

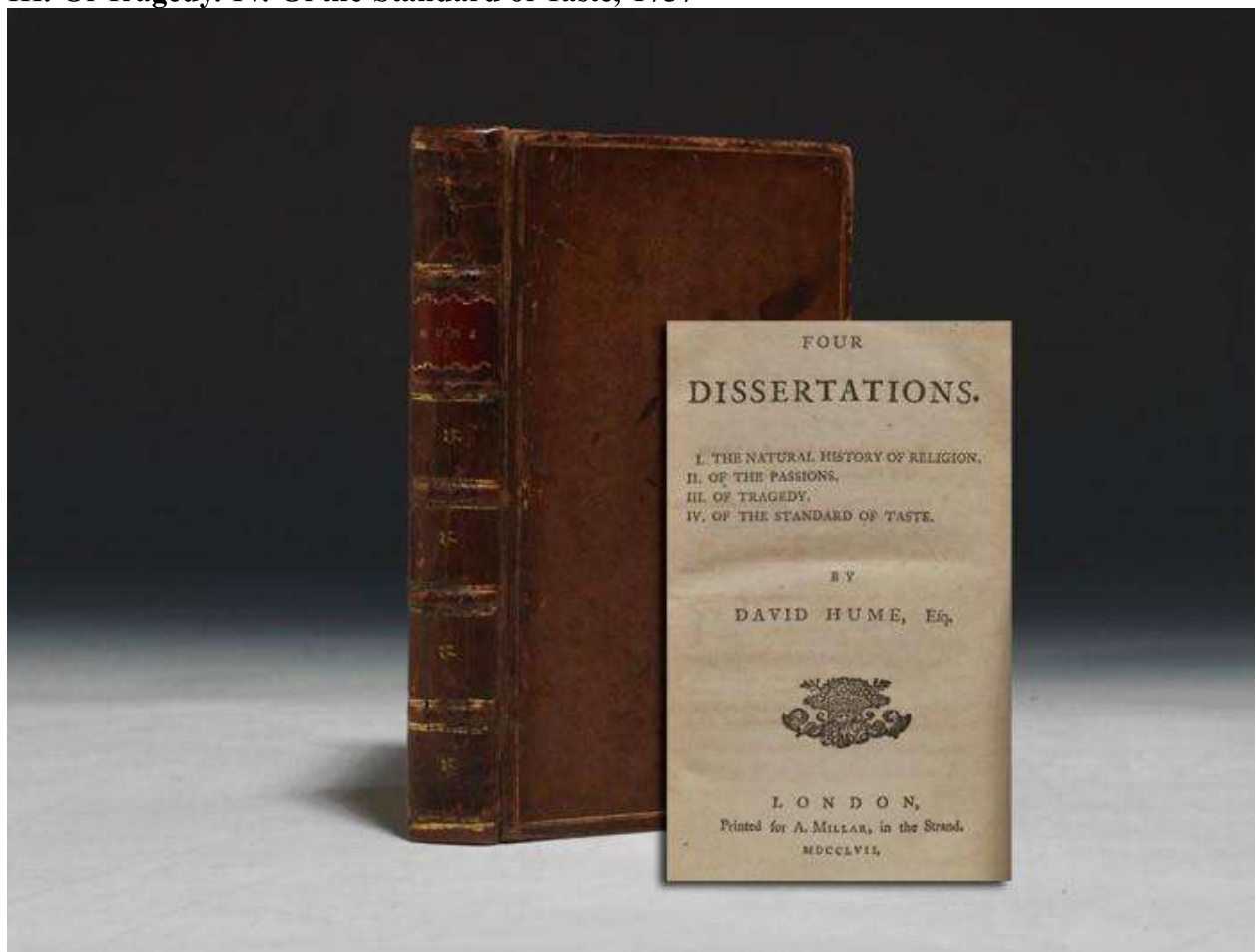
"Four Dissertations"(1757) by David Hume: A Canonical Book

Curated by Stephen A Batman

Monday, March 31, 2025

Summary of this Particular Rare First Edition

David Hume, Four Dissertations. I. The Natural History of Religion. II. Of the Passions. III. Of Tragedy. IV. Of the Standard of Taste, 1757



FOUR
DISSERTATIONS.

- I. THE NATURAL HISTORY OF RELIGION.
- II. OF THE PASSIONS.
- III. OF TRAGEDY.
- IV. OF THE STANDARD OF TASTE.

BY
DAVID HUME, Esq.



L O N D O N,
Printed for A. MILLAR, in the Strand.
MDCCLVII.

“THERE IS A UNIVERSAL TENDENCY AMONG MANKIND TO CONCEIVE ALL BEINGS LIKE THEMSELVES... WE FIND HUMAN FACES IN THE MOON, ARMIES IN THE CLOUDS”: HUME’S *FOUR DISSERTATIONS*, 1757 FIRST EDITION, IN CONTEMPORARY CALF BOARDS

*First edition of this collection of four essays, including the first appearance of Hume’s Natural History of Religion, with scarce half title and dedication pages present. This classic volume includes the first appearance in print of Hume’s important *The Natural History of Religion* and his only works in the field of aesthetics, *Of Tragedy* and *Of the Standard of Taste*.*

"In *The Natural History of Religion*, Hume maintained that there is no evidence of any specific instinct for religious belief. Some races have no religion. In all known cases the earliest religions were polytheistic and idolatrous, with no notion whatever of an intelligent cause of the whole frame of nature. They were as truly atheistic as would be the beliefs of a contemporary person who acknowledged the existence of elves and fairies but denied the existence of God" (*Encyclopedia of Philosophy*), an argument which led to Hume himself being accused of atheism. "After publication Hume withdrew the dedication 'To the Reverend Mr. Hume, Author of *Douglas, a Tragedy*,' but cancelled the withdrawal four days later, 800 copies having been sold without it. He never reprinted it... The fourth 'Dissertation' originally proposed by Hume was to have been *Some Considerations previous to Geometry and Natural Philosophy*; this he withdrew and substituted two *Of Suicide* and *Of the Immortality of the Soul*. These two reached the proof stage before being withdrawn and replaced by *Of the Standard of Taste*" (Rothschild 1176).

First edition, early state, with cancel leaves C12 and D1, as in all copies (Todd, 200); with uncorrected "ative" as the first word on page 9 and corrected "lancing" as the first word on page 131. With half title and scarce dedication pages. Jessop, 33-5. Todd, 200. Rothschild 1176. Gift inscription from British poet and translator R.C. Trevelyan to Burmese scholar Tet Htoot. Contemporary and early ink owner signatures. Occasional marginal pencil markings.

HUME, David. *Four Dissertations*. I. *The Natural History of Religion*. II. *Of the Passions*. III. *Of Tragedy*. IV. *Of the Standard of Taste*. London: Printed for A. Millar, 1757. 12mo, contemporary full brown speckled calf gilt rebaked with original spine laid down, raised bands, red Morocco spine label. Housed in a custom box.

Interior quite bright, a bit of light wear to extremities, and slight soiling to boards. A handsome copy in near-fine condition.

Introduction

David Hume's "Four Dissertations," published in 1757, represents a significant contribution to Enlightenment philosophy, addressing fundamental questions about human nature, religion, emotion, and aesthetics. The collection consists of four essays: "The Natural History of Religion," "Of the Passions," "Of Tragedy," and "Of the Standard of Taste." What makes this work particularly interesting is its complex publication history, which reveals much about the

intellectual climate of 18th-century Britain. The book we know today was not Hume's original intention; it underwent significant revision before reaching the public.

Originally, Hume had planned a different collection. The first three essays were to be accompanied by a dissertation on the metaphysical principles of geometry. However, shortly before publication, Hume was persuaded by Lord Stanhope that there were defects in this fourth essay's argument or clarity, leading him to remove it⁷. When his publisher advised that the remaining three essays were insufficient for publication, Hume initially sent two controversial essays—"Of Suicide" and "Of the Immortality of the Soul"—to complete the volume. These essays were actually printed in a collection titled "Five Dissertations," but Hume quickly regretted this decision⁷. Working with his publisher, Andrew Millar, Hume agreed to suppress these controversial essays and replaced them with "Of the Standard of Taste."

The cultural and political climate surrounding the publication of "Four Dissertations" was one of increasing intellectual freedom but persistent religious conservatism. The Scottish Enlightenment was flourishing, but challenging religious orthodoxy remained dangerous. Hume's reputation as a skeptic and alleged atheist had already cost him academic positions at the University of Edinburgh and Glasgow⁶. The suppression of his essays on suicide and immortality reflects the significant constraints still placed on intellectual discourse concerning religion. Despite these challenges, the mid-18th century was also a period of growing interest in empirical approaches to understanding human nature and society, providing fertile ground for Hume's naturalistic analyses of religion, emotion, and aesthetic judgment.

The Author

David Hume (1711-1776) was a Scottish philosopher, historian, economist, and essayist who became one of the most influential thinkers of the Scottish Enlightenment. Born David Home on May 7, 1711, in Edinburgh, Scotland, he later changed the spelling of his surname to "Hume" to ensure proper pronunciation by the English². Despite his noble ancestry, Hume struggled financially in his early career, working as a merchant's assistant and traveling to France where he engaged with Jesuit scholars at the College of La Flèche².

Hume's philosophical career began with the publication of "A Treatise of Human Nature" (1739-40), an ambitious work completed when he was only 28 years old. Though now considered one of the most important works in Western philosophy, it was poorly received at the time, described by critics as "abstract and unintelligible"². Hume later remarked that it "fell dead-born from the press," a disappointment that did not deter his philosophical pursuits².

Despite early setbacks, Hume persevered, publishing more accessible versions of his ideas. His "Political Discourses" (1752) was the only work he considered successful upon first publication². Hume's career took a significant turn with his six-volume "The History of England" (1754-1762), which became a bestseller and established him as the dominant interpreter of

English history for over 60 years². This success provided him with much-needed financial stability.

Throughout his career, Hume faced opposition due to his religious skepticism. He was denied academic positions at both the University of Edinburgh and the University of Glasgow because of protests over his alleged atheism²⁶. Despite these challenges, he secured positions as a librarian at the University of Edinburgh and as a secretary at the British embassy in Paris, where he was warmly received by intellectual society⁶.

Hume's philosophical approach was characterized by empiricism, skepticism, and naturalism. He rejected innate ideas, arguing that all human knowledge derives solely from experience². His skeptical stance extended to causality, inductive reasoning, and religious belief, positions that were radical for his time but have proven enormously influential in subsequent philosophical thought.

By the time "Four Dissertations" was published in 1757, Hume was 46 years old and had established himself as a significant philosophical voice, though his most popular success came through his historical writings. He died in Edinburgh on August 25, 1776, at the age of 65, maintaining his philosophical composure and reported lack of concern for an afterlife—a stance that continued to generate controversy even after his death⁶.

Why this is a Canonical Book

"Four Dissertations" merits inclusion in the canon of influential works for several compelling reasons that relate to both America's foundational principles and the development of critical responses to traditional authority—a tension that has defined American intellectual history.

First, Hume's naturalistic approach to religion in "The Natural History of Religion" represents an early and sophisticated attempt to understand religious belief as a human phenomenon rather than a divine revelation¹. This empirical approach to studying religion influenced the secular framework of American governance, particularly the separation of church and state. By examining religion as a natural development arising from human psychology rather than supernatural truth, Hume provided intellectual ammunition for those who sought to establish governance free from religious authority—a cornerstone of American political thought.

Second, Hume's analysis of human passions and his emphasis on sentiment rather than pure reason as the basis for moral judgment had profound implications for democratic governance. His view that "reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions"⁴ challenged purely rationalistic approaches to politics and ethics. This understanding of human nature influenced American pragmatism and the recognition that democratic systems must account for human emotions and interests, not just abstract principles.

Third, Hume's work on aesthetic judgment in "Of the Standard of Taste" addresses a fundamental tension in American culture: how to reconcile individual freedom with shared values. His nuanced position that aesthetic judgments involve both subjective experience and objective standards offers a model for thinking about cultural pluralism within a unified society—a persistent challenge in American democracy⁵.

Fourth, the publication history of "Four Dissertations" itself illustrates the struggle for intellectual freedom against religious and social constraints—a struggle central to American identity. The suppression of Hume's essays on suicide and immortality demonstrates the real limits placed on free inquiry in his time, highlighting by contrast the value of the First Amendment protections that would later become fundamental to American governance.

Finally, Hume's empiricism and skepticism toward unexamined authority provided philosophical foundations for the Enlightenment thinking that influenced America's founders. His insistence on grounding knowledge in experience rather than tradition or revelation resonates with the experimental nature of American democracy and its ongoing process of self-correction.

While some of Hume's ideas—particularly his religious skepticism—have provoked adverse reactions from those who see traditional religious values as essential to American culture, his emphasis on natural human sentiments as the basis for morality and his defense of intellectual freedom have become integral to American self-understanding. "Four Dissertations" thus represents both the Enlightenment principles that shaped American governance and the ongoing tensions between secular and religious perspectives in American cultural life.

Five Timeless Quotes

1. "Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions."⁴

This famous quote from Hume encapsulates his revolutionary understanding of human psychology and moral reasoning. Rather than viewing reason as the supreme guide to human conduct, Hume argues that our passions—our desires, emotions, and sentiments—are what ultimately motivate us, while reason merely helps us achieve what we already want. In our current age of polarization, this insight remains profoundly relevant. It reminds us that rational argument alone rarely changes minds; effective persuasion must engage with people's underlying values and emotional commitments. For civic discourse, this suggests that bridging divides requires understanding and addressing the passions that drive different political perspectives, not merely presenting facts and logical arguments.

2. "He is happy whose circumstances suit his temper, but he is more excellent who can suit his temper to his circumstance."⁴

This wisdom speaks directly to our contemporary struggles with expectations, entitlement, and resilience. In an era of social media where constant comparison fuels discontent, Hume reminds

us that happiness comes not from achieving ideal circumstances but from finding harmony between our temperament and our situation. The second part of the quote emphasizes the virtue of adaptability—a quality increasingly valuable in our rapidly changing economy and society. For Americans facing economic disruption, technological change, and social transformation, Hume's insight offers both consolation and a practical path forward: work to improve your circumstances when possible, but also cultivate the flexibility to thrive within existing constraints.

3. "It is an absurdity to believe that the Deity has human passions, and one of the lowest of human passions, a restless appetite for applause."[4](#)

This critique of anthropomorphic conceptions of God remains relevant to contemporary discussions about religion in public life. Hume challenges the tendency to project human qualities onto divine beings, particularly our own need for validation and praise. In today's context, this quote invites reflection on how religious beliefs can be distorted by human psychological needs and social dynamics. For a pluralistic society like America, Hume's skepticism toward claims about divine preferences in human affairs offers a valuable perspective for maintaining separation between religious conviction and public policy, while respecting the importance of faith in many citizens' lives.

4. "The truth springs from arguments amongst friends."[4](#)

In our era of echo chambers and partisan media, Hume's insight about the social nature of truth-seeking is more relevant than ever. He suggests that truth emerges not from isolated reasoning but through respectful dialogue among people who share a basic commitment to one another despite their differences. This perspective offers a powerful corrective to both dogmatic certainty and relativistic dismissal of truth claims. For American democracy, it suggests that maintaining bonds of civic friendship across political divides is not merely a matter of civility but essential to our collective ability to discern truth and make wise decisions.

5. "Where am I, or what? From what causes do I derive my existence, and to what condition shall I return? ... I am confounded with all these questions, and begin to fancy myself in the most deplorable condition imaginable, environed with the deepest darkness, and utterly deprived of the use of every member and faculty."[4](#)

This expression of existential doubt resonates powerfully with contemporary experiences of uncertainty and anxiety. Hume acknowledges the profound disorientation that can come from questioning fundamental assumptions about existence. Yet his philosophy as a whole suggests that we can live meaningfully despite such uncertainties. In our current moment, characterized by rapid technological change, environmental threats, and social transformation, many Americans experience similar existential confusion. Hume's willingness to confront such questions honestly, without retreating to dogmatic certainty, models an intellectual courage valuable for navigating our complex world.

Five Major Ideas

1. The Natural Origins of Religion

In "The Natural History of Religion," Hume advances a pioneering naturalistic account of religious belief, arguing that religion originates not from rational argument or divine revelation but from human emotions—particularly hope, fear, and the desire to control the future¹. He contends that polytheism was humanity's earliest religion, arising naturally from psychological conditions, while monotheism developed later through competition between religious traditions⁵. This naturalistic approach represented a radical departure from prevailing theological explanations and laid groundwork for the scientific study of religion. Hume's analysis of how religious beliefs evolve through social and psychological processes rather than divine intervention continues to influence contemporary understanding of religion as a human phenomenon, informing both academic religious studies and public discourse about the role of religion in society.

2. The Psychology of Human Passions

In "Of the Passions," Hume develops a sophisticated taxonomy of human emotions, dividing them into direct passions (desire, aversion, joy, grief, hope, and fear) that arise immediately from pleasure or pain, and indirect passions (pride, humility, love, and hatred) that involve more complex relations⁵. This analysis challenges the rationalist tradition by emphasizing the fundamental role of emotion in human psychology and moral judgment. Hume's insight that reason alone cannot motivate action without the involvement of passion revolutionized ethical theory and anticipated modern psychological understanding of emotion's role in decision-making. His detailed account of how passions originate and influence behavior provides a framework for understanding human motivation that remains relevant to fields ranging from marketing to political science to artificial intelligence.

3. The Paradox of Tragedy

In "Of Tragedy," Hume tackles the puzzling question of why humans derive pleasure from tragic art that depicts suffering and sorrow⁵. He rejects simplistic explanations and develops a nuanced account of how the artistic qualities of tragedy transform potentially painful emotions into aesthetic pleasure. This analysis illuminates broader questions about the relationship between art and emotion, and between form and content in aesthetic experience. Hume's exploration of this paradox anticipates contemporary discussions in neuroscience and psychology about emotional regulation and the complex interplay between different affective states. His insights remain valuable for understanding not only our engagement with tragic art but also the broader human capacity to find meaning and even pleasure in confronting difficult realities.

4. Standards of Taste and Aesthetic Judgment

In "Of the Standard of Taste," Hume navigates between pure subjectivism and rigid objectivism in aesthetic judgment, arguing that while taste is personal, there are nevertheless qualities in works of art that will be appreciated by all who observe them under suitable conditions⁵. He identifies factors that can distort aesthetic judgment, including prejudice, lack of practice, and insensitivity to the relevant qualities. This balanced approach offers a sophisticated framework for thinking about cultural evaluation that acknowledges both individual differences and shared standards. Hume's analysis remains pertinent to contemporary debates about cultural relativism, canon formation, and aesthetic education, offering a middle path that respects diversity while maintaining that meaningful cross-cultural aesthetic dialogue is possible.

5. Empirical Skepticism as Methodology

Throughout "Four Dissertations," Hume applies the empirical and skeptical approach that characterizes his broader philosophical project, insisting that claims about religion, emotion, and aesthetics be grounded in observable phenomena rather than abstract speculation⁵. This methodological commitment represents a fundamental shift toward naturalistic explanation in domains previously dominated by theological or rationalist approaches. Hume's consistent emphasis on the limits of human knowledge and the need for continuous examination of our beliefs established a template for subsequent empirical inquiry across multiple disciplines. His skeptical empiricism continues to serve as a valuable corrective to dogmatism and overconfidence in our knowledge claims, while his naturalistic explanations of human phenomena have helped shape the development of the social sciences.

Three Major Controversies

1. Religious Skepticism and Accusations of Atheism

Hume's naturalistic approach to religion in "The Natural History of Religion" generated significant controversy, contributing to his reputation as an atheist or dangerous skeptic. By treating religion as a natural phenomenon arising from human psychology rather than divine revelation, Hume challenged the foundations of religious authority¹. His suggestion that polytheism was humanity's original religion contradicted biblical accounts, while his critical assessment of monotheism's social effects—arguing that it tends to promote intolerance, hypocrisy, and intellectual absurdities—offended religious sensibilities¹. These views cost Hume academic positions; he was denied chairs at both the University of Edinburgh and Glasgow due to religious opposition⁶. The controversy extended to his "History of England," where passages critical of Christianity had to be removed from subsequent editions after vocal attacks from religious critics⁶. The publication history of "Four Dissertations" itself reflects this controversy—Hume's essays on suicide and immortality were suppressed due to their direct challenges to Christian doctrine⁷. This tension between religious tradition and secular inquiry that Hume encountered continues to animate American cultural and political debates about the proper relationship between religious belief and public discourse.

2. The Challenge to Moral Rationalism

Hume's account of the passions and their relationship to moral judgment represented a direct challenge to prevailing rationalist moral theories. By arguing that reason alone cannot motivate action and that moral distinctions are derived from sentiment rather than rational principles, Hume undermined both theological accounts of morality as divine command and rationalist accounts of morality as discoverable through pure reason⁴. This position was controversial because it seemed to make morality subjective and potentially relativistic, raising concerns about the foundations of social order. Critics worried that without objective rational or divine foundations, morality would collapse into mere preference or convention. This controversy continues in contemporary debates between moral realists and anti-realists, and in tensions between religious and secular approaches to ethics in American public life. Hume's emphasis on natural human sentiments as the basis for morality represents an alternative to both religious traditionalism and abstract rationalism that continues to influence progressive approaches to ethics and politics.

3. The Limits of Human Knowledge

Hume's skeptical approach to knowledge claims across all four dissertations challenged the confidence of both religious and philosophical authorities. By emphasizing the limits of human understanding and the role of custom and habit rather than reason in forming our beliefs, Hume undermined pretensions to certainty in domains ranging from religion to aesthetics⁶. His suggestion that many of our most fundamental beliefs cannot be rationally justified but are instead products of natural psychological processes was disturbing to those who sought secure foundations for knowledge. This skeptical stance was viewed by many as dangerous, potentially leading to moral and intellectual nihilism. The controversy surrounding Hume's skepticism is reflected in the harsh attacks he received from contemporaries like James Beattie, whose "Essay on the Nature and Immutability of Truth in Opposition to Sophistry and Scepticism" (1770) condemned Hume's philosophy⁶. The tension between skeptical inquiry and the desire for certainty that Hume highlighted remains central to American intellectual life, manifesting in debates about scientific authority, religious knowledge claims, and the foundations of political values.

In Closing

Civic-minded Americans should read "Four Dissertations" because it offers profound insights into the human condition that remain relevant to our contemporary challenges while illuminating the intellectual foundations of American governance and culture. Hume's naturalistic approach to religion provides valuable perspective for navigating the complex relationship between faith and public life in a pluralistic society. His analysis of human passions helps us understand the emotional underpinnings of political behavior and moral judgment, offering wisdom for bridging divides in our polarized era.

The collection's exploration of aesthetic judgment offers a nuanced framework for thinking about cultural evaluation that respects diversity while maintaining that meaningful cross-cultural dialogue is possible—a crucial balance for American cultural life. Hume's empirical skepticism models an intellectual humility sorely needed in our age of certainty and partisan entrenchment, reminding us of the limits of human knowledge and the importance of continuous examination of our beliefs.

Perhaps most importantly, "Four Dissertations" demonstrates that challenging established orthodoxies and examining fundamental questions about human nature, religion, and values is not antithetical to civic virtue but essential to it. Hume's willingness to follow evidence and argument where they lead, even when they challenged prevailing beliefs, exemplifies the intellectual courage necessary for democratic citizenship.

For Americans committed to thoughtful engagement with our cultural and political inheritance, "Four Dissertations" offers both historical perspective on the Enlightenment ideas that influenced our founding and timeless wisdom about human nature that can guide us through contemporary challenges. In Hume's balanced skepticism, empirical approach, and humane outlook, civic-minded readers will find resources for navigating the tensions between tradition and innovation, faith and reason, individual judgment and shared standards that continue to define American life.

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