 13

Find and read the brief fifth paragraph. Although they are not numbered as such, there are three further subsections. Duties to God are discussed in paragraphs 6–14, duties to others in paragraphs 15–17, and duties to ourselves in paragraphs 18–19. Find and make a note of these boundaries.

5.3 Do we have a duty to God not to commit suicide?

Why, you may be wondering, would anyone think that we have a duty to God not to take our own lives? Because it would have been so familiar to his original readership, Hume barely bothers to state the position he is opposing before criticising it. His concern is to refute the charge that in taking our own lives we would be 'encroaching on the office of divine **providence**, and disturbing the order of the universe' (paragraph 8). This position can be expressed less elegantly but more transparently as follows:

> *The sanctity-of-life argument against suicide:* life ought not to be taken by anyone save God; so one ought not to take one's own life.

In a later idiom, the charge against suicide is that it involves *playing God*, i.e. making and acting on a decision that properly belongs to God and God alone. The phrase 'playing God' is often used even in a non-religious context to describe any action that involves the agent going beyond their proper station in the universe. In the Second World War some military strategists declared themselves uncomfortable at being called on to make decisions that would determine which of two cities would be heavily bombed. Their discomfort did not necessarily have a religious basis, and their use of the phrase 'playing God' in that context would often have been metaphorical. But the origins of the idiom lie in a genuine worry about literally taking God's decisions for him.

Without seeking to undermine the arguments for God's existence, Hume sets out to show that taking one's own life is unobjectionable. The thought that we have a duty not to take God's decisions for him, and in particular not to take the decision to end our own life, is, Hume suggests, preposterous *even from the most reasonable theological perspective*.

In order to show that from the most reasonable theological perspective available we should not condemn suicide, Hume must first establish what the most reasonable theological perspective available actually is. This task occupies him in paragraphs 6–7. At the very least, he suggests, the most reasonable theological perspective will assume the

legitimacy of the argument from design (see the glossary if you need a reminder); this is the only argument for the existence of God that he believes is even remotely plausible.

Central to the argument from design is the assumption that order and harmony are evidence of a benign and powerful creator. Anyone who accepts the argument – in other words, anyone with a reasonable theological perspective – is committed to seeing order and harmony as God's handiwork. Any denial of the inference from order and harmony to divine influence would undermine the only plausible reason for accepting that God exists at all.

If the first component of any reasonable theological perspective is a commitment to the argument from design, the second is a recognition that order and harmony permeate every aspect of the universe. Each is observable within nature, within us, and within our relation to our environment. Since harmony and order are to be regarded as evidence of God's handiwork, this must mean that no part of the universe is free from God's influence.

The all-pervasiveness of harmony and order throughout the universe is something we can easily observe, says Hume (paragraph 6):

> [A]ll bodies, from the greatest planet to the smallest particle of matter, are maintained in their proper sphere and function.

Hume is insistent on this point about the all-pervasiveness of harmony and order, and hence of God's influence (paragraph 6):

> These two distinct principles of the material and animal world, continually encroach upon each other, and mutually retard or forward each other's operation.

In other words, all entities, including both inanimate and animate, appear subject to a single system of interlocking laws.

The significance of this is reached in paragraph 7:

> When the passions play, when the judgement dictates, when the limbs obey, this is all the operation of God …

Consider the last of these three phenomena, the ‘obedience’ of our limbs to our decisions to move them. What he seems to have in mind here is that when you act – to scratch your ankle, for example – you are usually able to do so because the physical world accommodates your mental decision. In a non-harmonious world, your decision to scratch could just as easily be followed by your hand flying up towards the ceiling as its moving down towards your ankle. The fact that your hand moves down towards your ankle is a sign that human decision making is just as permeated by harmony as any other event in the universe, and so equally subject to God's benign influence as the rest of the universe.

A useful term to know here is ‘providence’. Divine providence includes all goings-on in the universe that are the direct result of God's influence. Many theologians have held that human action falls outside of divine providence, that our individual choices are not part of God's plan at all, and that we alone bear responsibility for them. Hume is arguing to the contrary that the entire universe, including each of our actions, falls within God's providential reach. His ground for thinking this, to repeat, is that harmony and order are manifest in human action just as they are manifest in the non-human sphere, and harmony and order are the surest sign there is of God's presence.

In paragraph 7 Hume addresses the thought that some of our actions do not really seem to be anyone's but our own. We cannot see God's hand at work in our actions looked at in

isolation, he acknowledges. But seen as part of a harmonious system, our actions are as much permeated by God's influence as is the rest of the universe.

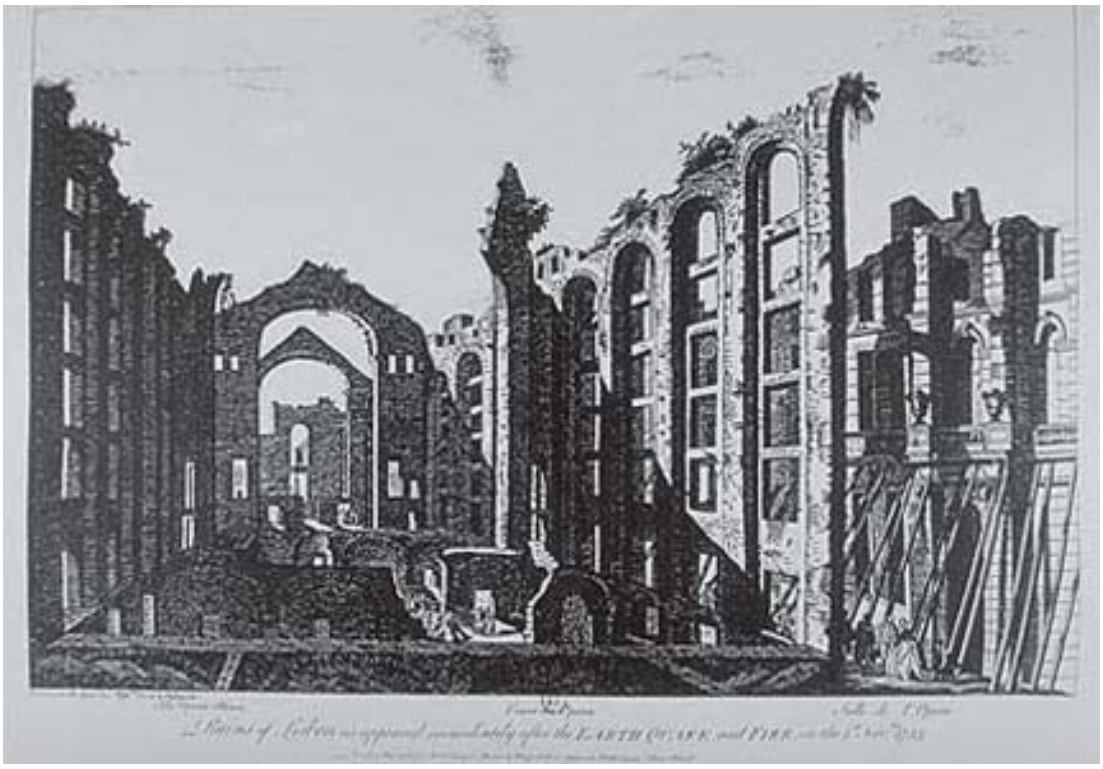

Figure 6(a) J.P. Le Bas, *Ruins of the Opera House* (after the Lisbon earthquake of 1755), 1757, from the Le Bas series, Bibliotheque Nationale de France, Paris. Photo: courtesy National Information Service for Earthquake Engineering, University of California, Berkeley

Figure 6(b) J.P. Le Bas, *Ruins of the Praca de Patriarchal (Patriachal Square)* (after the Lisbon earthquake of 1755), 1757, from the Le Bas series, Bibliotheque Nationale de France, Paris. Photo: courtesy National Information Service for Earthquake Engineering, University of California, Berkeley

The Lisbon earthquake was mentioned earlier in a different connection. This event gave rise to debates that reflected issues salient at the time. Many focused on trying to understand the disaster as a natural phenomenon, and the science of seismology began in earnest around that time. Others were more concerned with reconciling such a cataclysmic event with their preferred conception of divinity. In particular, theologians struggled with the so-called **problem of evil:** if God is all-powerful and benevolent, why does he let terrible things happen? A popular answer to this problem prior to the Lisbon earthquake was that evil is brought into the world by human weakness. This was one reason why many, unlike Hume, thought that human action fell beyond God's providence. But while political corruption, murder and war could be understood in this way, earthquakes were clearly a different matter. A few tried to account for the earthquake as God's punishment for the sinfulness of Lisbon, which was perceived as a decadent city. But this was hard to reconcile with the fact that the ‘decadent’ opera house (Figure 4.6(a)) was joined in ruin by the cathedral and other religious buildings. In fact, five of Le Bas's six etchings contain one or more religious buildings. Figure 4.6(b) shows the patriarchal palace, which was the only major religious building to survive the tremor and the tidal wave. It served as an impromptu prayer centre before it too was lost in the fires that followed.

Exercise 14

Read paragraphs 6–7. Their meaning is occasionally quite elusive. A useful maxim to adopt when this happens is to aim to get the author's basic gist, then move on, coming back later if you have to. With this in mind, what is the basic gist of these two paragraphs?

Hume is attempting to set out what the most reasonable theological perspective is; he has yet to say anything about suicide from this perspective. The first component of this perspective is a commitment to the argument from design. This is left largely implicit by Hume, save where he announces that 'sympathy, harmony, and proportion, … [afford] the surest argument [for] supreme wisdom' (paragraph 6). The second component is recognition that harmony and order permeate every aspect of the universe, including the human sphere. Putting these two components together, even events taking place in the human sphere -our own actions – must be regarded as part of God's plan (i.e. as 'belonging to divine providence'). Or, if you like, our actions are also God's actions. This is true of all actions, so there are no grounds for distinguishing between actions that are our own and those that belong to God.

Having established that, on pain of having to reject design as a sign of God's existence, *all* our actions need to be treated equally as a part of God's plan, Hume unveils the relevance of this for the morality of suicide (paragraph 8).

It is absurd, he claims, to condemn an act of suicide as 'encroaching on the office of divine providence', that is, as doing what God and only God may do. Such condemnation would be absurd because every action would then have to be condemned for the same reason. If we condemn acts of suicide for encroaching on God, we would also need to condemn acts of ankle scratching. Both actions fall inside the scope of divine providence. Both have equal status as part of God's grand design.

Hume is criticising any attempt to establish a division between ordinary decisions and sacred decisions. Decisions of the first kind would belong to us alone; decisions of the second kind would belong to God alone. His long discussion of divine providence is meant to have shown that such a division is misguided. 'Shall we assert', asks Hume in paragraph 8,

> that the Almighty has reserved to himself in … [some] peculiar manner the disposal of the lives of men, and has not submitted that event [i.e. the disposal of human life], in common with others, to the general laws by which the universe is governed? This is plainly false.

It is 'plainly false' because having a specially reserved sphere of influence is incompatible with the *universality* of divine providence. All types of action, from ankle scratching to suicide, are on the same footing; indeed, they are on the same footing as every event in the universe. All are subject to the universal laws of nature. These regular, ordered and harmonious laws of nature are our only assurance that God exists at all, so *must be* taken as a sign of God's influence.

Exercise 15

Read paragraph 8. How does Hume's view of providence bear on his views on the moral acceptability of suicide?

Hume holds that no distinction can be drawn between those decisions that belong to God and those that do not: God's providence is total. So ending life cannot be treated as unique in belonging exclusively to God.

By the end of paragraph 8 Hume has stated the main argument of his essay. The principal value of the essay lies in this discussion of the all-pervading presence of divine providence, and its relevance for the morality of suicide. The remainder is repetition or else it introduces some short and relatively easy-to-grasp theological considerations. So now would be a good time to state Hume's reply to the sanctity-of-life argument in as simple a way as possible:

> *Hume's reply to the sanctity-of-life argument:* any reasonable theology will see order and harmony as a sign of God's influence; order and harmony are present equally in all human actions; so there is no distinction to be made between actions (e.g. suicide) that belong to God and actions (e.g. ankle scratching) that do not.

Exercise 16

Read paragraphs 9–14. Paragraphs 11–14 recapitulate the core 'providence' argument discussed already, so treat this as an opportunity to cement your understanding of his position. Before that, jot down a sentence capturing the objection Hume is *responding* to in paragraph 9. Then do the same for paragraph 10.

Paragraph *9*: the huge significance of the decision whether to end a human life should lead us to regard it, unlike other decisions, as one that only God may take. Paragraph 10: to take one's life is to insult God by destroying his creation. (You may have come up with a different emphasis.)

You may have recognised in Hume's reply to the objection in paragraph 9 the comments that so annoyed the anonymous commentator for *Monthly Review* quoted earlier. Actually, Hume presents several different replies in quick succession. In the first of these he suggests that 'the life of a man is of no greater importance to the universe than that of an oyster'. It is not clear what Hume means by 'importance to the universe', but on the face of it this is a bizarre claim. He makes a similar-sounding claim in comparing diverting the Nile with diverting the flow of blood through human veins. This is a case where, as interpreters, we have to make a decision. Either Hume had a good but obscure point to make with these examples, and we should pause to work out what that point is. Alternatively he was just being sloppy, in which case we should ignore his remark and move on to his other responses. I am going to adopt the latter strategy.

A more promising reply (I suggest) is embedded elsewhere within paragraph 9. Hume points out that we don't condemn those who *save* their own lives by 'turn[ing] aside a stone which is falling upon … [their] head' for stepping on God's toes. Yet deciding to save a life is just as significant as deciding to end one. Why then should we make this complaint when it is a matter of ending our lives? The same reasoning used to condemn those who take their own lives could be used to condemn those who save their own lives. Both the taker and the saver could be said to be acting 'presumptuously' in taking such huge decisions. Hume treats this as showing the reasoning to be equally absurd in each case.

In paragraph 10 Hume is responding to the thought that by killing oneself one is destroying God's greatest creation. This would be insulting to God, rather as destroying a watch would be insulting to the watch's maker. Hume, however, is concerned with acts of suicide that are motivated by inconsolable misery and incurable illness. So a better analogy would be with the act of destroying a watch that is already permanently broken

down and useless. Throwing out such a watch is in fact an act of *respect* for the watchmaker.

Exercise 17

Remind yourself of the structure of the essay as stated in paragraph 5. Then read the remaining paragraphs of the essay. Paragraphs 15–16 deal with duties to society; paragraphs 17–18 deal with duties to self.

5.4 Assessing Hume's views

The main value of Hume's essay lies in its discussion of our duties to God. Here Hume's arguments initially seem quite convincing. But arguments almost always seem convincing when they are first heard and understood. The real test comes when we try to think of possible objections. Here is one such objection, based on what has become known as the *problem of evil*, the problem of reconciling God's benevolence and omnipotence with the fact that evil exists in the world:

> Hume thinks that divine providence extends to all human action. But how can this be true? If it were, we would have to say that God is responsible for the actions of every cruel or brutal ruler.
>
> This would be incompatible with the assumption that God is a benevolent being. At least *some* human actions must fall outside of divine providence. Hume's claim that from the most reasonable theological perspective all actions belong equally to God's grand design looks suspect.

Exercise 18

Reread ‘On suicide’. Has Hume shown that suicide is not always wrong in principle? Try to come up with an objection, or reproduce in your own words the objection having to do with the problem of evil outlined above.

Conclusion

This free course provided an introduction to studying the arts and humanities. It took you through a series of exercises designed to develop your approach to study and learning at a distance and helped to improve your confidence as an independent learner.

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Allan Ramsay, David Hume, 1766, oil on canvas, 76.2 x 63.5 cm, Scottish National Portrait Gallery, Edinburgh. Photo: SNPG/Bridgeman Art Library.

Joseph Wright of Derby, Lecture on the Orrery in which a Candle is used to create an Eclipse, 1766, oil on canvas, 147.3 x 203 cm, Derby Museum and Art Gallery. Photo: reproduced by courtesy of Derby Museum and Art Gallery/Bridgeman Art Library/John Webb.

William Blake, Isaac Newton, c.1795, colour print finished in ink and watercolour on paper, Tate Gallery, London. Photo: © Tate, London 2002.

Figure 1 Joseph Wright of Derby, “The Old Man and Death” 1773, oil on canvas, 101.6 x 127cm, Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, CT, Ella Gallup Sumner and Mary Catlin Sumner Collection

Figure 2 Louis-Léopold Boilly, “Les Cinq Sens (The Five Senses)”, 1823, colour lithograph, 21 x 18cm, Photo © Leonard de Selva/CORBIS

Figure 3 Johann Friedrich Bolt, after Vinzenz Kininger, title page from the printed music score of “Don Giovanni”, 1801, engraving, Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde, Vienna

Figure 4 William Blake, “Capaneus the Blasphemer”, illustration to Dante’s “Divine Comedy”, Hell Canto 14, 1824-7, pen, ink and watercolour, 37.4 x 52.7cm, courtesy of the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Australia (Felton Bequest, 1920)

Figure 5 Jean-Baptiste Greuze, “The Paralytic”, 1763, oil on canvas, 115.5 x 146cm, The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg. Photo: Scala

Figure 6a J.P. Le Bas, “Ruins of the Opera House” (after the Lisbon Earthquake of 1755), 1757, from the Le Bas series, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris. Photo: National Information Service for Earthquake Engineering, University of California, Berkeley.

Figure 6b J.P. Le Bas, “Ruins of the Praca de Patriarchal (Patriarchal Square)” (after the Lisbon Earthquake of 1755), 1757, from the Le Bas series, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris. Photo: National Information Service for Earthquake Engineering, University of California, Berkeley.

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