

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.

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The Immortality of the Soul

By the mere light of reason it seems difficult to prove that the soul is immortal; the arguments for immortality are usually based either on **(1)** metaphysical themes, or **(2)** moral ones, or **(3)** physical ones. [In Hume's time 'physical' meant something like 'pertaining to how things stand in the real world'; it did not imply a limitation to the world of *matter*.] But in reality it is the Gospel, and that alone, that has brought life and immortality to light [Hume's exact phrase].

(1) Metaphysicians often assume that the soul is immaterial, and that thought couldn't possibly belong to a material substance. But we are taught by *sound* metaphysics that the notion of *substance* is wholly confused and imperfect, and that our only idea of any •substance is the idea of a •collection of particular qualities inhering in an unknown *something*. So matter and spirit [= 'soul' = 'mind'] are fundamentally equally unknown, and we can't find out what qualities either of them has. We are also taught that questions about causes and effects can't ever be answered *a priori*—i.e. just by •thinking—and that •experience is our only basis for judgments about causes. So if we are to discover whether

a suitably structured portion of matter can be the cause of thought,

we'll have to discover this through •experience. Abstract •reasonings can't settle any question of fact or existence, •such as the question of whether matter ever thinks. •But the unsettled nature of that question isn't the sole reason for doubting that the soul is immortal. Suppose we knew that a spiritual (•and thus immaterial) substance is spread all through the universe, . . . and is the only thing that has thoughts; we would still have reason to conclude *from analogy* that nature uses •this spiritual stuff• in the way she

uses the other kind of stuff, matter. She uses matter as a kind of paste or clay: works it up into a variety of forms and things, dismantles each of these after a while, and then makes something new from its substance. Thus, the same material substance can successively compose the •bodies of many different animals; and so—our analogical reasoning leads us to conclude—the same spiritual substance may compose their •minds, in which case the •consciousness of •human and other• animals, i.e. the •system of thought that they formed during life, may always be dissolved by death. As for the new thing that nature makes out of the spiritual stuff that was for a while x's mind: x has no stake in that, and no reason to care about it. Even those who are perfectly sure that the soul is mortal have never denied that the stuff the soul is made out of is immortal. . . .

In the ordinary course of nature, •anything that can be brought into existence can be driven out of existence, or—putting the same thing the other way around—anything that can't go out of existence didn't ever come into existence. (I say 'the *ordinary* course of nature' because I am setting aside the possibility of God's intervening in the laws of nature—which is something that science and philosophy should always set aside!) Thus, if the soul is immortal it existed before our birth •as well as after our death•; and if the before-birth existence is none of *our* concern, then the same holds for the existence after death. Animals undoubtedly feel, think, love, hate, will, and even reason, though less well than men do; are *their* souls also immaterial and immortal?

(2) Let us now consider the **moral** arguments, chiefly the ones that appeal to God's justice, which is supposed to be further interested in the future punishment of the vicious

and reward of the virtuous [‘future’ here means ‘after our death’]. These arguments are based on the assumption that God has attributes other than the ones he has put into play in this universe—the only universe we know. From what do we infer the existence of these further attributes?

We can safely say that

- If we know that God has actually done x, then x is best;

but it is very dangerous for us to assert that

- If x seems to us best, then God must do x.

How often would this reasoning fail us with regard to the present world?

But if *any* of nature’s purposes are clear to us, we can say that (so far as we can judge by natural reason) the whole scope and intention of man’s creation is limited to the present life. When anyone looks beyond that ·to the after-life·, how weak his concerns about it are! Any beliefs he has involving this floating idea of the after-life are less steady, and have less effect on his behaviour, than the flimsiest guess about some matter of fact relating to everyday life. I am saying this about how men think and feel on the basis of the •natural ·in-born· inherent structure of their mind and passions. Some people do have strange terrors with regard to the after-life, but those terrors would quickly vanish if they weren’t •artificially fed by indoctrination. And what about the indoctrinators? What is *their* motive? It is only to earn a living, and to acquire power and riches, in *this* world. That they work so hard and zealously at this is, therefore, evidence against them!

If after the end of this life there will be an after-life that is infinitely more important than this one, how cruel and wicked and unfair it is of nature to make the present life the only one that we naturally care about or know anything about! Would a kindly and wise being engage in such a

barbarous deceit?

All through nature we find that an animal’s •abilities are exactly proportioned to •what it needs to do. Man’s reason makes him much superior to the other animals, and his needs are proportionately greater than theirs: his whole time, and his whole ability, activity, courage, and passion, are kept busy protecting him from the ·potential· miseries of his present condition, and they are often—indeed nearly *always*—not adequate for the business assigned them. . . .

The powers of men are no more superior to their wants, considered merely in this life, than those of foxes and hares are, compared to *their* wants and to the span of their lives. The inference from parity of reason is therefore obvious—the inference, that is, to the conclusion that men don’t have any powers that are superfluous to their needs in this life and so are probably needed in the after-life·.

On the theory that the soul is *mortal*, it is easy to explain why women’s abilities are less than men’s. It is because their domestic life requires no higher capacities of mind or body than they actually have. But this fact becomes absolutely insignificant—it *vanishes*—on the religious theory, according to which the two sexes have equally large tasks, so that their powers of reason and perseverance ought also to have been equal; and—·coming back to my previous theme·—the powers of both sexes ought to have been infinitely greater than they actually are.

Every effect implies a cause, which implies another, ·and so on backwards· until we reach the first cause of all, which is God. Therefore, everything that happens is ordered to happen by him, ·so that· nothing can be the object of his punishment or vengeance.

By what •rule are punishments and rewards distributed? What is the divine •standard of merit and demerit? Shall we suppose that God has the same sentiments [= ‘the same

kinds of feelings and attitudes] as *humans*? That is a very bold hypothesis; but we have no conception of any sentiments other than human ones. So, whatever sentiments we suppose God to have, let us apply *human* feelings and attitudes to the system of rewards and punishments that is standardly attributed to God. If we try to apply standards of approval and blame other than human ones, we'll get into a total muddle. What teaches us that there is any such thing as a moral distinction, if not our own sentiments? [still = 'feelings and attitudes']

We shall find that the system in question, judged by the human standard, fails in at least four ways. [Hume's presentation of this material is slightly re-ordered in what follows.]

(a) According to human sentiments, essential parts of individual merit include the person's being

sensible,
brave,
well mannered,
hard working,
prudent,
intellectually brilliant.

Shall we then construct a heaven for poets and heroes, like the elysium of ancient mythology? Why confine all rewards to one kind of virtue?

(b) Heaven and hell involve two distinct sorts of men, good men and bad men; but the vast majority of us don't fall cleanly into either category, and instead float between vice and virtue. Suppose you went all over the place with the intention of giving a good supper to the righteous, and a thorough beating to the wicked: you would often be at a loss how to choose, finding that the merits and the demerits of most men and women scarcely add up to righteousness or to wickedness.

(c) Our ideas of goodness and justice condemn any punishment that has no proper end or purpose. We aren't willing to inflict punishment on a criminal *just* because of our sense that he is to blame and deserve to be punished. (Perhaps this isn't true of a victim of the crime, though it may hold for him too if he is a good-natured man.) And we have this attitude to the infliction of the ordinary punishments that human law inflicts, which are trivial compared with what God is said to have in store for the wicked. When judges and juries harden their hearts against the sentiments of humanity, it is only because of their reflection on what is needed in the public interest. [Hume illustrates juridical mercy through a story from ancient Rome, based on a passage in Suetonius which he seems to have misunderstood. Then, after a fairly savage side-swipe at 'bigoted priests', he sums up his point about our thinking that punishment is wrong unless it has an end or purpose, by saying that this attitude of ours condemns the system of punishment attributed to God, because 'no end can be served by punishment after the whole scene is closed'. He doesn't explain that striking last phrase.]

(d) According to our ideas, punishment should bear some proportion to the offence. Why then would there be eternal punishment for the short-term offences of a frail creature like man? Our moral ideas come mostly from our thoughts about the interests of human society. Those interests are short-term and minor; ought they to be guarded by punishments that are eternal and infinite? The eternal damnation of one man is an infinitely greater evil in the universe than the overthrow of a billion kingdoms.

The view that there will be a life after death goes with the view that our present life is a probationary state—one in which we are tested to see if we are fit for what is to come. Nature handles human lives as though it *wanted* to refute this notion of a probationary state, by making human

infancy so frail and mortal, with half of mankind dying before they are rational creatures and thus fit for testing.

(3) Physical arguments from the analogy of nature are the only philosophical [here = 'scientific'] considerations that should be brought to bear on the question of the immortality of the soul, or indeed any other factual question. And they count heavily in favour of the *mortality* of the soul.

Where any two items *x* and *y* are so closely connected that all alterations we have ever seen in *x* are accompanied by corresponding alterations in *y*, we ought to conclude—by all the rules of analogy—that when *x* undergoes still greater alterations so that it is totally dissolved, a total dissolution of *y* will follow.

Sleep, a very small effect on the body, is accompanied by a temporary extinction—or at least a great confusion—in the soul. That is one pointer to the body-mind analogy that runs through the course of a whole human life. A person's body and mind match one another in respect of

- their weakness in infancy,
- their vigour in manhood,
- their similar disorders in sickness, and
- their gradual decay in old age.

There seems to be no escape from the final step: body and mind match one another in respect of

- their dissolution in death.

The last symptoms that the mind reveals in itself are disorder, weakness, insensibility, and coma, the fore-runners of its annihilation. As the body continues to collapse, the effects on the mind grow until they totally extinguish it. *Totally* extinguish? Yes.: Judging analogically by how things usually go in nature, no life-form can stay in existence when transferred to a condition of life very different from the one it began in. Trees die in the water, fish in the air, animals in the earth. Even such a minor difference as a change of

climate is often fatal. What reason do we have, then, to imagine that an immense alteration such as is made on the soul by the collapse of its body and all its organs of thought and sensation can happen without the dissolution of the whole? Soul and body have everything in common. The organs of one are all organs of the other; so the existence of one must depend on the existence of the other.

It is generally agreed that the souls of animals are mortal; and they are so like the souls of men that the argument from analogy—to the mortality of human souls—is very strong. *Are they so alike? Yes!* Animals' souls resemble ours as closely as their bodies resemble ours, and the latter resemblance is so strong that no-one rejects the argument drawn from comparative anatomy. [That last clause is taken verbatim from Hume.] So the only theory on this topic that philosophy can listen to is the doctrine of metempsychosis. [That is the doctrine that souls can shift from body to body. Hume's point may be this:

If you approach the question of the soul's immortality in a philosophical or scientific spirit, taking account of all the analogies between bodies and minds, you'll have to conclude that all souls are mortal. So your only way to hold onto the immortality of the soul, while still being 'philosophical' enough to know about the existence of those analogies, is to declare them *irrelevant*; don't be ignorant of them, and don't try to argue that they are weaker than they seem; just *ignore* them and go the whole hog with the doctrine of metempsychosis, which ignores them.

If that is what Hume is saying, he is saying it with contempt. But this interpretation is conjectural; you may be able to come up with a better suggestion about what is going on here.]

Nothing in this world is perpetual; everything, however firm it may seem, is continually changing; the world itself shows signs of frailty and dissolution. With those facts in mind, consider the thesis that one single life-form, seemingly the frailest of all and the one that is subject to the greatest disorders, is immortal and indestructible! That thesis flies

in the face of all the analogies; it is a rash and irresponsible leap in the dark.

Those who accept the religious theory of the immortality of the soul ought to be troubled by the question of what to do about the infinite number of posthumous existences, i.e. of souls whose bodies have died. It may be that every planet in every solar system is inhabited by intelligent mortal beings. (We have no evidence against that, and no support for any other specific thesis about how such beings are distributed through the universe.) For each generation of these, then, a new universe must be created beyond the bounds of the present universe; unless there was created at the outset a single universe so enormously large that it could hold this continual influx of beings. Should any philosophical or scientific system accept such bold suppositions as that, with no better excuse than that they are *possible*?

Consider the question

Are Agamemnon, Thersites, Hannibal, Varro, and every stupid clown that ever existed in Italy, Scythia, Bactria or Guinea now *alive*?

Can anyone think that this weird question could be answered in the affirmative on the basis of a study of nature? Clearly not, which is why we don't find people defending the immortality thesis in any way but through appeal to revelation. . . . Given that we have no mental states before our body is put together, it is natural and reasonable to expect that we won't have any after it goes to pieces.

Our horror of annihilation might be **(a)** a consequence of our love of happiness rather than **(b)** a basic passion. That is, our horror at the thought of our extinction may reflect **(a)** regret at the happiness we will miss rather than

(b) a fundamental underived fear of going out of existence. But if **(b)** is the case, this strengthens the argument for the *mortality* of the soul: nature doesn't do things in vain, so she wouldn't give us a horror of an outcome that was impossible—which is what our extinction would be if the soul were immortal. 'But would she give us a horror of an outcome that was unavoidable—which is what our extinction would be if the soul were mortal? Yes, she very well might, if the human species couldn't survive without having that horror. Our extinction is inevitable; but if we weren't afraid of it our lives would be worse, and much shorter.

Any doctrine is suspect if it is favoured by our passions. The hopes and fears that gave rise to this doctrine of the soul's immortality are very obvious.

In any controversy, the defender of the negative thesis has an infinite advantage. If the proposition under debate concerns something that is out of the common experienced course of nature, that fact alone is almost—perhaps *entirely*—decisive against it. What arguments or analogies can we use to prove some state of affairs that no-one ever saw and that in no way resembles any that ever *was* seen? Who will put so much trust in a purported philosophy that he'll take its word for something so marvellous? For that, some new sort of logic is needed, and some new faculties of the mind to enable us to understand the logic!

The only way we can know this great and important truth that our souls are immortal is through God's revealing it to us; a fact that illustrates as well as anything could mankind's infinite obligations to divine revelation.