

Happiness, Friendship, and Tragedy

Introduction

Can a philosopher be happy? Hume had a lot to say about happiness throughout his writings. He also appears to have been one of the few great philosophers in history—indeed, perhaps the only one—who was both joyful and would have been a joy to be friends with. He was beloved by virtually everyone he met, and though many disliked his ideas—in particular his religious skepticism—it appears that everyone who met or spent time with him enjoyed the experience.¹⁸ Hume was witty, sharp, incisive, and provocative without being belligerent. He was an excellent conversationalist, was frequently invited to attend dinner parties throughout his adult life, and was widely sought-after as an acquaintance and guest. Even those who objected to his alleged irreligiosity admitted that it was hard to hate him as a person, even if you hated his ideas. The French indeed called him “le bon David.”¹⁹

By all appearances, then, he was happy, lived life to its fullest, and enjoyed the company of others. And yet, he suffered one disappointment after another. His first great work, the *Treatise of Human Nature*, “fell dead-born from the press” and went largely ignored; he twice sought university professorships and was twice denied; he fell in love but never married and had no children; he frequently suffered from painful gout and kidney stones, and during

18 One notable exception was the time Hume spent with Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778), who, in his paranoia, decided Hume was part of a conspiracy against him. This is no doubt more a reflection of Rousseau, however, than of Hume. See Rasmussen, 2017, ch. 7 for a discussion of this notorious falling-out. See also Hocutt, 2003 for a trenchant discussion of Rousseau.

19 See Mossner, 1943.

the last several years of his life endured an exhausting and debilitating dysentery; and, what must surely have been the most painful to him, he suffered one disappointment after another from perhaps his single best friend, Adam Smith. And the disappointments from Smith culminated in a final disappointment, even betrayal, right at the end of Hume's life.

Happiness

"The great end of all human industry," Hume wrote, "is the attainment of happiness. For this were arts invented, sciences cultivated, laws ordained, and societies modelled, by the most profound wisdom of patriots and legislators" (EMPL: 148). Hume seemed to accept the view of the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle (384–322 BC) that happiness, or *eudaimonia*, was the ultimate end of all human action, the final goal for the sake of which we do everything else, but which we pursue for no other goal than to achieve it itself. Hume's argument was that we pursue the arts, science, and industry, and we frame our political and economic institutions, ultimately with the goal of allowing, enabling, and encouraging people to lead truly flourishing, happy, or eudaimonic lives. Or at least we should. But this requires us to have some idea about what a eudaimonic life is.

One aspect of the pursuit of eudaimonia, according to Hume, is work. He believed that happiness cannot be merely bestowed upon a person like a gift, but, rather, is something one must work for and achieve. It is, in fact, hard work. It requires an assessment of one's skills, abilities, and values; a reckoning of the opportunities one has, the obligations and responsibilities one has, and the constraints one faces; and it requires a personal commitment to order and engage one's life's activities to enable the chance of attaining eudaimonia. But perhaps one worries about the hard work this would require. If achieving eudaimonia is hard, and its prospects unfortunately uncertain, is the pursuit worth it? Hume captured this worry by asking: "shall that labour and attention, requisite to the attainment of thy end [of happiness], ever seem burdensome and intolerable?" (EMPL: 149). Hume's answer: "Know, that this labour itself is the chief ingredient of the felicity to which thou aspires, and that every enjoyment soon becomes insipid and distasteful, when not acquired by fatigue and industry" (EMPL: 149). Happiness, Hume said, is like a prey that a hunter

seeks, but a prey that “flies from his pursuit, or defends itself from his violence” (EMPL: 149). It takes work, strategy, flexibility, patience, perseverance, and industry to achieve. Only after such hard work and much concerted effort can its attainment provide genuine happiness, “felicity,” or eudaimonia.

According to Hume, however, it is not only hard work that is required: it must be hard work in the service of ends that are worthy of pursuit. Hume claimed that “the happiest disposition of mind is the *virtuous*; or, in other words, that which leads to action and employment, renders us sensible to the social passions, steels the heart against the assaults of fortune, reduces the affections to a just moderation, makes our own thoughts an entertainment to us, and inclines us rather to the pleasures of society and conversation, than to those of the senses” (EMPL: 168). Part of the work that is required to achieve our ultimate end of happiness, then, is a ranking of our values, including our moral values. We determine what is most valuable to us, what is second-most-valuable to us, and so on down the line. Because our resources are limited, we cannot, alas, achieve everything we want. We have to determine what tradeoffs we are willing to make, or what lower-ranked values we are willing to give up to enable us to achieve higher-ranked values; and we have to make sure that our ranking of values corresponds to our considered judgment about what virtue requires. Only in this way can we ensure we are putting ourselves in the best possible position to achieve, not mere pleasure or contentment, but genuine happiness, or eudaimonia.

Hume modeled these claims in his own life. He worked hard, producing, as we have seen, a large body of philosophical writing about an enormous range of topics—everything from metaphysics and epistemology to psychology and moral theory, to political economy and economics, to a history of England, to the history of religion, to aesthetics and a proposed standard of judgment for works of art. One theme that runs throughout Hume’s work is his desire not only to achieve happiness for himself, but to demonstrate for others what a truly happy and virtuous life is, and to recommend public institutions that could enable its attainment for ever more people. Hume’s recommendation of a liberal political order and a market-based commercial society were motivated by this noble and generous aim of learning from history and empirical observation

what could constitute a virtuous and happy life for human beings as they are actually constructed and given the actual constraints they face.

Friendship

One aspect of the above quotations bears emphasis. Hume wrote that happiness “inclines us rather to the pleasure of society and conversation” (EMPL: 168), and he believed that friendship—true friendship—is an indispensable element of a virtuous and thus happy life. Elsewhere Hume recommended “the study of the beauties, either of poetry, eloquence, music, or painting” because they “draw off the mind from the hurry of business and interest; cherish reflection; dispose to tranquillity; and produce an agreeable melancholy, which of all dispositions of the mind, is the best suited to love and friendship” (EMPL: 7). Hume repeatedly spoke of “the delicate pleasure of disinterested love and friendship” (EMPL: 169); he warned against jealousy, which “excludes men from all intimacies and familiarities with each other” and cautions that no one wants to be friends with a jealous person (EMPL: 184–5); and he told us that “*friendship* is a calm and sedate affection, conducted by reason and cemented by habit; springing from long acquaintance and mutual obligations; without jealousies or fears, and without those feverish fits of heat and cold, which cause such an agreeable torment in the amorous passion” (EMPL: 189).

True friendship, for Hume, involves a mutual concern for the good of each other, something that can arise only from “habit” and “long acquaintance and mutual obligations.” Hume’s repeated caution that jealousy can destroy friendship indicates that, for him, a true friend is a person who delights and finds joy in one’s virtue and accomplishments, who does not resent one’s successes, and who suffers along with one in one’s pains and failures. The ability to fully sympathize with another requires a thorough understanding of the other, something that can arise only from spending time with one another, getting to know one another well, and developing a genuine concern for one another’s well-being.

As I mentioned, Hume modeled this behaviour in his own life, and he was able to develop some deep and lasting friendships. After Hume’s death, Adam Smith wrote: “Upon the whole, I have always considered him, both in his lifetime and since his death, as approaching as nearly to the idea of a perfectly

wise and virtuous man, as perhaps the nature of human frailty will permit.”²⁰ High praise—indeed, such high praise that Smith was criticized for suggesting that a known skeptic and possible atheist could possibly warrant it when the consensus at the time was that only a Christian could be truly moral and virtuous. Yet Smith’s estimation that Hume approached the ideal of being a “perfectly wise and virtuous man” suggests that, by Hume’s argument, Hume should have been deeply happy.

Tragedy

I dwell on this because it seems surprising given the number of devastating disappointments Hume experienced in his life. And one cannot help but wonder whether Hume’s greatest disappointment was the many occasions on which his friends—and in particular his best friend, Adam Smith—failed him. Hume heaped praise on Smith’s *Theory of Moral Sentiments* and on his *Wealth of Nations*. Regarding the former, Hume wrote, with a raillery that bespeaks their friendship: “I proceed to tell you the melancholy news, that your book has been very unfortunate; for the public seem disposed to applaud it extremely” (HL1: 305). Regarding the latter, Hume wrote: “Euge! Belle! Dear Mr Smith: I am much pleas’d with your Performance” (HL2: 311). Smith, however, did not return the favor with any of Hume’s writings. Smith alluded to Hume several times in his writings, and named him in a few places, but there is a great gap between Hume’s praise and encouragement of Smith’s work and Smith’s of Hume’s. Hume expressed regret that the positions he took might damage Smith’s reputation; he wrote to Smith: “it mortifies me that I sometimes hurt my Friends” (HL1: 314). Hume repeatedly entreated Smith to visit him, and he even schemed to find excuses for Smith to live or work closer to Hume—but to no avail.

Perhaps the coup de grace, however, was that Smith refused Hume’s dying request that Smith publish Hume’s *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion* upon his death. Some have judged this refusal to be a stain on Smith’s character, though there are reasons to soften a negative judgment. The timing was bad: Hume died only months after Smith’s *Wealth of Nations* was published, and if Smith thereupon published Hume’s *Dialogues*, which was certain to create

20 Smith to William Strahan, 9 Nov. 1776 (Smith, 1987: 221).

an outcry and renewed accusations of skepticism and atheism, it might have affected both the sales of *The Wealth of Nations* and Smith's own scholarly reputation. Moreover, when Smith informed Hume of his reservations, Hume immediately relieved Smith of the burden of publishing the *Dialogues* (he said he would ask his nephew to do it), and Hume continued to treat Smith with respect and friendship. And, as we saw, after Hume died, Smith published the open letter claiming that Hume approached "as nearly to the idea of a perfectly wise and virtuous man, as perhaps the nature of human frailty will permit."²¹

Still, one cannot read Hume's correspondence with Smith regarding not only this issue but several others over decades of their friendship and not be struck by its lopsidedness: Hume's letters demonstrate that he considered Smith a dear friend in a deep, Aristotelian sense, while Smith's correspondence, on the whole, is both less frequent and less friendly. And Hume time and again entreated, even begged, Smith to visit him, write to him, and speak with him, while Smith again and again unaccountably simply did not. It is hard not to sympathize with Hume, and to wonder how he managed to maintain his characteristic cheerfulness when he had every reason to abandon it, how he managed to be generous and magnanimous toward others, even those whose disappointments were best positioned to cut him deeply.

Smith reported that in the days before his death, Hume joked about how he would attempt to distract Charon, the mythical ferryman who takes people across the river Styx to Hades, in an effort to delay the trip Charon would take Hume on (Smith, 1987: 219). Though Hume was by this point too weak even to rise from his bed, he nevertheless maintained his wit, humor, and sanguinity about his impending end. Regardless, then, of how the world—including his closest friends—treated him, Hume approached life with a vitality, with a seriousness of purpose tempered by a light-hearted sense of good humor, and a continuing desire to find joy in the world and communicate that joy to others.

Hume was thus a true friend, not only to those lucky enough to count themselves among his friends, but to philosophy, literature, history, virtue, and to all the world's inhabitants he did not know but whose nature he sought to understand and whose happiness he sincerely wished to promote. He was thus

21 My speculation is that Smith wrote this effusive praise of Hume upon Hume's death in part to assuage the guilt Smith felt from the knowledge that he never fully reciprocated, or even appreciated, Hume's friendship.

both a brilliant philosopher and a great and generous soul. Perhaps one might dare to hope he also achieved eudaimonia.