Hume and the Delightful Tragedy Problem

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'It seems an unaccountable pleasure', Hume writes, 'which the spectators of a well-written tragedy receive from sorrow, terror, anxiety, and other passions that are in themselves disagreeable and uneasy. The more they are touched and affected, the more are they delighted with the spectacle; and as soon as the uneasy passions cease to operate, the piece is at an end.'[1] It is with this opening remark that Hume introduces the main subject of his essay, 'Of Tragedy'. In that essay he attempts to account for the pleasure spectators of well-written tragedies receive, i.e. he attempts to solve what might aptly be called the 'delightful tragedy' problem, which, in essence, is the paradoxical phenomenon of pleasure being aroused from the 'bosom of uneasiness'. In this paper I shall critically analyse Hume's solution to the problem; the ultimate point of my discussion will be to determine whether his solution is adequate. I shall begin by focusing briefly upon two accounts of the paradoxical pleasure which Hume mentions and criticizes. Then I shall set out and analyse Hume's own account, and thereby determine its adequacy. It will become clear in the course of my analysis that three primary questions need to be distinguished: (i) how does tragedy as a work of art please?; (ii) why does tragedy as a work of art please?; (iii) why does tragedy as a specific form of art work, viz. the depiction of a tragic situation, please? I shall conclude by taking up for brief discussion Margaret Paton's interpretation of certain of Hume's aims and positions in 'Of Tragedy' as presented in her article, 'Hume On Tragedy'.[2]

According to Hume, one of the first attempts to account for the delightful tragedy problem was made by l'Abbé Dubos. Dubos' attempt consists of the suggestion that tragedy, like other amusements and pursuits such as business, gaming, shows and executions, arouses the passions and takes the mind's attention away from itself. When the mind is free of all passions and occupations and is forced to attend to just itself, it is in a disagreeable situation. Thus, by taking the mind's attention away from itself, tragedy offers pleasure to the spectator.

[1] David Hume, 'Of Tragedy', *Of The Standard of Taste and Other Essays*, John Lenz (ed.) (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merril Company, 1965), 29.

[2] Margaret Paton, 'Hume On Tragedy', *British Journal of Aesthetics* **13** (Spring 1973).

Hume accepts Dubos' suggestion that tragedy helps to make the spectator's time pass easier by relieving him of the oppression under which he labours when he is free of all occupations. However, Dubos' solution fails, Hume correctly points out, for it does not account for the fact that if the object of sorrow and distress which pleases in a tragedy were set before the spectator as a real life situation—which would undoubtedly arouse the passions and divert the attention of the mind away from itself—it would give him the most 'unfeigned uneasiness' and displease. The main point of Hume's criticism is that just because an object takes the mind's attention away from itself, it does not follow that that object will provide the mind with pleasure. Thus, to solve the delightful tragedy problem, it is not sufficient to say simply that tragedy pleases because it engages the mind's attention.

The second attempt to account for the problem which Hume mentions was made by Monsieur Fontenelle, who suggests that the idea of fiction which (presumably) accompanies the spectator's aroused 'disagreeable' passions helps to diminish the discomfort to the extent that it becomes an agreeable sorrow. While Hume thinks that in many cases the idea of fiction, or falsehood, accompanies the spectator's sentiments when he views a tragedy, and that there is such a thing as an agreeable sorrow, he does not think that it is the idea of fiction that makes a tragedy delightful. Hume offers a remarkably convincing counter-example to Fontenelle's suggestion, viz. a description of a gruesome, real-life situation executed with eloquence by an orator in such a way that it brings tears to the eyes of the listeners, listeners who are both beaming with satisfaction and quite convinced of the reality of the description. Fontenelle's theory cannot account for such satisfaction, for the satisfaction is not made possible by an idea of fiction. Moreover, while Hume accepts the idea that there is such a thing as an agreeable sorrow, he does not think that it is due to diminished discomfort. He writes,

> You may by degrees weaken a real sorrow, till it totally disappears; yet in none of its gradations will it ever give pleasure; except, perhaps, by accident, to a man sunk under lethargic indolence, whom it rouses from that languid state.[3]

Finding Dubos' and Fontenelle's solutions to the problem instructive but inadequate, Hume attempts to account for it by invoking what might aptly be called the 'Principle of Conversion'.[4] When viewing a well-written tragedy as a work of art two movements are created in the soul, or mind, according to Hume. On the one hand there is what he calls the predominant

[3] Op. cit., note 1, 33.

[4] Margaret Paton uses this particular expression to refer to Hume's way of dealing with the problem in question. See her article, 'Hume On Tragedy'.

movement, which is caused by the genius, eloquence, beauty, and talents displayed in the tragedy along with the fact that the tragedy is an imitation, i.e. is unreal. This movement might reasonably be said to be the appreciation of the aesthetic merits of a work of art. Along with this movement in the soul there is, when viewing a tragedy as a work of art, a subordinate movement which is the result of affected passions. This latter movement is a negative, or disagreeable, one owing to the kind of passions that arouse it in the spectator, e.g. sorrow, indignation, woe, etc. The Principle of Conversion is the principle whereby the subordinate movement is converted into the predominant movement, and upon such conversion the latter is strengthened. The result of this conversion is an increased feeling of pleasure, or delight, in the spectator of the tragedy.

To help validate his theory concerning the problem in question, Hume offers six examples of instances where the Principle of Conversion is operative. In his first example, novelty, or the feeling of 'newness', is considered a subordinate movement which gives strength to whatever emotion is predominant, e.g. joy, sorrow, pride, shame. In the second, the predominant movement of jealousy in Othello is increased by the subordinate one of aroused impatience. Examples three, four, five and six are cases where the predominant movement is increased by a subordinate movement which is occasioned by situations of difficulty or adversity. In three, the feeling of affection in parents is said to be strengthened by the difficulties involved in rearing a sickly and weak child, so that the parents commonly have greatest affection for him or her. The fourth is a case where the sorrow caused by the death of a friend increases the sentiment of endearment which was felt prior to the friend's death. In five, jealousy and the uneasiness caused by absence of a lover are viewed as the cause of a movement which helps the agreeable affection of love to subsist. Finally, example six is a case where esteem, or being prized, is given such additional force by the grief for the artistic creator who struggles with death that one prizes his last unfinished work most. Although one might (perhaps justifiably) take issue with certain of the technical points of Hume's examples—for instance, by suggesting that a parent's *sympathy* for a weak and sickly child accounts for his or her additional affection, or that one often has merely *additional appreciation* for the final works of artists struggling with death—I think that the main point he is attempting to establish by them, viz. that what he takes to be a predominant movement is strengthened by the conversion of a subordinate one, is quite discernible.

Hume's attempt to answer the delightful tragedy problem by invoking the Principle of Conversion helps us to understand *how* it is that we are pleased by, or take delight in, artistic creations in general, and in *tragedy as a work of art* in particular. The predominant movement which, aetiologically speaking, is caused by beauty, eloquence, talents displayed, etc., in conjunction with the subordinate movement—the latter serving to

engage our interest, for our interest must be engaged before we can find any object delightful—is the formula necessary for enjoying the arts. Hume's points concerning the predominant movement take into account the object of experience, e.g. tragedy as the object, for it is the object which displays talents, beauty, etc., and his points concerning the subordinate movement take into account the subjective aspects of the individual viewing a tragedy as a work of art. His overall point, one might say, is that the beauty, etc., of the object must be joined to the passion of the spectator in order for him to take delight in tragedy. More generally, the delight is due to a particular union between subject and object. Hume's attempt also sheds some light upon the issue of *why* we enjoy tragedy as an artistic creation: he asserts, 'tragedy is an imitation, and imitation is always of itself agreeable'.[5] However, though Hume's solution to the problem offers this aetiological explanation of how it is that we are pleased by artistic creations in general, and by tragedy as an artistic creation in particular, and though it sheds some light upon the issue of why we enjoy tragedy as an artistic creation, it does not serve to demarcate our enjoyment of tragedy as a specific sort of object of artistic enjoyment. For it does not answer the question, 'Why do we enjoy tragedy, not simply as an artistic creation, but more importantly, as a specific form or type of artistic creation, viz. as the depiction of a tragic situation?' With respect to this latter issue, it is clear, I believe, that Hume's theory is inadequate as an account of the delightful tragedy problem.

Hume's account of how we enjoy tragedy as a work of art is not without certain fundamental problems. The passions that give rise to the predominant movement are considered by him to be calm passions, whereas those that give rise to the subordinate one he considers to be violent ones.[6] As Margaret Paton correctly observes,[7] the violent passions could more plausibly be supposed to arouse the predominant movement in the spectator of tragedy than the calm ones. In 'Of Tragedy', Hume provides us with no striking evidence, or reasonable justification, for why the calm passions dominate rather than the more violent ones. The six examples that he advances in support of his theory do not help us to resolve this difficulty. In addition, at best the examples serve to show that it is possible for subordinate movements to give strength to dominant movements in one and the same individual, even though the two kinds of movements may be of contrary natures. Given that (at best) this is all that the examples show in and of themselves, and that the possibility of something does not entail its actual existence, Hume's six examples do not stand as

[5] Op. cit., note 1, 32.

[6] David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Selby-Bigge (ed.) (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 276.

[7] Op. cit., note 2, 128.

evidence for the claim that the Principle of Conversion is operative in the spectator's experience of a well-written tragedy. Thus, they do not confirm his theory.

Furthermore, aside from Hume's fifth example—the one where jealousy and the uneasiness caused by absence are said to help love to subsist—the examples do not incontrovertibly corroborate his Principle of Conversion as such. Upon analysis one discerns three distinct features of the Principle: (i) that there is a quantitative difference between two movements in the soul, viz. a predominant one and a subordinate one; (ii) that there is a qualitative difference between the two movements, viz. one agreeable, one disagreeable; and (iii) that the subordinate movement is converted into the predominant one. Hume's first example, where it is maintained that novelty, which is in itself agreeable, increases a predominant movement of any kind, helps to corroborate his Principle as such only if the predominant movement is a disagreeable one; for it is only then that the example exhibits the second feature of Hume's Principle. This example does not lend force to his Principle in so far as the latter is supposed to help resolve the delightful tragedy problem, however, for according to the Principle of Conversion in tragedy the predominant movement is agreeable and the subordinate one is disagreeable. Hume's second example, the one where Hume points out that Othello's jealousy is increased by his impatience, lends support to his Principle as such (but not to the form of it that is supposedly operative in tragedy, for the predominant movement is negative) only if one grants that impatience is an agreeable quality which produces an agreeable movement in the soul—for otherwise there would be two disagreeable movements. It cannot be presumed that many thinkers, especially those who have been influenced by the Ancient Greek and the Christian traditions, will be willing to grant this point to Hume; in these traditions, impatience has always been viewed as a non-virtuous and negative quality. The third, fourth, and sixth examples Hume advances are open to argument. For it is questionable whether parents have greatest affection for the child who is weak and failing, it is questionable whether the sorrow over the death of a friend increases the sentiment of endearment which was felt prior to the friend's death, and it is doubtful whether the last unfinished works of famous artists are always prized most.

Moreover, it seems that there is a difficulty in the very postulation that the subordinate movement is converted into the predominant one. If the subordinate movement were actually converted into the predominant one, it would be reasonable to suppose that the overall effect of tragedy on the spectator would be sheer delight or pleasure. That is, one would suspect that with the conversion of the movements there would be an analogous conversion of the overall mood of the spectator from that of seriousness, or grimness—which, with respect to tragedy, is the effect of sorrow, grief, in short, the subordinate movement—to a lighter and more amiable one, if not

during the production then certainly following it. In point of fact, however, just the reverse is the case. Generally speaking, the spectators of tragedy are serious and grim during the production, and they remain so after the production. That there is no conversion of the overall mood of the spectator of tragedy in conjunction with the alleged conversion of the violent passions into the calm ones raises doubt as to whether or not the alleged conversion is actually a conversion. One could say that the depth of the pleasure in tragedy may be explained, in part, precisely by the fact that it is emotions of opposite quality that increase the pleasure taken in tragedy, or, as Hume writes at one point in his essay, that 'the soul being at the same time roused by passion and charmed by eloquence, feels on the whole a strong movement, which is altogether delightful'.[8] But such an explanation gives us all the less reason to suppose that '. . . the predominant emotions seize the whole mind, and convert the [subordinate movements] into themselves, [or] at least tincture them so strongly as totally to alter their nature',[9] for the depth of the pleasure in tragedy would be due to the tension in the soul that is created by the contrasting emotions.

What, then, can be said of the adequacy of Hume's solution to the delightful tragedy problem in so far as it is an explanation of *how* it is that we enjoy tragedy as an artistic creation? Hume's solution to the problem is much more compelling and insightful than the solutions of Dubos and Fontenelle. The major difficulties with their solutions stem from the fact that they address the problem by focusing upon the subject, i.e. the spectator, without making an investigation of the object or seeking to bring it into any specific relation with the subject. The virtue of Hume's account hinges on his observation of this latter relation. We have no good reason, however, for accepting Hume's predominant/subordinate movements postulation, nor for accepting his Principle of Conversion in tragedy—and even good reason for doubting the validity of the latter. With respect to these difficulties, I submit that Hume's solution is not adequate as an account of how it is that tragedy pleases.

Rather than talk about conversion of the subordinate movement into the predominant one, I think it would be better to talk merely of the union of the subjective aspects, i.e. the passions, and the aesthetic merits of the object in attempting to understand how tragedy pleases. What would seem to serve as a link between the subjective aspects and the aesthetic merits of the object is the subject's ability to empathize and to have compassion for human suffering, misfortune, and travail. We are all acquainted with the forces of evil, misfortune, painful fate, etc., forces which are always involved in tragedy not simply as an artistic creation but also as the depiction of a tragic situation. The spectator's acquaintance with

[8] Op. cit., note 1, 32.
[9] Ibid.

such forces and his compassion for human suffering would serve to link his appreciation of the aesthetic merits of tragedy as an artistic creation with the emotions that accompany his viewing the depiction of a tragic situation. Without any empathy and compassion for human suffering the spectator of tragedy could feel no grief or sorrow; without grief, sorrow, etc., the spectator would be left in absolute calmness and indifference, and would, thus, not be able to relish the beauties of imagination and expression, in short, he could not appreciate the aesthetic qualities of the object. Thus we see that empathy and compassion for human suffering are essential elements in any adequate account of how it is that we enjoy tragedy. Moreover, I submit that they are the key to understanding *why* it is that we enjoy tragedy as the depiction of a tragic situation.

I should like to conclude this paper by making some brief, critical observations on Margaret Paton's interpretation of certain of Hume's aims and positions in 'Of Tragedy' as presented in her article, 'Hume On Tragedy'. On page 122 of her article, Paton gives an explicit statement of her main contentions:

> In re-examining Hume's essay I shall argue that his study of the spectator's passions is not concerned with describing their reactions as such but is rather a study of the way in which the right, i.e. objective, responses to tragedy are achieved. . . . Hume's aim and method . . . if I have understood him correctly, is to show that a satisfactory answer to the question: 'Why does tragedy please?' must be concerned with the object of the spectator's emotions. Thus it is mistaken to regard Hume's treatment of tragedy as being solely in terms of a psychological or causal principle, which would mean that he had no interest in examining the concept of tragedy.

Paton's claim concerning Hume's aim is only a partial statement of his aim. If Hume were simply concerned with answering the question 'Why does tragedy please?' and with suggesting the centrality of an analysis of the object as the key, there would not be much need for his Principle of Conversion. This Principle is the key to answering the question 'How does tragedy please?'—the question which, I submit, was foremost in Hume's mind judging from (i) the nature of his response to the delightful tragedy problem, and (ii) the importance of the predominant/subordinate distinction. Furthermore, as I pointed out earlier, Hume responds to the question 'Why does tragedy as an artistic creation please?'; he does not respond to the question 'Why does tragedy as the depiction of a tragic situation please?' Hume's answer to the former question would not be different in kind from the answer to the question 'Why do comedy and farce as artistic creations please?' Tragedy, comedy and farce as artistic creations please because they are *imitations* with certain aesthetic merits that arouse passions.

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Although Hume may have had some interest in examining the concept of tragedy, I do not think that he provides a clear and explicit analysis of it in his essay. Certainly I think that one can infer his view of the concept of tragedy from certain claims he makes; however, Paton's statement of his view is not without problems. She suggests on page 126 of her article that Hume's view of tragedy culminates in the distinction between form and content. Her suggestion that this Aristotelian distinction captures the essence of Hume's view of the concept of tragedy is problematic. On page 125 she states:

> We may be aghast as we foresee and watch [the tragic character's] agonies, but the form given the tragic content presents us with an object which is totally unlike any real life 'tragedy' and in relation to which it would be appropriate to feel delight.

In some sense Paton is correct. The imposition of a *certain* form makes the object 'different' from a real life 'tragedy'. However, the object cannot be totally different from any real life 'tragedy' for then we would not know it is (supposed to be) a tragedy. That is, it must in some way resemble reality either as we know it or as we can imagine it. Also, in many cases we enjoy a tragic drama more the more realistic, i.e. life seeming, it is. Paton's use of the notion of form is insufficient for capturing Hume's conception of tragedy, for his conception does not entail the presentation of an object that is 'totally unlike any real life "tragedy"', but *the presentation of an object which is an imitation* (usually of a real life 'tragedy').[10]

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[10] I should like to thank Professor Douglas Lewis for the acute comments he made on the content and style of an earlier version of this paper.