1. Of Superstition and Enthusiasm

1. How does superstition arise (SE 2)?
2. Explain how enthusiasm comes about (SE 3).
3.* In what way are superstition and enthusiasm of a ‘contrary nature’ (SE 2)?
4. The ‘first reflection’ deals with ‘priestly power’. Explain it briefly (SE 5–6).
5. Do you find the ‘second reflection’ plausible (SE 7–8)?
6. Why is superstition, but not enthusiasm, inconsistent with civil liberty (SE 9–10)?
7.* Why are superstition and enthusiasm ‘species of false religion’?

Background. (a) The opening ‘maxim’ also appears in The Natural History of Religion (§11), which is the first of the Four Dissertations of 1757. (b) Given Hume’s reservations about religion, it may seems peculiar that he refers to a ‘true religion’ in ¶1. It is hard to see what Hume means by this. There is a passage in Dialogues concerning Natural Religion (12.12), where Cleanthes (one of the three characters, and sometimes [controversially] associated at least partly with Hume’s view) says, “The proper office of religion is to regulate the heart of men, humanise their conduct, infuse the spirit of temperance, order, and obedience […]”. True religion is also associated with a kind of ‘natural piety’, i.e. a piety perhaps grounded in the recognition of the limits of human (epistemic) nature; or perhaps along the lines of Wordsworth: a reverent joy of nature (‘My heart leaps up when I behold / A rainbow in the sky’). Perhaps ironically, this would be surprisingly close to Stoic theology. (c) Hume removed a footnote about priests in later editions (after ‘Priests’ in ¶5). It reads, “By Priests I understand only the Pretenders to Power and Dominion, and to a superior Sanctity of Character, distinct from Virtue and good Morals. These are very different from Clergymen, who are set apart to the care of sacred Matters, and to conducting our public Devotions with greater Decency and Order. There is no Rank of Men more to be respected than the latter” (see Selected Essays, p. 350).

2. Of Suicide

Hume wrote Of Suicide and Of the Immortality of the Soul probably in the 1750, yet suppressed their publication. The reasons are not clear. One reason is that Hume felt threatened by church authorities. Another reason is that he found both essays wanting: for the planned Five Dissertations, he had also written an essay on geometry, which he suppressed when someone pointed out mistakes. And in the published Four Dissertations, he did publish the Natural History of Religion, which is just as critical of religion as Su and IS. (Hume replaced Su and IS with Tr and ST; for the whole story, see his letter to William Strahan, 25.1.1772, HL II 252–4).

1. Compare the opening with Hume’s thoughts on superstition in SE (see above) (Su 1–2).
2.* Hume writes as if philosophy was a ‘cure’ or medicine (Su 1–2). Is this consistent with what he writes in *The Sceptic* (esp. Sc 29)?

3. What is the aim of the essay (Su 3)?

4. How does Hume’s opponent use providence for arguing against suicide (Su 5–20)?

5.* But it is also providence that Hume uses to defend suicide. How does he do this? You could use Su 17 for discussion, but the main idea appears a few times at Su 8–20.

6. Do you think Hume’s considerations and examples show that suicide is not a harm to society (Su 21–7)?

7. Interpret the final paragraph by connecting Hume’s thoughts about superstition (Su 1–2) and happiness (Su 29).

8.* Capture what you think is Hume’s ‘message’ in one sentence. (Ask yourself: what does he actually say about suicide, does he promote it, or does he merely think there is nothing wrong with it, or does he remove the grounds for thinking suicide is bad, or show—consistent with the ‘experimental method’—how the view that suicide is a ‘crime’ has come about, etc.?)

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**Background.** (a) The Structure of the essay: ¶1–3, introductory remarks about superstition and philosophy, statement of the aim; ¶4, the three target charges; ¶¶5–20, that suicide does not ‘encroach’ divine authority; ¶¶21–7, that suicide does not violate our duties to others; ¶¶28, that suicide does not violate our duties to ourselves; ¶29, concluding remark about happiness and freedom. (b) The three arguments against suicide (Su 4) match those by Aquina’s in the *Summa Theologica* (Part II-II, question 64, article 5).1 (c) The ‘surest argument of supreme wisdom’ (Su 5) is a cosmological argument for the existence of God. This type of argument works backwards from alleged facts about the universe to some divine cause for these facts. In the *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, Cleanthes (a character in the dialogue) defends a version of such a ‘surest’ argument, *viz.* the design argument, which concludes from the apparent presence of ‘harmony and proportion’ to some divine designer. (d) There is an allusion to miracles at Su 7. For more details, see ‘Of Miracles’ in the *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* (esp. EHU 10.12).

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