The Four Essays on ‘human life and on happiness’

1. The four essays explore the nature of the good life, and thus happiness, and philosophy can be, or is, a means for achieving it: hence ‘happiness essays’.

2. They are presented as speeches, or perhaps inter-connected soliloquies. The style of Ep, Sto, and Pl are surprisingly Non-Humean, more like ironical allusions to ‘enthusiasm’ (Of Superstition and Enthusiasm) or even parodies of the ‘easy philosophy’ (cf. further reading B).1

3. Cicero is the inspiration for both theme and style. The main topic of De finibus: “what is the end, what is the ultimate and final goal, to which all our deliberations on living well and acting rightly should be directed? What does nature pursue as the highest good to be sought, what does she shun as the greatest evil?” (I.11). Cicero puts the different opinions in opposition, and in the end rejects (more or less) all of them. Cicero is hence a sceptic like Hume. (For more on Hume’s scepticism: optional reading C.) The style of Ep, Sto, and Pl resembles T 1.4 (see further reading D).

4. Are the essays progressive, with Pl being the most extravagant tendency or temperament? And is The Sceptic really Hume’s self-portrait?

5. Is their purpose therapeutic rather than analytical (‘anatomical’)—designed to change rather than inform?2 But can philosophy really be a ‘medicine of the mind’ (Sc 28)?

6. Does Hume dismiss the ancient schools? Perhaps. RP 20 suggests that Aristotle debased learning, and RP 23 that blind adherence to the schools led to ‘servile philosophy’ that has now lost all ‘credit and authority’; and that truth can be found in nature, not in the ‘schools’. In a letter, Hume writes: “[…] being smit with [Cicero’s, Seneca’s, and Plutarch’s] beautiful Representations of Virtue & Philosophy, I undertook the Improvement of my Temper and Will, along with my Reason & Understanding. I was continually fortifying myself with Reflections against Death, & Poverty, & Shame, & Pain, & all the other Calamities of Life. These no doubt are exceeding useful, when join’d with an active Life; because the Occasion being presented along with the Reflection, works it into the Soul, & makes it take a deep Impression, but in Solitude they serve little other Purpose, than to waste the Spirits, the Force of the Mind meeting with no Resistance, but wasting itself in the Air, like our Arm when it misses its Aim. […] I found that the moral Philosophy transmitted to us by Antiquity, labor’d under the same Inconvenience that has been found in their natural Philosophy, of being entirely Hypothetical, & depending more upon Invention than Experience. Every one

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consulted his Fancy in erecting Schemes of Virtue & of Happiness, without regarding human Nature, upon which every moral Conclusion must depend” (Letter to George Cheyne, March/April 1734, HL I 14–6). Can we learn anything from the ancients?

7. In the final paragraph of the third book of the Treatise, Hume mentions that reflections on happiness ‘require a work apart’ (T 3.3.6.6)—these four essays (see further reading D). In the same paragraph, he mentions the important painter–anatomist analogy (cf. HL I 32–3).

8. How could we choose between these four philosophies? Hume: taste, sentiment, not principle. A sentiment is perhaps like an attitude, or a belief, which is a ‘lively idea’ (see EHU 5.12), somewhere between a passion and a judgement.

1. The Epicurean (Ep)

9. The focus is on natural pleasures. This includes sensual and pleasures—hence hedonism (ἡδονή, hedone); but also mental and social ones: love, friendship, and conversation. Epicureans reject the Stoic’s ‘therapy of desire’ as artificial and stilted. For Hume, natural ≠ original. Some artificial qualities are ‘natural’, and even if they depend on society and custom (and thus are ‘artificial’), they are constitutive of human nature. The Epicurean flaw is to equate ‘non-natural’ with ‘arbitrary’, and hence to reject anything that is not natural.

10. The good life is the pleasurable (or pain-free) life. The pleasures are transient, but so is everything else. The best way to achieve happiness is to retreat from the world. For Hume, Epicureanism is a ‘selfish system of morals’ (EPM App. 2.3), i.e. a version of egoism. The Epicurean seems happy without any contribution to the life she/he enjoys (cf. Ep 13–6).

11. Form: over the course of the essay, Hume moves from the genre of the essay to the genre of dialogue, increasingly hyperbolic and out of rhetorical control. Hume’s other dialogue: Dialogues concerning Natural Religion (1779), which is modelled after Cicero too (De natura deorum, which discusses the theology of the ancient schools).

2. The Stoic (Sto)

12. The Epicurean hedonism grounds in a flawed view of human nature: for a Stoic, happiness needs to be achieved, it does not arise without our actions and reflection. Achieving virtue is hard work, not least as it involves improving our powers and faculties, and so, in a sense, achieving control over, or perhaps even overcome, nature. Tranquillity (or happiness) can be achieved by mastering our desires and controlling our passions, the pursuit of virtue (while accepting its elusiveness), and thus, self-improvement. Hence, the key to human flourishing is therapy of the soul (θεραπεία means ‘looking after’ or ‘taking care’).

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13. The Stoic Zeno held that the good life is the one that ‘flows well’; or is in tune with nature (the cosmic flow of things), and is internally harmonious or coherent (cf. Plato: the balanced or ‘just’ soul). Moral progress consists in understanding the rational cosmic plan and how we fit in it, learning about ourselves and our nature, and embrace fate willingly (not resist it).

14. Hume’s relationship with Stoicism is charged (see the letter on p. 1; see also (e.g, EHU 5.1, NHR 12.22). See the extract for an example of his suspicions.

15. While the Stoic engages with the world, she/he seems deluded about the importance of diligent improvement. The Stoic also over-emphasises the intellect.

16. Yet, Hume seems to have a soft spot for the Stoic nonetheless. For some concessions, see Sto 13, where sympathy comes close to the sage’s ‘genuine passions’ or ‘true feelings’; or Sc 23, 51n., where Hume admits that ‘moral precepts’ have some (limited) role to play; or his idea that ‘soften’ the (unruly) passions promotes sympathy and affection (with the [social] universe?). This suggests some (thin) common ground between Humean ethics and the Stoic. Yet still, ‘Nature is always too strong for principle’ (EHU 12.23).

17. Background: despondent ‘Conclusion’ of T 1 (see further reading D). Hume recognises that what needs done is no more speculative (moral) principles, but an exploration of human nature itself. So, when he talks about principles, he means those that govern our nature, not ones we find by ‘school’ reasoning. All moral and political laws can be ‘reduced’, i.e. traced back, to principles of human nature (cf. Of the Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences, That Politics May be Reduced to a Science).

3. The Platonist (Pl)

18. By reflection and devotion, the Platonist finds virtue not in perfection of human mind (this is vain), but in nature itself, and the ‘artist’ of nature: the most perfect, or excellent, being. For Hume, this theism is too ‘enthusiastic’, and it is misleading: devotion to an abstract and thus unimaginable entity is irrelevant to our lives (see Sc 23).

19. Again, there are (slim) affinities to Hume himself. E.g., he maintains that virtuous actions and praise relate to the human minds and ideas, so that motives matter for normative evaluations (T 3.3.1).
20. For the Sceptic, there is no one way of becoming happy, or to flourish. So, there may be some truth in the previous systems? A ‘just mixture’?

21. Does this essay express Hume’s own views? Perhaps. It seems certainly in line with other passages on scepticism (see further reading C). And the essay contains some succinct exposition of Humean ethics (see Sc 14–18).

22. Context. If The Sceptic expresses his views, and effectively rejects the Stoic view of happiness, then Hume’s application for the post in Edinburgh in 1745 is ill judged: a degree to ‘moralising’ and instructing in virtue was expected for all university teaching.4 Hume’s project to ‘anatomise’ human nature seems too detached, too little pedagogical. He was also publicly attacked for promoting scepticism. See extract for a rebuttal.

23. Perhaps, Hume concedes that philosophy cannot instruct people about the end of their lives, or have a practical role in showing what might make them happy. He thus re-directs philosophy from morality to politics: taking for granted certain basic needs (security, liberty, property), he engages political topics in a dispassionate analytical (‘anatomical’) discussion.5

24. What is happiness for Hume? In The Delicacy of Taste, he suggests that the right enjoyment of the ‘common occurrences of life’ largely constitutes happiness (DT 1). So, rather than pleasure or wisdom, well-being seems to be the final value of life.

25. Further Readings (available for download): (A) Treatise 3.3.6, ‘Conclusion of this Book’. (B) Essays concerning Human Understanding, Essay I ‘Of the Different Species of Philosophy’ (i.e. Enquiry I). (C) Essays concerning Human Understanding, Essay XII ‘Of the Sceptical or Academical Philosophy’ (i.e. Enquiry XII). (D) Treatise 1.4.7, ‘Conclusion of this Book’.

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4 Stewart, ‘The Stoic Legacy’.