

CHAPTER SEVEN

David Hume: Morals and Suicide

David Hume's essay entitled *On Suicide* was published posthumously (that is, after his death) with money provided within his own will. Hume was as insistent upon its publication as he was paranoid that it would not be published. These circumstances underscore the value he placed in its contents and the importance he placed on it within his thought. The fact, however, that Hume was raised a Calvinist Christian controlled his thinking both about Philosophy and religion, as we shall see.

Three things are immediately evident within the first few paragraphs of the essay. First, Hume's empathetic confidence that "philosophy", as he uses the term is "the sovereign antidote...(which it) affords to superstition and false religion..." because superstition is "...founded on false opinion" and "...must immediately vanish when true philosophy has inspired more just sentiments of superior powers...", that is, the human mind. Hume, therefore, follows the rationalistic path cut by Francis Bacon in his 1620 *New Organon*.

Secondly, Hume insists that both "natural timidity", generated by the horror of death and "superstition", in his view generated by religion are **the** obstacles to suicide. Philosophy, however, will "...restore men to their native liberty by examining all the common arguments against Suicide".

Thirdly, he provides an analogy between using the human mind for channelling "...rivers and other natural elements" and committing suicide:

Man is stopped by rivers in his passage over the surface of the earth; the rivers, when properly directed, lend their force to the motion of machines, which serve to the use of men...Every action, every motion of a man, innovates on the order of some parts of matter and diverts from their ordinary course the general law of motion. Putting together, therefore, these conclusions, we find that human life depends upon the general laws of matter and motion and that it is no encroachment on the office of providence to disturb or alter these general laws.

Thus, obstacles to suicide, when properly directed by philosophy will "...lend their force to the motion of..." rational argument "...which serve the use of man" and

humans may decide whether to live or die in the same manner they decide whether or not to dam a river!

This chapter discusses each of these three items in the order Hume presents them. We must note that Hume cites three and only three B.C. sources, Cicero, Seneca and Pliny as justification and corroboration for his position about the human right to decide whether or not to commit suicide. The implication of his references appears to inform the reader that the past philosophers support his view, however, anyone who knows the discipline of Logic realizes that these citations and this argumentation is fallacious, that is, Hume's references are selected by Hume as a projection of his conviction and, as such, constitute what is called the Fallacy of Accent. The Fallacy of Accent results when any person cites support for his or her argument using only historical facts, dates or sources which agree with that person's view of a situation or a point of view - and carefully omits any other historical facts, dates or sources which would be adverse to or contradict the person's view point on the issue at hand.

The first item is that Hume's view confines philosophy to the operation of the human mind and plays the same role in respect to human opinions, theories and the bodily perceptions as science does in the world of nature. So, the purpose and activity of philosophy is to direct a rational "use" of any and everything human. Just as science "...properly directs" nature so that "... (nature) serve(s) the use of man", so philosophy "...properly directs.." human living activities. "Properly directs" as the function and purpose of the human mind places Hume within the so-called "age of reason" proponents of reason and qualifies him among the "authoritarians" after the model of Hobbes' 1651 Leviathan:

To govern the animal world, he (God) has endowed all living creatures with bodily and mental powers; with senses, passions, appetites, memory and judgment, by which they are impelled or regulated in that course of life to which they are destined. These two distinct principles of the material and animal world, continually encroach upon each other and mutually retard or forward each others' operations.

Hume, therefore claims that philosophy will provides the direction which is proper to these forces, just as science provides the direction which nature's rivers and other natural phenomena require so that these will "...lend their force to the motion of machines which serve to the use of man". Obviously, given Hume's one dimensional view of the world of nature and the purpose of human reason, Camus' distinction between the "habit of thinking", as spiritual and the "habit of living" as

material and spiritual would have no significance to Hume. Indeed, this one dimensional view would have no place for the creation of beauty by art either because such creation has no “use”! Of course, neither would this narrow scientific sympathy of Hume have any significance to Camus either!

Hume ascribes to the view that whatever the “habit of living” contains and reveals must come under the direction and control of philosophy as promulgated by the human mind. So, in a similar way, the natural raging of a river must come under the control of dams in order to “...serve to the use of man”. Obviously Hume views nature as merely a tool subject to the mind of human beings and thus, a tool within human hands for the purpose of the human end as determined by any given thing’s “usefulness” for human beings. Nature has no independent status so any respect for the life of living beings is beyond the ken of Hume. Any notion of stewardship of nature and planet earth is absent from Hume’s view of the world. Indeed, one wonders whether or not Hume even knew what a parasite meant so he could not consider humans as parasites on planet earth! A parasite, after all, is a Greek word, meaning one who sits down and eats together with one’s host; thus, any parasite which does not respect its host who feeds it will quickly cease to have a food source and die!

On the contrary, Hume views humans as being created in order to turn nature to the “use of man”, so, in this sense, Hume ascribed to the assumption that God created nature exclusively for the “use of man” and both exist independently of God - since Hume ignores any possibility that this God might have some other purpose in “mind” than creating the world of beings for man’s exclusive use! That “use” controlled Hume’s thinking is clear from perhaps his most famous writing, namely, his *Treatise of Human Nature*, Hume states:

(In moral philosophy) we may hope to establish...a science, which will not be inferior in certainty and will be much superior in utility to any other of human comprehension. (*Treatise of Human Nature*, “Introduction”, xxiii)

Therefore, just as all of nature must be “used” as the human mind decides, so humans must develop a moral view which builds itself around the human “use” of everything pertaining to human living. Here we find Hume anticipating the *geist* of Hegel - the early Catholic Christian church called this a heresy and condemned it as **Gnosticism**, that is, that God is known exclusively and adequately by the human mind, thereby reducing the meaning of “God” to the human mind’s definition and consequent “use”.

Secondly, Hume ascribes the human rejection of suicide to two elements: first, to the natural timidity of the horror of death. Hume sees the purpose of philosophy, therefore, to eradicate this timidity. Thus, Hume's provision for posthumous publication of his essay on suicide, but the irony of this provision is that Hume gives way to this very fear, namely, fearing that death would mean that the world would not have his view available to dispel this human fear! The second element is Hume's claim that the rejection of suicide is due to the afterlife, heaven or hell, and/or purgatory - although for the Calvinist Hume, purgatory was not an option. Philosophy, however, according to Hume will counter both obstacles, this natural timidity and the false opinion. Hume asks, presumably in the name of Philosophy:

Shall we assert that the Almighty has reserved to himself in any manner the disposal of the lives of men and has not submitted that even, in common with others to the general laws by which the universe is governed? This is plainly false; the lives of men depend upon the same laws as the lives of all other animals; I and these are subjected to the general laws of matter and motion.

The logic of the fact that humans share the same "destiny" as all of created nature compels Hume to the following conclusion:

Is it because human life is of so great importance that it is a presumption for human prudence to dispose of it? But, the life of a man is of no greater importance to the universe than that of an oyster...And were it of ever so great importance, the order of nature has actually submitted it to human prudence and reduced us to a necessity in every incident of determining concerning it. Were the disposal of human life so much reserved as the particular province of the Almighty that it were an encroachment on his right for men to dispose of their own lives, it would be equally criminal to act for the preservation of life as for its destruction.

So "...the life of a man is of no greater importance to the universe than that of an oyster..."! Obviously Hume reflected an oyster in his morning mirror! But, what else could we expect from someone who has reduced nature and all human actions and beings on planet earth to the "use" of human beings? Obviously, the life of a human being also must accept the same measure, that is, whether or not the human being is deemed useful to himself, to his peers and, of course, to the state!

Thirdly, Hume views the human decision about the flow of life within the human beings to be parallel to that of the flow of a river, or any other life phenomenon in nature. Philosophy, therefore, must provide proper direction for these human life sources, just as science's technology provides proper direction for natural sources, all for the use of man. Of course, what does Hume mean by this "science" whose method and conclusions he makes the foundation upon which he builds this *Essay on Suicide* and, indeed, his view of Philosophy and human thinking? Well, as ironic as it might seem, his view comes from his analysis of England and England's major thinkers as he lays them out in his book entitled *The History of England*. I find this "ironic" because one would assume that anyone who would write history would do so with the attitude to attend to the facts, rather than to focus on those facts which would support that "historian's" specific view of England and, more generally, yet, more fundamentally, one's view of oneself - remember that Fallacy of Accent and the viewer's reflection of self in the mirror! Sir Isaac Newton and Robert Boyle were Hume's scientists of choice, or, rather Hume's view of Isaac Newton's and Robert Boyle's method and conclusions:

Boyle was a great partisan of the mechanical philosophy; a theory which, by discovering some of the secrets of nature and allowing us to imagine the rest is so agreeable to the natural vanity and curiosity of men...In Newton this island may boast of having produced the greatest and rarest genius that never rose for the ornament and instruction of the (human) species. Cautious in admitting no principles but such as were founded on experiment; but resolute to adopt every such principle, however new or unusual...While Newton seemed to draw off the veil from some of the mysteries of nature, he shewed (sic.) at the same time the imperfections of the mechanical philosophy; and thereby restored her ultimate secrets to that obscurity in which they ever did and ever will remain. (*History of England*)

Hume never dismisses "mechanical philosophy", that is, the presumption that the world has the same constituents as does a British clock, with its interdependence of wheels upon wheels in the self-movement productive of keeping time. However, he argues that only the kind of experimentation which Newton requires, namely, the testing of empirical facts for identical repetition will lay bear the secrets of nature. Of course, Hume's empirical view of the world is that whose movements and changes are determined by use and use as useful for man as ordained by God. Absent, however, from Hume's suicide discussion is any awareness of being a friend to oneself, much less to other people. Love for love's sake, good for good's sake, virtue for virtue's sake, a model even for the pagans Socrates within the

Apology and Aristotle within his *Nichomachean Ethics* are all absent from Hume's discussion of suicide. Consequently, the possibility that to be alive is a good, indeed, a gift in and of itself and, therefore, any respect for just being alive as a good in itself is totally unknown to Hume!

Hume's view of human life corresponds to Ivan Ilych's view of his own life. Hume's view of use finds its basis in the morals of so-called "utilitarianism" of his time and he does not arise about these morals because of the mechanical view of the world and the necessity that all knowledge be useful for humans. Yet, Hume's views are just as prevalent within our European, American society of today: **marriage** is chosen upon the basis of the ability to use one's talents in one's career; **abortion** is chosen on the basis of the use of a woman's body as reserved to that woman; **euthanasia** is chosen on the basis of the ability to use one's body and mind; **quality of life** is chosen on the basis of the uses resulting from convenience and profit; **capital punishment** is chosen on the basis of a person's uselessness to society; indeed, **love** is chosen as a basis of one's usefulness to be liked; and **education** falls prey to the decision whether or not the subject matter is useful in obtaining a job. This is what I call the morals of use and permeates American society today to the extent that it has become the standard according to which Americans think and make decisions. Just as Hume admired and followed Boyle and Newton, so Americans admire and follow Hume whether they know it or not, so influential is Hume's thinking within the occidental world.

Hume does not even reach the level of ethical action found in pagans, such as Socrates or discussed in Aristotle's *Nichomachean Ethics*. Socrates found true value only in being virtuous, that is, the good of the soul rather than the "wealth, honor and reputation" in which his Athenian peers found their value. So, Socrates chastised his Athenian peers:

My good friend, you are a citizen of Athens, a city which is very great and very famous for its wisdom and power - are you not ashamed of caring so much for the making of money and for fame and prestige when you neither think nor care about wisdom and truth and the improvement of your soul?...I spend my whole life in going about and persuading you all to give your first and greatest care to the improvement of our souls and not until you have done that to think of your bodies or your wealth. I tell you that wealth does not bring virtue, but that wealth and every other good thing which men have, whether in public or in private comes from virtue. (*Apology*, VII, 30)

Just as the *Apology* lists three goods which Socrates spoke about to his fellow Athenians, so Aristotle distinguishes three meanings of good within his *Nichomachean Ethics*. Aristotle observes that “...the common run of people identify it (good) with pleasure...a life of enjoyment” (*hedone*); “cultivated and active men, on the other hand, say wealth and honor are goods” - Aristotle calls these two useful goods, adding that honor is a good which “...men seem to pursue...to assure themselves of their own worth” (1095b 25). This observation shows how perceptive the third century B.C. Aristotle was of the human condition. The third good is that of the contemplative life of mind within the soul. These three goods are developed later and applied to the love of friendship within *Book 8, Chapter 3*. Therefore, again this pagan, Aristotle distinguishes three goods, the useful good which includes the pleasurable good or *eros*, the good of friendship or *philos* and the good of being, that is, *agape*. This good of being includes both the good of friendship and the good of being useful, or the pleasurable good, but obviously Hume recognized only the useful, or good of pleasure. No ethical view of the world can rest on the basis of living life on the basis of being useful. Such a view of life demeans human living and reduces human living to an arbitrary view which makes life contingent upon whoever decides what “useful” means - given the fact that no other standard exists for meaning than the decision of a given person or society as that in which a “useful” life consists.