# **‘The sentiments of sects’: Epicurean, Stoic, Platonist, Sceptic**

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In the ‘Advertisement’ to Volume 1 (1741) of the *Essays, Moral and Political*, Hume cautioned that his ‘Reader must not look for any Connexion among these ESSAYS, but must consider each of them as a Work apart’.[[1]](#footnote-1) Yet he also acknowledged, in the corresponding ‘Advertisement’ to Volume II (1742), that the collection of four essays – ‘The Epicurean’, ‘The Stoic’, ‘The Platonist’ and ‘The Sceptic’ – represented an exception to this rule. He did so to offer a different caution: ‘’Tis proper to inform the READER, that, in those ESSAYS, intitled, *The Epicurean*, *Stoic*, &c. a certain Character is personated; and therefore, no Offence ought to be taken at any Sentiments contain’d in them’.[[2]](#footnote-2) In the 1748 edition, Hume further qualified the purpose of these essays in a footnote at the start of ‘The Epicurean’:

The intention of this and the three following essays is not so much to explain accurately the sentiments of the ancient sects of philosophy, as to deliver the sentiments of sects, that naturally form themselves in the world, and entertain different ideas of human life and of happiness. I have given each of them the name of the philosophical sect, to which it bears the greatest affinity.[[3]](#footnote-3)

These pieces, which John Immerwahr aptly (and influentially) christened ‘Hume’s essays on happiness’, reveal very considerable care, labour and artfulness on the part of their author.[[4]](#footnote-4) If Hume was, until his dying day, committed to ‘continually improving and correcting [his] Works in successive Editions’, it is noteworthy that the only significant revision made to the four essays was the addition of a footnote (revealingly, in Hume’s own voice) to ‘The Sceptic’ in 1768.[[5]](#footnote-5) The essays disclose the extent of Hume’s attentiveness to the relationship between literary form and philosophical content; and, as Immerwahr was perhaps the first to recognize, their careful interpretation promises to illuminate fundamental aspects of Hume’s philosophical project as a whole.[[6]](#footnote-6) Yet here we recall Duncan Forbes’s salutary warning to Hume scholars, that

Hume is terrible campaign country, rugged, broken, cross-grained, complex, remorseless in its demands. One has to fight every inch of the way, and can never feel really secure. No interpretation ever seems to get going before it is pulled up almost immediately by some difficulty. … And this perhaps is the ultimate mystery of Hume’s ‘scepticism’, which the devotees eventually attain to.[[7]](#footnote-7)

In the case of the four essays, I will argue, a necessary point of departure is for the interpreter – initially, at least – to accept Hume’s caution to his reader that each essay is an exercise in ‘personation’ or philosophical ventriloquism.[[8]](#footnote-8) The ‘mystery of Hume’s “scepticism”’ will not be demystified (if, indeed, it can be) simply by identifying Hume with ‘The Sceptic’, as various commentators have been inclined to do.[[9]](#footnote-9) Rather than asking whether Hume’s own ‘sentiments’ correspond ‘naturally’ to one or other of the sects, a better question to pose is why Hume’s essays focus on ‘sentiment’ at all – rather than, for example, philosophical reasoning and argument. After all, it was axiomatic for Hume that ‘all doctrines are to be suspected, which are favoured by our passions’.[[10]](#footnote-10) It may be that my view of ‘human life and of happiness’ seems ‘naturally’ to correspond to that of the Stoic (for example), but this need not imply that the Stoics’ attempt to *justify* such a view as inherently superior to all others by means of philosophical argument is a convincing (or even a legitimate) exercise.

A second, and related question to ask is: why do Hume’s essays take the form of philosophical *monologue*, rather than *dialogue*? Hume, like many contemporaries, saw the appropriateness and effectiveness of the dialogue form for certain kinds of philosophical inquiry.[[11]](#footnote-11) The third Earl of Shaftesbury, whose ‘rhapsodic style’ Hume ‘parodies’ in ‘The Stoic’ and ‘The Platonist’, and Bernard Mandeville, whose critiques of Stoicism bear comparison to those offered by ‘The Sceptic’, had recently composed dialogues that focused squarely on the question of which ideas of ‘human life and of happiness’ (represented by different philosophical sects) were most philosophically compelling.[[12]](#footnote-12) More pertinently still, commentators are agreed that Cicero’s *De finibus bonorum et malorum* served as a model for Hume’s four essays, and Hume’s admiration for this work (and its author) is unquestionable.[[13]](#footnote-13) But Cicero’s work takes the dialogue form, as Hume’s essays do not. If Hume was content to follow Cicero in employing the dialogue to interrogate the philosophical foundations of natural theology, the case was otherwise when it came to moral subjects.[[14]](#footnote-14)

I turn to these two questions in Section II. To broach them, however, a broader understanding of Hume’s engagements with ancient philosophy – initially with a view to reforming himself (as a rather intense youth), and later to introducing a ‘reformation’ in ‘the science of man’ – is required.[[15]](#footnote-15) This context is sketched, necessarily briefly, in Section I.[[16]](#footnote-16)

## **I. Ancient moral philosophy and the science of man**

In the *Treatise*, Hume famously defended the need for a ‘compleat system of the sciences, built on a foundation almost entirely new’ on the basis that

moral philosophy is in the same condition as natural, with regard to astronomy, before the time of *Copernicus*. The antients, tho’ sensible of that maxim, *that nature does nothing in vain*, contriv’d such intricate systems of the heavens, as seem’d inconsistent with true philosophy, and gave place at last to something more simple and natural. To invent without scruple a new principle to every new phenomenon, instead of adapting it to the old; to overload our hypotheses with a variety of this kind; are certain proofs, that none of these principles is the just one, and that we only desire, by a number of falshoods, to cover our ignorance of the truth.[[17]](#footnote-17)

The implication of this passage is clear. Hume conceded that ‘some late philosophers in *England*’ had ‘begun to put the science of man on a new footing’ (‘Mr. *Locke*, my Lord *Shaftesbury*, Dr. *Mandeville*, Mr. *Hutcheson*, Dr. *Butler*, &c.’). Yet they had not fully emancipated moral philosophy – as Copernicus had astronomy, and Francis Bacon had natural philosophy – from the errors of the ancients, and thereby effected the ‘total Alteration’ for which Hume called.[[18]](#footnote-18) With breath-taking (and perhaps ill-advised) audacity, Hume reprimanded one of those ‘late philosophers’ – Hutcheson, who was very much his senior and would later play a pivotal role in blocking Hume’s candidacy for an academic post in Scotland – in precisely these terms.[[19]](#footnote-19) Hutcheson, Hume declared, failed to grasp that a science of man based ‘entirely upon experience’ could ‘never arrive at ultimate principles’ in its treatment of morality.[[20]](#footnote-20) Hutcheson’s moral theory remained

founded on final causes; which is a Consideration, that appears to me pretty uncertain & unphilosophical. For pray, what is the End of Man? Is he created for Happiness or for Virtue? For this Life or the next? For himself or his Maker? Your Definition of *Natural* depends upon solving these Questions, which are endless, & quite wide of my Purpose.[[21]](#footnote-21)

Hume returned to the issue of the indebtedness of modern moral philosophy to the ancients in the *Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals* (1751). Moral philosophers continued to focus on ‘solving… Questions’ that were as ‘endless’ as they were ‘merely verbal’, with the result that little progress had been made in moral science:

In this kingdom, such continued ostentation, of late years, has prevailed among men in *active* life with regard to *public spirit*, and among those in *speculative* with regard to *benevolence*; and so many false pretensions to each have been, no doubt, detected, that men of the world are apt, without any bad intention, to discover a sullen incredulity on the head of those moral endowments, and even sometimes absolutely to deny their existence and reality. In like manner, I find, that, of old, the perpetual cant of the STOICS and CYNICSconcerning *virtue*, their magnificent professions and slender performances, bred a disgust in mankind; and LUCIAN, who, though licentious with regard to pleasure, is yet, in other respects, a very moral writer, cannot, sometimes, talk of virtue, so much boasted, without betraying symptoms of spleen and irony.[[22]](#footnote-22)

In ‘*speculative*’ matters, none had emphasized ‘*benevolence*’ more strongly than Hutcheson, who initially professed himself the disciple of both Shaftesbury and the ‘Antient Moralists’. (Indeed, it is worth remarking that Hutcheson professed to establish ‘*the Ideas of Moral Good and Evil*’ in accordance with the ‘*Sentiments of the Antient Moralists*’ – ‘sentiments’ on which Hume would focus his attention in his essays.)[[23]](#footnote-23) Small wonder, then, that a modern day Lucian had appeared – Mandeville, from whose attacks Hutcheson sought to defend Shaftesbury and his Stoic guides – who declared, with scarcely concealed ‘spleen and irony’, that ‘moral distinctions’ were merely the ‘inventions of politicians’.[[24]](#footnote-24)

Mandeville’s treatment of morality was heavily indebted to Pierre Bayle;[[25]](#footnote-25) and it was to Bayle and perhaps Mandeville himself whom Hume turned for ‘Diversion & Improvement’ after his attempts to follow the austere moral teachings of Stoic authors induced a prolonged depressive episode from the late 1720s.[[26]](#footnote-26) As an undergraduate at the University of Edinburgh, Hume would have ‘absorbed’ what Hutcheson, recalling his own experience as a student at Glasgow, described as ‘the first elements of the search for truth, where I tasted to the full the immortal sublimities of Vergil and Homer, the delights, tasteful charm, elegant wit, the jest and humour in Xenophon, Horace, Aristophanes and Terence, and likewise the abundant elegance and scope of Cicero’s writings in all branches of philosophy’.[[27]](#footnote-27) After university, the allure of this literature retained its appeal for Hume: even as his family intended him for the law, ‘while they fancied I was poring upon Voet and Vinnius, Cicero and Virgil were the authors which I was secretly devouring’.[[28]](#footnote-28) In 1726, Hume also acquired a copy of Shaftesbury’s *Characteristicks*, which reformulated Stoic moral teaching for a modern audience, as did Hutcheson’s *Inquiry into the Original of our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue*, published the previous year.[[29]](#footnote-29) Yet Hume’s attempts to follow the regimen of self-cultivation and self-discipline recommended by the Stoic philosophers and their modern admirers as the only path to virtue and happiness precipitated a profound mental crisis:

There was another particular, which contributed more than any thing, to waste my Spirits & bring on me this Distemper, which was, that having read many Books of Morality, such as Cicero, Seneca & Plutarch, & being smit with their beautiful Representations of Virtue & Philosophy, I undertook the Improvement of my Temper & Will, along with my Reason & Understanding. I was continually fortifying myself with Reflections against Death, & Poverty, & Shame, & Pain, & all the other Calamities of Life.[[30]](#footnote-30)

Hume’s hard-won personal experience of the vacuity of Stoic moral teaching would have made him eminently receptive to Mandeville’s ‘spleen and irony’ in the *Fable of the Bees* (1714, 1723), which offered a savage critique of Shaftesbury – and, in *Part II* (1728), of ‘that curious Metaphysician’ Hutcheson. As Mandeville noted in his inimitable style:

I could swagger about Fortitude and the Contempt of Riches as much as *Seneca* himself, and would undertake to write twice as much in behalf of Poverty as ever he did, for the tenth Part of his Estate: I could teach the way to the *Summum bonum* as exactly as I know my way home: I could tell People that to extricate themselves from all worldly Engagements, and to purify the Mind, they must divest themselves of the Passions, as Men take out the Furniture when they would clean a Room thoroughly; and I am clearly of the Opinion, that the Malice and most severe Strokes of Fortune can do no more Injury to a Mind thus stript of all Fears, Wishes and Inclinations, than a blind Horse can do in an empty Barn. In the Theory of all this I am very perfect, but the Practice is very difficult; and if you went about picking my Pocket, offer’d to take the Victuals from before me when I am hungry, or made but the least Motion of spitting in my Face, I dare not promise how Philosophically I should behave myself.[[31]](#footnote-31)

As Mandeville’s critics were quick to observe, his vitriolic attack on Stoic moral philosophy was decidedly unoriginal: ‘the *Fable of the Bees*’, William Warburton quipped, ‘is but the *Tap-droppings* of *Hobbes* and *Rochefoucault’s* unnatural *Beverage*’.[[32]](#footnote-32) Hobbes had similarly dismissed the quest for the *summum bonum*; like Mandeville, he considered it ‘not much better than a Wild-Goose-Chace’:[[33]](#footnote-33)

the Felicity of this life, consisteth not in the repose of a mind satisfied. For there is no such *Finus ultimus*, (utmost ayme,) nor *Summum Bonum*, (greatest Good,) as is spoken of in the Books of the old Morall Philosophers. Nor can a man any more live, whose Desires are at an end, than he, whose Senses and Imaginations are at a stand. Felicity is the continuall progresse of the desire, from one object to another; the attaining of the former, being still but the way to the later.[[34]](#footnote-34)

Shaftesbury’s own writings were animated by a concern to confront the ‘revivers’ of a vulgar form of Epicureanism ‘in latter days’ – notably in England (with Hobbes and Locke), France (with La Rochefoucauld and Jacques Abbadie) and the Low Countries (Bayle) – who used ‘the play of words’ to reduce all the springs of human action to self-interest and self-love.[[35]](#footnote-35) Shaftesbury declared that these modern Lucians ‘set themselves against all these Good men as Socrates Cato & c.’ and their modern admirers, and appeared to have ‘abandon’d vertue’ altogether – by, as Hume put it, denying its very ‘existence and reality’.[[36]](#footnote-36)

As the foregoing suggests, Hume’s observation in 1751 that debates within modern moral philosophy represented a rather tiresome restaging of the exchanges in the late Hellenistic period between the rival philosophical sects was, by this time, old hat. Hume’s perspective was, however, distinctive: it was for this very reason, he argued, that the science of man had remained in its infancy. Hume grasped that, because modern moral philosophers identified themselves – or, more commonly, their antagonists – with one or other of the ancient sects, by critiquing those sects an author could comment indirectly (but intelligibly) on the errors of their modern disciples: for example, Shaftesbury and Hutcheson (via Stoicism) or Mandeville (Epicureanism).[[37]](#footnote-37) Hume’s withering verdict on the pre-Copernican state of contemporary moral philosophy indicated that modern *philosophers*, adopting the experimental approach, had to emancipate themselves from this captivity to the ancients. This, however, need not imply that Hume was contemptuous of the achievements of the ancient moralists *tout court*, as some scholars have argued.[[38]](#footnote-38) Their treatment of moral subjects was, in certain respects, infinitely superior to that of their modern admirers, not excluding the pioneers of the ‘Science of *Man*’.[[39]](#footnote-39) Nor did it mean that the educated modern *reader*, who made no claim to the title of philosopher, would not find a rich source of stimulation, entertainment and instruction in their works. To such a reader, ‘the ancients were familiar voices’; their works, ‘preserved, published, translated, and frequently reprinted,…shared bookshelves with authors contemporary to the readers’ and ‘were seventeenth- and eighteenth-century authors, in that sense’.[[40]](#footnote-40) Indeed, and notwithstanding any scars left by his personal experience of doing so in the 1720s, Hume declared that even the Stoic sages could serve as models for imitation by moderns who turned (as they ought) to moral philosophy and ancient history for practical guidance in how to lead good and happy lives.[[41]](#footnote-41)

Hume’s four essays, I now want to argue, advance both of these claims. Moral *philosophers* must recognize that the ‘search for truth’ (as Hutcheson termed it) was impeded rather than advanced by a reverence for the ancient moralists; but educated *readers* could and should turn to their writings in their quest for happiness and self-knowledge. Here Hume’s choice of the monologue, rather than dialogue form is significant.

## **II Philosophical monologue: against the authority of the sage**

As Hume’s various cautions to his reader indicate, the form adopted in the four essays was highly distinctive. In a recent article, Colin Heydt declares that they represent ‘the *only* set of philosophical monologues of which I am aware in the history of Western philosophy’.[[42]](#footnote-42) Why, then, did Hume not follow his model, Cicero’s *De finibus*, in adopting the dialogue form? A clue is provided by Hume in the essay that immediately preceded ‘The Epicurean’ in the 1742 volume – ‘Of the Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences’. There, Hume offers *De oratore* as modelling the ‘Spirit of Dialogue’, on account of Cicero’s declared commitment to

writing a conversation [his interlocutors] once had on the subject, my purpose being, in the first place, to dispel that notion, which had always prevailed, that one of them had no great learning and the other none at all; secondly, to preserve in literary form the sentiments concerning eloquence which to my thinking were expressed to perfection by those consummate orators, if in any way I should have succeeded in recapturing and representing their pronouncements; and lastly, I protest, to rescue, as far as possible, from disuse and from silence, the reputation of these men which was already beginning to wane. […] I thought that it was a tribute due from me to those great intellects, that while all still held them in living memory, I should render that memory immortal, if I could.[[43]](#footnote-43)

In his dialogues on moral questions, however – that is, on ‘different ideas of human life and of happiness’ – Hume declared that Cicero had violated his own rules when it came to the dialogue form. Cicero represented his Epicurean speaker in *Tusculanae Disputationes* (Atticus) in ‘a pitiful light’, and similarly treated his Stoic interlocutor in *De finibus* (Cato) ‘in somewhat of a cavalier manner’. This is because, on moral questions, Cicero took his own philosophy to be (uniquely) capable of identifying truths which representatives of the other sects fail to grasp; he intervenes directly in the dialogue, and the other characters are portrayed as ‘humble admirer[s] of the orator’ who are to receive ‘his instructions, with all the deference which a scholar owes to his master’.[[44]](#footnote-44) Conversely, a more ‘tolerable Equality [is] maintain’d among the speakers’ in *De natura deorum*: ‘*Cicero*, being a great Sceptic in Matters of Religion, and unwilling to determine any Thing on that Head among the different Sects of Philosophy, introduces his Friends disputing concerning the Being and Nature of the Gods, while he is only a Hearer; … and he recounts the Conference as only from Hearsay’.[[45]](#footnote-45)

Hume, like Hume’s Cicero, was *not* a ‘great Sceptic’ in matters of morality: the science of man can, and must, be laid on a ‘solid foundation’, and be made to yield true conclusions.[[46]](#footnote-46) It follows that a dialogue on moral questions would necessarily violate ‘the Spirit of Dialogue’ as Cicero understood it in *De oratore*, with the author (or his spokesperson) instructing the other speakers, who defer to his authority. This is precisely what we find when Hume did turn his hand to such a dialogue, which served as the conclusion to the second *Enquiry*; and one might surmise that it was because it violated the rules of the form (as Hume understood them) that he expressed some reservations about it: ‘I have scarcely wrote any thing more whimsical, or whose Merit I am more diffident of’.[[47]](#footnote-47) By the end of ‘A Dialogue’, the other speaker, Palamedes, has been silenced completely, and Hume’s ‘I’ is permitted to engage in monologue, without interruption or challenge.[[48]](#footnote-48) By this means, Hume establishes (seemingly to Palamedes’s satisfaction) that the ‘principles of morals’ he has uncovered in the work as a whole – ‘principles’ that build upon ‘a foundation almost entirely new’,[[49]](#footnote-49) one quite different to that upon which the ancient moralists constructed their ethical theories – are unchallengeable. This is the kind of dialogue effected by Shaftesbury in *The Moralists* (1709), where the Epicurean-Sceptic is converted utterly to the Stoic’s vision of ‘human life and of happiness’; and by Mandeville in *Part II* of the *Fable*, which reconstructs the debate between an admirer of Shaftesbury (Horatio) and a disciple of Mandeville’s (Cleomenes), so as to reverse the outcome.[[50]](#footnote-50)

Berkeley’s *Alciphron, or the Minute Philosopher* (1732), meanwhile, allowed the Christian moralist (the author’s spokesman, Euphranor) to triumph decisively over the freethinking assailants of religion (loosely representing Shaftesbury and Mandeville), who failed to grasp that the true end of life, and the only stable source of happiness, is to be found in loving God and following His will in all things. There is no room for uncertainty in matters of such importance as religion; and as Berkeley’s subtitle declares, the work offers *An Apology for the Christian Religion, against those who are called Free-Thinkers*.[[51]](#footnote-51) Conversely, Hume – as, on his reading, had Cicero – considered religion to be the ideal ‘Matter’ on which the ‘Spirit of Dialogue’ could be indulged, precisely because ‘Doubt, uncertainty, suspence of judgement appear the only result of our most accurate scrutiny, concerning this subject’.[[52]](#footnote-52) The subject was, furthermore, of no practical consequence for human life and conduct: ‘What Danger can ever come from ingenious Reasoning & Enquiry? The worst *speculative* Sceptic ever I knew, was a much better Man than the best superstitious Devotee & Bigot’. It was for this reason that, in the *Dialogues*, Hume was committed in earnest to making the arguments of his interlocutors – irrespective of his own personal views – as strong as possible, and to not intervening in their discussion. Here, Hume paraphrases *De oratore*: ‘By this Means, that vulgar Error would be avoided, of putting nothing but Nonsense into the Mouth of the Adversary’.[[53]](#footnote-53) Unlike in ‘Metaphysics & Theology’, however, in morals no less than ‘in Politics & natural Philosophy, whatever Conclusion is contrary to certain Matter of Fact must certainly be *wrong*, and there *must* be some *Error* lie somewhere in the Argument’.[[54]](#footnote-54)

Thus understood, Hume’s four philosophical monologues indicate both the merits (relative to modern philosophy) and the demerits (in comparison to Hume’s own science of man) of ancient moral philosophy. In its favour is that the ancients did not take the ‘Reasoning turn’ that had ‘carry’d’ the moderns ‘away from Sentiment’.[[55]](#footnote-55) To its grievous disadvantage was that the ancients – and their modern admirers, whether neo-Stoics like Hutcheson or neo-Epicureans like Hobbes and Mandeville – lacked self-knowledge. They failed to grasp that the sentiments that gave rise to their ‘ideas of human life and of happiness’ were subjective, and mistook a part (of human nature and its multiplicity of desires and needs) for the whole. Here the short descriptors of each philosopher’s position are indicative: the Epicurean is ‘*The man of elegance and pleasure*’; the Stoic, ‘the man of action and virtue’; and the Platonist, ‘the man of contemplation, and *philosophical* devotion’.[[56]](#footnote-56) The Sceptic lacks any such descriptor, for the simple reason that he is able to grasp that all of these things – pleasure, action, contemplation and even devotion – are ‘goods’, the pursuit of which might conduce to the individual’s happiness (and to virtue) in their particular case. This is why Hume can claim that the ‘sentiments’ of these ‘sects’ will ‘naturally form themselves in the world’, and give rise to contrasting visions of happiness and virtue. The case is quite different when it comes to the ‘ideas of human life and of happiness’ entertained in a Christian age by enthusiasts such as Blaise Pascal, because the ‘sentiments’ that inform those ideas are (unlike those of the ancients) inherently *unnatural*. They lead their advocates to attempt (vainly) to lead entirely ‘*artificial* lives’ by denying the ‘natural’ desires and needs that animate human beings in society (hence their subscription to the ‘monkish virtues of mortification, penance, humility, and passive suffering’).[[57]](#footnote-57) Such ‘sentiments’ – unlike those of the ancient moralists – will be abhorrent to all sane individuals at all times and places, except those whose minds and hearts have, from their earliest infancy, been subject to the priest’s ‘chissel and the hammer’.[[58]](#footnote-58)

All of Hume’s ancient philosophers recognize happiness and virtue to be inseparable; none – even the Platonist – so much as entertains the possibility that a necessary condition of true happiness (i.e. in a world to come) might be suffering and misery in this life.[[59]](#footnote-59) Yet all define virtue according to their predominant inclinations: whether in friendship, indolence and the enjoyment of nature’s bounty (the Epicurean); in activity and labour, creating through art and industry goods that nature has not furnished fully-formed, including a good character (the Stoic); or in the repose that is to be found in contemplation of, and the expression of fervent devotion towards, the only being truly capable of such exquisite artistry, and of the Stoic’s desired self-sufficiency that comes from an immunity to the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, i.e. God (the Platonist). As the Sceptic observes, all the philosophers ‘are led astray, not only by the narrowness of their understandings, but by that also of their passions’. Indeed, their philosophies represent nothing more than an attempt to rationalize their own preferences, given to them by a ‘predominant inclination’ that does not depend on ‘our choice’ but rather on one’s education, ‘natural propensities, … constitution and temper’.[[60]](#footnote-60) This attempt to understand, and to justify, one’s own moral and aesthetic sentiments *to oneself* is far from deplorable, as it allows for self-knowledge and a deliberate pursuit of what one takes (on closer inspection) to be ‘good’ or desirable. What is deplorable, however, is the attempt to lay claim to authority in determining what *others* ought to pursue, and thereby to declare that there is but one road – one’s own – to happiness. The attempt to convince others that what they take to be indifferent is not merely a good that ‘ought’ to be pursued, but even the highest of all goods (the *summum bonum*), is futile. ‘Good and ill, both natural and moral, are entirely relative to human sentiment and affection’, and the Stoic’s attempt to persuade the Epicurean of the error of his ways is bound to fail (and vice versa), because no-one can ‘alter his feelings, PROTEAS-like’, at will.[[61]](#footnote-61) It is also dangerous, because the philosopher who sets himself up as a sage, claiming authority over others, feels constrained to ignore the ‘change[s] of inclination’ within oneself that every individual experiences periodically over the course of their lives. At one time, an individual might broadly share the sentiments expressed by the Stoic; at another, they might find themselves in sympathy with the Epicurean.[[62]](#footnote-62) Yet their claim that one must choose one road, and one road only, to happiness compels them to pursue goods that now appear ‘indifferent or disagreeable’ to them, thereby rendering them hypocritical and (it follows) unhappy.[[63]](#footnote-63)

In Hume’s essays, the Stoic offers criticisms of the Epicurean, the Platonist of the Stoic and Epicurean, and the Sceptic of all three that there is good reason to think Hume shared. All, in this sense, speak for Hume. Yet no one philosophy displaces the other, and this is to some extent true even when it comes to the Sceptic. This is because the Sceptic himself accepts that there is something uniquely valuable in each philosophy, which speaks to sentiments that different people (or, indeed, the same person at different times in their life) will ‘naturally’ experience: ‘each of these kinds of life is agreeable in its turn, and … their variety or their judicious mixture chiefly contributes to the rendering all of them agreeable’.[[64]](#footnote-64)

## **Conclusion: beyond circularity**

It follows that the claim that Hume’s objective, in the essays, is to deny that moral philosophy can (as all of the ancient schools claimed) offer ‘medicine for the mind’, supporting individuals in the ways of virtue, needs qualification.[[65]](#footnote-65) Here the intervention of Hume’s voice, as author, in the form of a footnote added to ‘The Sceptic’ in 1768 is significant. In denying the therapeutic function of moral philosophy, ‘The Sceptic, perhaps, carries the matter too far’, because so long as the individual’s ‘temper be antecedently disposed after the same manner as that to which’ the philosophers they read ‘pretend to form it’, then such reading ‘may, at least, fortify that temper, and furnish it with views, by which it may entertain and nourish itself’. At times of trial, when ‘passion is awakened, [and] fancy agitated… the philosopher is lost in the man’, who no longer knows what he wants, or why (and whether he ought to) want(s) it. What has been lost is self-knowledge: a clear sense of one’s settled character, and one’s ‘predominant inclination’. Hume’s advice here is not to turn, as he did in his youth, to one sect only – the Stoics – to secure the tranquility and assurance that he so craved. Insofar as the Stoics express ideas of life and happiness that do not correspond to one’s own inclinations, the attempt to model oneself according to their precepts is bound to be an exercise in futility and self-torment. Rather, such an individual should sample the works of representatives of *all* the philosophical schools, because doing so will lead to self-knowledge.[[66]](#footnote-66) One’s aversion to the more austere of Stoic precepts will be as revelatory as one’s sympathy with sentiments expressed by the representative of another sect. But as human nature is complex, so one’s sympathy with any one school is unlikely to be total; and here, one must not look to any particular philosopher (or school) as possessing the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth:

Assist yourself by a frequent perusal of the entertaining moralists: Have recourse to the learning of PLUTARCH, the imagination of LUCIAN, the eloquence of CICERO, the wit of SENECA, the gaiety of MONTAIGNE, the sublimity of SHAFTESBURY. Moral precepts, so couched, strike deep, and fortify the mind against the illusions of passion… Despise not these helps; but confide not too much in them neither; unless nature has been favourable in the temper, with which she has endowed you.[[67]](#footnote-67)

*All* of the ancient philosophers had been ‘endowed’ with a favourable temper; they possessed a firmness of character, and a degree of constancy in their predominant inclinations, that ensured a tolerable consistency between their moral practice and their moral precepts. This was why, ‘If a Man made Profession of Philosophy, whatever his Sect was, [the Antients] always expected to find more Regularity in his Life and Manners, than in those of the ignorant & illiterate’.[[68]](#footnote-68) In the ancient world, deluded and hypocritical religious fanatics like Pascal, whose ‘ideas’ about happiness and virtue could not but diverge from their real (and secret) ‘sentiments’, were entirely unknown. The ancient philosophers’ teachings worked for *them*; what they failed to understand was that they would not work for *all*.

Hume’s intervention, as author, in ‘The Sceptic’ – the final of the four essays – thus serves to emphasize the point made by Hume in his letter to Hutcheson of 1739. The disagreements between the ancient philosophical sects were ‘endless’, because their attempt to identify one *end* for humankind (the *summum bonum*) was misconceived. To the extent that modern moral philosophers, who professed to offer a science of man, continued to ask the same question – ‘what is the End of Man? Is he created for Happiness or for Virtue? For this Life or the next? For himself or his Maker?’ – they remained trapped in the endless circularity depicted in Hume’s four essays.[[69]](#footnote-69) Lucian’s splenetic, ironical rejoinder to the ancient Stoics’ ‘magnificent pretensions’ was rewritten, predictably in cruder form (as ‘insipid raillery’),[[70]](#footnote-70) in Mandeville’s response to Shaftesbury; Mandeville’s denial of the reality of virtue was exposed as an absurd overreaction by Hutcheson, whose claims for benevolence were again excessive; and so the carousel turns. So long as one accepts the legitimacy of the questions set for moral philosophy by the ancients, the discussion must end in ‘doubt, uncertainty [and] suspence of judgment’.[[71]](#footnote-71) Morality would, then, be a fitting subject for interrogation by the true ‘Spirit of Dialogue’. Yet the moral scientist, who builds upon the foundation of experience and applies the experimental method to moral subjects, recognizes that such questions are ‘quite wide of my purpose’.[[72]](#footnote-72) ‘The Sceptic’ can see that his philosophical rivals are asking the wrong questions; he identifies what the right questions are for the scientist of man; but he does not, and cannot address them. That task is left to Hume, and to other moderns, whose love of truth is *their* ‘predominant inclination’.

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1. *E* (C), II, p. 529. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid., II, p. 530. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid., I, p. 119 n. 1/ *E* (LF), p. 138 n. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. John Immerwahr, ‘Hume’s essays on happiness’, *Hume Studies*, 15 (1989), pp. 307–24. This represented the first sustained treatment of the four essays; and all subsequent scholars who have worked on them quite properly acknowledge their debt to Immerwahr’s path-breaking study. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Hume to Strahan, 25 Mar. 1771, in *HL*, II, p. 239; this point is noted by T. H. Grose, in *The Philosophical Works of David Hume*, eds. T. H. Green and T. H. Grose (new edition in 4 vols., London, 1886), III, p. 45.On his deathbed, Hume ‘diverted himself with inventing several jocular excuses, which he supposed he might make to Charon’ so as to delay embarking on his boat to the underworld, notably that ‘I have been correcting my works for a new edition’: Adam Smith to William Strahan, 9 Nov. 1776, in *E* (LF), pp. xliii–xliv. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. For particularly rich discussions of the four essays that probe the relationship between form and content, see Colin Heydt, ‘Relations of literary form and philosophical purpose in Hume’s Four Essays on Happiness’, *Hume Studies*, 33 (2007), pp. 3–19; and Isabel Rivers, *Reason, Grace and Sentiment: A Study in the Language of Religion and Ethics in England, 1660–1780* (2 vols., Cambridge, 1991-2000), II, ch. 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Duncan Forbes, *Hume’s Philosophical Politics* (Cambridge, 1975), pp. viii–ix. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. For the popularity of such philosophical ventriloquism in the eighteenth century, further evidenced by Montesquieu’s *Persian Letters* (1721), Voltaire’s *Philosophical Dictionary* (1764), and the general popularity of the novel, see Genevieve Lloyd, *Enlightenment Shadows* (Oxford, 2013), esp. ch. 3 (‘Hume’s sceptic’). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See particularly the comments by Grose in *Philosophical Works of Hume*, III, pp. 46–7; and Robert J. Fogelin, *Hume’s Scepticism in the Treatise of Human Nature* (London, 1985), p. 119 (the Sceptic advances Hume’s position ‘under the thinnest possible disguise’). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Hume, ‘Of the Immortality of the Soul’ [1777], in *E* (LF), p. 598. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Michael B. Prince, *Philosophical Dialogue in the British Enlightenment. Theology, Aesthetics and the Novel* (Cambridge, 1996). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. For Hume’s parody of Shaftesbury’s *Moralists*, see Rivers, *Reason, Grace and Sentiment*, II, p. 76. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. As evidenced by Hume’s exchange with Hutcheson in 1739, discussed below. For Hume’s admiration for Cicero, see Tim Stuart-Buttle, *From Moral Theology to Moral Philosophy: Cicero and Visions of Humanity from Locke to Hume* (Oxford, 2019), ch. 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Hume’s debt in the *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion* to the form, as well as content, of *De natura deorum* is universally acknowledged, but for an unusually penetrating analysis see Christine Battersby, ‘The *Dialogues* as original imitation: Cicero and the nature of Hume’s skepticism’, in N. Capaldi et al., eds., *McGill Hume Studies* (San Diego, 1976), pp. 239–52. Hume did, of course, write ‘A Dialogue’ on moral subjects, which concluded the second *Enquiry* (*EPM*, pp. 110–23), but this represents only a partial exception, as discussed below. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. *T*, ‘Introduction’, p. 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. For a fuller account see Tim Stuart-Buttle, ‘“An authority from which there can be no appeal”: The place of Cicero in Hume’s science of man’, *Journal of Scottish Philosophy*, 18 (2020), pp. 289–309. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. *T*, ‘Introduction’, p. 4; *T* 2.1.3. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Ibid., ‘Introduction’, p. 5 & n. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Roger Emerson, ‘The “Affair” at Edinburgh and the “Project” at Glasgow: The politics of Hume’s attempts to become a professor’, in M. A. Stewart and J. P. Wright, eds., *Hume and Hume’s Connexions* (Edinburgh, 2004), pp. 1–22. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Hume, *An Abstract of a Book Lately Published, Entituled, A Treatise of Human Nature, &c* (1740), in *T*, I, p. 407. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Hume to Hutcheson, 17 Sept. 1739, in *HL*, I, p. 33. Hume’s relationship to Hutcheson has generated much scholarly disagreement from the publication of Norman Kemp Smith’s *The Philosophy of David Hume* (London, 1941) to the present day. For a judicious critical discussion of the contours of that debate see Luigi Turco, ‘Hutcheson and Hume in a recent polemic’, in E. Mazza and E. Ronchetti, eds., *New Essays on David Hume* (Milan, 2007), pp. 171–98. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. *EPM*, p. 53. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. As indicated by the original subtitle of *An Inquiry into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue. In which the Principles of the late Earl of Shaftesbury are Explain’d and Defended, against the Author of the Fable of the Bees: and the Ideas of Moral Good and Evil are Establish’d, According to the Sentiments of the Antient Moralists* (London, 1725).For Hutcheson’s subsequent attempts to distance himself from both Shaftesbury and, with greater qualification, from the ancients – partly, perhaps, on account of Hume’s provocations – see Thomas Ahnert, *The Moral Culture of the Scottish Enlightenment, 1690–1805* (New Haven and London, 2014), pp. 51–65. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. ‘Of Luxury’ [1752], in *E* (C), I, p. 216/ *E* (LF), p. 280 (from 1760, renamed ‘Of Refinement in the Arts’). [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. John Robertson, *The Case for the Enlightenment: Scotland and Naples, 1680–1760* (Cambridge, 2005), pp. 261–80. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Hume to Michael Ramsay, Mar. 1732, in *HL*, I, p. 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Francis Hutcheson, *Inaugural Lecture on the Social Nature of Man* [1730], in *Francis Hutcheson: Two Texts on Human Nature*, ed. T. Mautner (Cambridge, 1993), p. 125. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. ‘My Own Life’ [1776], in *HL*, I, p. 1. This claim is corroborated by Hume’s description of his reading in a letter to Michael Ramsay, 4 Jul. 1727, in ibid., I, pp. 9–10. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. For Hutcheson and Stoicism, see M. A. Stewart, ‘The Stoic legacy in the early Scottish Enlightenment’, in M. J. Osler, ed., *Atoms, Pneuma, and Tranquility: Epicurean and Stoic Themes in European Thought* (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 273–96. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Hume to [an unnamed physician], Mar./ Apr. 1734, in *HL*, I, pp. 32–3. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Bernard Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees*, ed. F.B. Kaye (2 vols., Oxford, 1924), I, ‘Remark O’ [1714], p. 152. For the reference to Hutcheson, see ibid., II, p. 345. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. William Warburton, *A Critical and Philosophical Enquiry into the Causes of Prodigies and Miracles, as Related by Historians* (London, 1727), p. 31. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Mandeville, ‘A Search into the Origin of Society’ [1723], in *Fable*, I, p. 332. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. N. Malcolm (3 vols., Oxford, 2012), II, 1.11, p. 150. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. For this turn against Stoicism from the seventeenth century, see Christopher Brooke, *Philosophic Pride: Stoicism and Political Thought from Lipsius to Rousseau* (Princeton, 2012). For the British debate on these issues see Christian Maurer, *Self-love, Egoism and the Selfish Hypothesis: Key Debates from Eighteenth-Century British Moral Philosophy* (Edinburgh, 2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Shaftesbury, *Sensus Communis* [1709], in *Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, ed. D. Den Uyl (3 vols., Indianapolis, 2001), I, pp. 54–5; The National Archives, Shaftesbury Papers, 30/24/27/14 (draft of the ‘Socratick History’), p. 100. For further discussion of Shaftesbury’s classicism, see Stuart-Buttle, *From Moral Theology*, ch. 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Aaron Garrett, ‘The lives of the philosophers’, *Jahrbuch für Recht und Ethik*, 12 (2004), pp. 41–56, at p. 44. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Peter Loptson, ‘Hume and ancient philosophy’, *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, 20 (2012), pp. 741–72. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. See, for example, Hume’s remarks on the merits of ‘the philosophers of antiquity who treated of human nature’ in the *Abstract* in *T*, I, p. 407; the claim in his early memoranda (no. 257) that the ‘Moderns have not treated Morals so well as the Antients’: E. C. Mossner, ‘Hume’s early memoranda, 1729–1740: the complete text’, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 9 (1948), pp. 492–518, at p. 517; and the assertion of Hume’s first-person spokesman in ‘A Dialogue’, in the second *Enquiry*, that moral science is ‘the only one, in my opinion, in which [the ancients] are not surpassed by the moderns’: *EPM*, p. 114. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Alan Charles Kors, *Naturalism and Unbelief in France, 1650–1729* (Cambridge, 2016), p. 49. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. As Hume’s presentation of Cleanthes as the model of the virtuous man in the conclusion to the second *Enquiry* indicates: *EPM*, pp. 72–3. That Cleanthes was able to live virtuously need not imply that he (or the ancient sages more generally) understood the true *principles* of morals, or indeed the capital point that moral motivation owes nothing whatsoever to religious belief. It is not accidental that Hume, in a work (the *Dialogues*)written in the same period as the second *Enquiry*, took Cleanthes as the representative of Stoic philosophical theism (and religious moralism), the untenable philosophical foundations of which the sceptic, Philo exposes with relish. As regards the study of ancient history, see Hume’s remark in ‘Of the Study of History’ (1741) that ‘I must think it an unpardonable ignorance in persons of whatever sex and condition, not to be acquainted with the history of their own country, together with the histories of ancient GREECE and ROME’: *E* (C), I, pp. 27–8/ *E* (LF), p. 566. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Heydt, ‘Relations of literary form’, p. 7 n.19 (italics added). [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Cicero, *De oratore*, trans. H. Rackham and E. W. Sutton (Cambridge MA, 1942), 2.2.7–8. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. *E* (C), I, pp. 112–3/ *E* (LF), p. 129. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. This passage was removed in 1768: *E* (C), I, pp. 587–8/ E (LF), p. 623. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. *T*, ‘Introduction’, p. 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Hume to Gilbert Elliot, 10 Feb. 1751, in *HL*, I, p. 145. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. See *EPM*, pp. 116 to the end (p. 123), where from Palamedes’s ‘You need go no further…’ Hume’s spokesman dominates what has long since ceased to be a conversation. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. *T*, ‘Introduction’, p. 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Stuart-Buttle, *From Moral Theology*, pp. 242–56. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. George Berkeley, *Alciphron: or, the Minute Philosopher. In Seven Dialogues. Containing an Apology for the Christian Religion, against those who are called Free-Thinkers*, 2 vols. (London, 1732). [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. *NHR*, p. 87. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Hume to Gilbert Elliot, 10 Mar. 1751, in *HL*, I, p. 154. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Hume to Elliot, 18 Feb. 1751, in ibid., I, p. 151 (italics added). The claim that Hume considered religion, but not morality to be an appropriate subject-matter for dialogue is further explored in Michel Malherbe, ‘Hume and the art of dialogue’, in M. A. Stewart and J. P. Wright, eds., *Hume and Hume’s Connexions* (Edinburgh, 1994), pp. 201–23. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Mossner, ‘Hume’s early memoranda’, p. 517. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. *E* (C), I, pp. 119, 125, 132/ *E* (LF), pp. 138, 146, 155. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. *NHR*, p. 63. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. Ibid., p. 72. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. For an illuminating discussion of eighteenth-century conceptions of happiness and its relation to virtue, see Darrin M. McMahon, ‘From the happiness of virtue to the virtue of happiness: 400 B.C.–A.D. 1780’, *Daedalus*, 133 (2004), pp. 5–17. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. *E* (C), I, pp. 135, 141–2/ *E* (LF), pp. 160, 167–8. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. *E* (C), I, p. 141/ *E* (LF), p. 168. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. An example of an ancient philosopher whose movement between these philosophical positions attracted considerable comment from eighteenth-century moralists was Horace: see Frank Stack, *Pope and Horace: Studies in Imitation* (Cambridge, 1985). [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. *E* (C), I, p. 135/ *E* (LF), p. 160. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. *E* (C), I, p. 136/ *E* (LF), p. 160. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. A claim advanced in M. A. Stewart, ‘Two species of philosophy: The historical significance of the First *Enquiry*’, in P. Millican, ed., *Reading Hume on Human Understanding* (Oxford, 2002), pp. 67–95; and more forcefully still in James A. Harris, ‘Hume’s Four Essays on Happiness and their place in the move from morals to politics’, in Mazza and Ronchetti eds., *New Essays*, pp. 223–35. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. Here, what Malherbe (‘Hume and the art of dialogue’, p. 215) says about philosophical dialogue also applies to Hume’s philosophical monologues: ‘the reader should not search for the supposedly concealed purpose of the author, because what he has to discover is not the author, but himself; and he can find himself only in the dialogue of the moral world’, a dialogue between moral philosophies that Hume is here inviting his readers to construct for themselves. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. *E* (C), I, p. 147 n. 6/ *E* (LF), p. 177 n. 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. Hume to Elliot, 10 Mar. 1751, in *HL*, I, p. 154. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. Hume to Hutcheson, 17 Sept. 1739, in *HL*, I, p. 33. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. *E* (C), I, p. 7/ *E* (LF), p. 538. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. *NHR*, p. 87. [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. Hume to Hutcheson, 17 Sept. 1739, in *HL*, I, p. 33. [↑](#footnote-ref-72)