

FOUR ESSAYS

Tragedy, The Standard of Taste, Suicide, The Immortality of the Soul

David Hume

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[Brackets] enclose editorial explanations. Small ·dots· enclose material that has been added, but can be read as though it were part of the original text. Occasional •bullets, and also indenting of passages that are not quotations, are meant as aids to grasping the structure of a sentence or a thought. Every four-point ellipsis indicates the omission of a brief passage that seems to present more difficulty than it is worth.

First launched: July 2006

Last amended: January 2008

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Suicide

[(a) In this essay Hume speaks of 'God', but also of 'the Almighty', 'the Deity', and 'Providence'. The present version uses 'God' for all these. (b) Hume uses 'criminal' and 'lawful' to mean 'morally wrong' and 'morally permissible' respectively; he is *not* talking about the law of the land.] One considerable advantage that arises from philosophy is the wonderful antidote it provides against superstition and false religion. The other remedies against that pestilent disease are all useless, or at least unreliable. Most purposes of life are well served by •plain good sense and practical skills, but •these have no effect on superstition and false religion. History, as well as daily experience, provide examples of men with great abilities in practical affairs who have all their lives crouched under slavery to the crudest superstition. Even gaiety and sweetness of temper, which help to cure every other wound, provide no remedy for such a virulent poison. We can see this especially in the fair sex: they are richly endowed by nature, but feel many of their joys being blasted by this insistent intruder. But once philosophy has gained possession of the mind, superstition is effectively excluded; it is fair to say that philosophy has a more complete victory over •this enemy than over •most of the vices and imperfections to which human nature is prone. Love or anger, ambition or greed, have their root in personal character and feelings, which •even• the soundest reason can hardly ever fully correct; but because superstition is based on false opinion, it must immediately vanish when true philosophy has inspired sounder views concerning higher powers. In this case, the contest between the disease and the medicine is a more even one; and nothing can prevent the medicine—•philosophy— from winning, provided that it isn't a tricked-up tissue of falsehoods.

There's no need for me here to glorify the merits of philosophy by displaying the pernicious tendency of the vice—•superstition—of which it cures the human mind; •for the evils of superstition have been known for centuries•. Cicero says:

The superstitious man is miserable in every scene, in every incident in life. Even *sleep*, which banishes all the other cares of unhappy mortals, brings him new things to be terrified of, when he looks back on his dreams and reads them as predictions of future calamities.

I would add that although death alone can finally end his misery, he doesn't dare to escape into its shelter, but prolongs his miserable existence because of his absurd fear that he might offend •God•, his maker, if he uses the power that he has been given by that beneficent being—I mean, the power to end his own life•. The gifts of God and nature are snatched from us by this cruel enemy, •superstition•. At a time when one step—•one small action—would remove us from the regions of pain and sorrow, superstition's threats •deter us from taking that step, and• chain us down to a hated existence that is made miserable more by superstition than by anything else.

There are people who have been brought by life's calamities to the point of needing to take this fatal remedy, and have had their suicide attempt fail because of the interference of well-meaning friends. Very few of them can steel themselves to try a second time. We have such a great horror of death that when •the prospect of• it presents itself to a man in any form other than the one he has tried to get used to, it acquires new terrors and overcomes his feeble courage.

But when the menaces of •superstition are added to this •natural timidity, it's not surprising that this inhuman tyrant deprives men of all power over their lives, considering that it even deprive us of many pleasures and enjoyments that we are strongly inclined to pursue. Let us here try to restore men to the liberty they were born with, by examining all the common arguments against suicide and showing that, according to the views of all the ancient philosophers, suicide can be free from every charge of guilt or blame.

If suicide is criminal, it must be an infraction of our duty either **(1)** to God, **(2)** to our neighbour, or **(3)** to ourselves. ·Let us examine these in turn·.

(1) The following considerations may be enough to show that suicide doesn't conflict with our duty to God. In order to govern the •material world, the almighty creator has established general and unchanging laws by which all bodies, from the greatest planet to the smallest particle of matter, are kept in their proper places and kept behaving as they ought. To govern the •animal world, God has equipped all living creatures with bodily and mental powers—with senses, passions, appetites, memory, and judgment—by which they are driven or regulated in the course of life they are destined to pursue. These two distinct governments—of the ·inanimate· material world and the animal world—continually encroach upon each other; each of them sometimes blocks and sometimes helps the operations of the other. The nature and qualities of the bodies in the environment limit what men and other animals can do, and affect how they do it; for example, a river brings a traveller to a halt because he can't get across. And, ·in the other direction·, the activities of ·men and other· animals are constantly affecting the qualities and behaviour of those bodies; for example, men alter the course of a river so that it will drive a machine that serves their purposes. But though the provinces of the material and animal powers are

not kept entirely separate, this doesn't lead to any discord or disorder in the created world. On the contrary, •the mixing, combining and contrasting of all the various powers of inanimate bodies and living creatures gives rise to •the surprising harmony and proportion that provide the best evidence for the existence of a supremely wise God.

No individual event shows God's providence; what shows it are the general and unchanging laws that he has established from the beginning of time. Every event can be said to be, in a sense, God's work; all events come from the powers he has equipped his creatures with. Consider

- a house that falls by its own weight, and
- a house destroyed by the hands of men.

These are equally cases of something being brought to ruin by God's providence. The powers of a human being are as much God's workmanship as are the laws of motion and gravitation. When the passions are at work, judgment dictates and the limbs obey—this is all the operation of God; and his government of the universe depends upon these animate sources of energy as well as upon the inanimate ones. All events are equally important in the eyes of that infinite being who takes in at a glance the furthest regions of space and the remotest periods of time. There is no event, however important to us, that God has •exempted from the general laws that govern the universe, and •set aside to be directly managed by him in some other way. The rise and fall of states and empires depends on the smallest whims or passions of individual men; and the lives of men are shortened or lengthened by the smallest accident of air or diet, sunshine or tempest. Nature carries right on ·through all this·; and if general laws *are* ever broken by particular volitions on God's part, it is in some way that we don't notice. Just as on the one hand the elements and other inanimate parts of the creation carry on their action without regard to

the particular interests and situations of men, so also men are allowed to use their own judgment and discretion dealing with the various upsets in the material world, and may use all the powers they have to provide for their ease, happiness, or survival.

Now, consider a man who is tired of life and hunted by pain and misery, and who bravely overcomes his natural terror of death and makes his escape from this cruel scene ·by taking his own life·. We are told that this man has made God indignant by encroaching on the office of God's providence and disturbing the order of the universe. What are we make of this? [God's 'office' is his role, his job, the work that is allotted to him (by himself, as it happens).] Are we to say that God has in some special way kept the disposal of the lives of men for himself—·for his personal attention·—rather than leaving that outcome, like most others, to be settled by the general laws by which the universe is governed? No—that is plainly false; the lives of •men depend on the same laws as the lives of all •other animals, which are subjected to the general laws of matter and motion. The fall of a tower, or a drink of poison, will destroy a man just as well as the lowliest animal; a flood indiscriminately sweeps away *everything* that comes within reach of its fury. Well, then, since men's lives always depend on the general laws of matter and motion, are we to say that it is a crime for a man to end his own life because it is *always* criminal to encroach upon these laws or disturb their operation? That seems absurd; all animals—men included—are entrusted to their own prudence and skill for their conduct in the world. They are fully authorized to alter any operations of nature as far as they can. Without that they couldn't survive for a moment: every action, every move someone makes, makes a difference to how some part of the material world is arranged, and diverts the general laws of motion from their ordinary course

(·like diverting a river·). Putting these conclusions together, then, we find that human life depends upon the general laws of matter and motion, and that you don't encroach on God's office when you disturb or alter these general laws. Doesn't it follow that everyone is free to end his own life when he wishes to do so? Can't he lawfully use this power that nature has conferred on him?

If we are to stop this from being the obviously right conclusion we must show a reason why a man's •general permission to intervene in nature doesn't apply to the •particular case ·of intervention to end his own life·. Is it because human life is so important that when someone cuts his own life short this is a case where the human desire to take care of one's own interests has carried someone far out of bounds? No! A man's life has no more importance to the universe than an oyster's. And even if it *were* enormously important, the facts about human nature and our place in the universe bring the ending of our lives within the scope of our planning; we are repeatedly forced to make decisions that affect when we shall die.

Suppose that the disposal of human life is up to God alone, so that anyone who commits suicide is encroaching on God's rights. In that case, acting for the •preservation of one's life would be just as criminal as acting for its •destruction. In fending off a stone that is falling on my head *I disturb the course of nature*: I trespass on God's territory by making my life longer than he intended it to be, this intention being expressed by the general laws of matter and motion to which he had subjected my life.

A hair, a fly, an insect can destroy this mighty being whose life is ·supposedly· of such importance. If •something depends on such insignificant causes as those, isn't it reasonable to suppose that human prudence may lawfully dispose of •it? It wouldn't be a crime for me to divert the

Nile or Danube from its course, if I could. So where is the crime of diverting a few ounces of blood from their natural channel?

[From here on, Hume writes as if he were proposing to commit suicide, and arguing with an opponent. In fact, he lived for twenty more years; and he went to his death (from an illness) with a calm serenity that is admired by everyone.]

Do you picture me as discontented with God or cursing the day I was born, because I leave life behind, putting an end to an existence that would make me miserable if it lasted any longer? I am far from having such feelings! What is at issue here is not how I feel but what I believe. I am convinced of a certain matter of fact that even you admit is possible, namely that human life can be unhappy; and I am also convinced that if I stay alive much longer my life won't be worth living. But so far from *complaining* against God, I *thank* him for the good that I have already enjoyed, and for the power he has given me to escape the bad times that threaten me. You foolishly imagine that you don't have such a power, and that you must stay alive even if you are loaded with pain and sickness, with shame and poverty—so *you* are the one who has reason to complain against God!

Don't you teach that when anything bad happens to me I ought to be resigned to my fate? And don't you maintain this even when the bad things come through the malice of my enemies, because the actions of men are God's work as much as the actions of inanimate beings? Well, then, when I fall on my own sword, my death comes to me from God's hands just as it would if it had involved a lion, a precipice, or a fever.

When you require me to submit to my fate in every calamity that comes my way, you aren't forbidding me to avoid or escape the calamity, if I can, by skill and hard work. Well, why may I not employ one remedy as well as

another—i.e. employ suicide rather than some other kind of avoidance?

If my life isn't *mine*, it would be criminal for me to put it in danger as well as to end it. In that case, it wouldn't be right to praise as 'a hero' someone who is led by friendship or the desire for glory to put his own life in danger. . . .

No being has any power or ability that it doesn't get from God; and no being, however wild and weird its actions are, can interfere with God's plans or disorder the universe. Those actions are God's work just as much as is the 'normal' chain of events that they interfere with; and whichever one of the two prevails—the 'normal' course of events or an action that interferes with it—we can infer that just because it *did* prevail it is what God wanted. It makes no difference whether or not the agent is animate, whether or not it is a thinking being: its power still comes from God and is included in the order he has laid down for the world. When the horror of pain conquers the love of life, and when a voluntary action gets in ahead of the effects of blind causes, this is a consequence of the powers and sources of energy that God has implanted in his creatures. The divine plan is still intact, and out of reach of any harm from humans.

It is impious, says the old **Roman** superstition, to divert rivers from their course, or interfere in any other way with processes that should be left to nature. It is impious, says the **French** superstition, to inoculate against small-pox by voluntarily producing fevers and illnesses, thus trespassing on God's territory. It is impious, says the **modern European** superstition, to rebel against God by ending our own life. So why isn't it impious to build houses, plough fields, sail upon the ocean? In *all* these actions we use our powers of mind and body to make some difference in the course of nature, and in *none* of them do we do anything more than that. So they are all equally innocent or equally criminal.

You may say:

When a soldier has been stationed as a sentinel in a particular place, if he deserts his post without being ordered to do so he is guilty of a crime. Well, God has stationed you in a particular place, like a sentinel, and if you desert your post without being recalled, you are also guilty of rebellion against God, and have made him displeased with you.

What makes you think that God has placed me in this station? It seems to me that I owe my birth to a long chain of causes, many of which involved voluntary human actions. 'But God guided all these causes', 'I hear you say', 'including those voluntary actions: nothing happens in the universe without his consent and co-operation.' But in that case my death, even if I bring it about voluntarily, happens only with God's consent; and whenever I find pain or sorrow so hard to bear that I am tired of life, I can conclude that I am being clearly and explicitly recalled from my post.

It is surely God who has placed me right here right now; but can't I leave the room when I want to, without being open to the charge of deserting my post or station? When I am dead, the principles [see Glossary] of which I am composed will still play their part in the universe, and will be just as useful to it as they were when they composed this individual creature. From the universe's point of view, the difference will be no greater than that between my being indoors and my being outdoors. The former change is more important *to me* than the latter, but not to *the universe*.

The idea that a created being could disturb the order of the world, or intrude into God's affairs, is a kind of *blasphemy*: it credits the created being with having powers and abilities that •it didn't get from its creator, and that •aren't subject to his government and authority. No doubt a man can displease God by disturbing *society*, but he hasn't

any chance of disturbing the way *the world* is governed. As for the anti-social actions that displease God: how do we know that they do? We know it from the way he has constructed human nature—from our feeling of remorse if we ourselves have been guilty of such actions, and our blame and disapproval when we observe them in others.

(2) So much for the thesis that suicide is criminal because it infringes on our duty to *God*. Now let us turn to the question of whether suicide is a breach of our duty to *our fellow-man* and to *society*.

A man who retires from life doesn't harm society: he only ceases to do good, and if *that* counts as doing harm, it is the very mildest form of harm-doing.

All our obligations to do good to society seem to involve doing something *in return*: I get the benefits of society, so I ought to promote its interests. But when I withdraw myself altogether from society, can I still be obliged to serve it? And even if our obligations to do good did last for ever, they certainly have some limits; I am not obliged to do a small good to society at the expense of a great harm to myself; so why should I prolong a miserable existence because of some trivial advantage that the public may perhaps receive from me? Suppose I am old and unwell: can't I lawfully resign from whatever jobs I have, and spend all my time coping with these calamities and doing what I can to reduce the miseries of my remaining years? If so, why isn't it lawful for me to cut short these miseries at once by •suicide•, an action that does no more harm to society?

•Now try three other suppositions•. Suppose that

- I am no longer able to do any good for society, or that
- I am a burden to society, or that
- my life is getting in the way of some other person's being much more useful to society.

In such cases it must be not only •lawful but •praiseworthy

for me to take my own life. And most people who are at all tempted to commit suicide are in some such situation; those who have health, or power, or authority, usually have better reason to be on good terms with the world.

Suppose the following:

A man is engaged in a conspiracy to bring about something that will be in the public interest. He is arrested as a suspect, is threatened with torture on the rack; and knows from his own weakness that if he is tortured he will tell the authorities who the other conspirators are and what they are planning.

Could that man do better for the public interest than by putting a quick end to a miserable life? [He cites an historical example, giving no details.]

Again, suppose that a felon has been justly condemned to a shameful death: can we think of *any* reason why he ought not to get in ahead of his punishment by taking his own life, thus saving himself from all the anguish of seeing death approaching him? He doesn't encroach on God's preserves any more than did the judge who ordered his execution; and his voluntary death is as advantageous to society as it is to him, because it rids society of a pernicious member.

(3) After the questions of my duty to God and my duty to society, we turn to the question of my duty to myself. Suicide can *often* be consistent with self-interest and with one's duty to oneself; this can't be questioned by anyone who accepts that age, sickness, or misfortune may make life a burden that is even worse than annihilation. I don't believe that anyone ever threw away his life while it was worth keeping. Our natural horror of death is too great to be overcome by small motives. It may happen that a man takes his own life although his state of health or fortune didn't seem to require this remedy, but we can be sure that he was cursed with such an incurable depravity or depression as must poison all enjoyment and make him as miserable as if he had been loaded with the most grievous misfortunes.

If suicide is a crime, only cowardice can drive us to it. If it is not a crime, both prudence and courage should lead us to rid ourselves of existence when it becomes a burden. If that time comes, suicide is our only way to be useful to society—setting an example which, if imitated, would preserve to everyone his chance for happiness in life, and effectively free him from all risk of misery.²

² It would be easy to prove that suicide is as lawful under Christianity as it was to the heathens. There isn't a single text of scripture prohibiting it. That great and infallible rule of faith and practice, which must control all philosophy and human reasoning, has left us free in this matter of cutting our lives short. Scripture does recommend that we resign ourselves to [= 'patiently put up with'] our fate; but that refers only to troubles that are unavoidable, not to ones that can be remedied by prudence or courage. 'Thou shalt not kill'—the sixth of Moses' ten commandments—is obviously meant to condemn only the killing of *others* over whose life we have no legitimate authority. Like most of scripture's commands, this one must be modified by reason and common sense; that is clear from the conduct of judges who condemn criminals to death, despite the letter of the law laid down in the sixth commandment. But even if this commandment were quite explicitly a condemnation of suicide, it wouldn't have any authority now; for *all* the law of Moses is abolished by Christianity, except when it is supported by the law of nature. And I have already tried to show that suicide is not prohibited by that law: in all cases, Christians and heathens are on precisely the same footing. . . . The power of committing suicide is regarded by the Roman writer Pliny as an advantage that men have even above God. [Hume quotes the Latin.]