



*virgin mary with a book*  
Κωνσταντίνος Παρθένης, 1932

George Couvalis

Flinders University

## David Hume's Lucianic Thanatotherapy

### Abstract

The eighteenth century philosopher David Hume was much influenced by Greek philosophy and literature. His favourite writer was the satirist Lucian. What is David Hume's thanatotherapy (therapy of the fear of death)? Is he an Epicurean or Pyrrhonian thanatotherapist? I argue that, while he is in part an Epicurean who is sceptical about his Epicureanism, he is primarily a Lucianic thanatotherapist. A Lucianic thanatotherapist uses self and other deprecating irony as a form of therapy. He also ruthlessly satirises religious consolations. I use Hume's deathbed allusions to Lucian's *Kataplous* (floating downwards) and the *Dialogues of the Dead* to explain my view.

### Introduction

It is the year 1776. The British philosopher David Hume is on his deathbed. He is a major intellectual and is regarded as the chief enemy of Christianity. Theists, atheists and agnostics alike are interested in his manner of death. Everything he does and says will be quickly reported to the salons. The dogmatic Christian critic Dr Johnson sends his biographer Boswell to Hume, hoping for a last minute recantation (Fieser 2005, 288-291). Hume composes his autobiography, *My Own Life* for publication (Hume 1980). Soon after his death, Hume's friend Adam Smith writes a letter for publication. In it, he stresses Hume's cheerfulness and reports that Hume has been reading Lucian's *Dialogues of the Dead* (Fieser 2005, 296-302).

According to Smith, Hume said that he could find no excuses he could give to Charon, the ferryman of the dead, for not going to Hades. "He had no house to finish, no daughter to provide for, he had no enemies upon which he wished to revenge himself". Nevertheless, he diverted himself by inventing excuses to present to Charon. "Good Charon, I have been correcting my works for a new edition. Allow me a little time, that I may see how the public receives the alterations". After quoting Charon politely rejecting this excuse saying "when you have seen the effect of these, you will be for making other alterations. There will be no end of such excuses", Hume presented his final excuse, saying "[H]ave a little patience, good Charon, I have been endeavouring to open the eyes of the public. If I live a few years longer, I may have the satisfaction of seeing the downfall of some of the prevailing system of superstition". Smith reports that Hume said Charon "would lose all temper and decency" and say "[Y]ou loitering rogue, that will not happen these many hundred years. Do you fancy I will grant you a lease for so long a term? Get into the boat this instant, you lazy loitering rogue" (Fieser 2005, 299-300).

Hume's doctor William Cullen tells of having heard a similar or the same story from one of Hume's friends. The friend is perhaps Smith. However, his version of Hume's remarks differs from what Smith reports in two important ways. First, he says that Hume's excuse was that he "had been very busily employed in making his countrymen wiser, and particularly in delivering them from the Christian superstition, but that he had not completed the great work". Second, he reports that the dialogue Hume was reading and imitating was *Kataplous* (floating or sailing downwards), in which the tyrant Megapenthes (great suffering) gives his excuses for not going to Hades (Fieser 2005, 294).

Annette Baier has shown that Hume was indeed imitating Megapenthes in *Kataplous* and not something from the *Dialogues of the Dead* (Baier 2008, 100-110). Further, she points out that Smith, unlike Cullen, was timid about offending the religious establishment. It is likely that Hume referred explicitly to his project of delivering his countrymen from the Christian superstition. Indeed, in a letter he did not intend for publication, Smith quotes Hume as saying "[G]ood Charon, I have been endeavouring to open the eyes of people; have a little patience only till I have the pleasure of seeing the churches shut up, and the clergy sent about their business..."<sup>1</sup>.

The scene in *Kataplous* Hume was imitating is one in which Megapenthes gives a series of excuses for not going into Charon's boat which are rejected in succession by Clotho, one of the fates. Megapenthes' excuses are that he has to finish a house, to give his wife directions about buried money, to build a town wall and set of docks for his town, and, finally, "to live only long enough to subdue the Pisidians and subject the Lydians to tribute, and to build myself a huge mausoleum and inscribe on it all the military exploits of my life". Each excuse is more hubristic than its predecessors. Commenting on the final excuse, Clotho says "[W]hy, man, you are no longer asking for this one day, but for a stay of nearly twenty years!". (Lucian 1915, 21)

Despite the plausibility of Baier's argument, Hume's remarks do not fit the scene in *Kataplous* closely. Cullen reports Hume excusing himself to Mercury (Hermes, not Charon), but in *Kataplous* Megapenthes excuses himself to Clotho. However, in one of Lucian's *Dialogues of the Dead*, Hermes is involved in a discussion with two philosophers. We will see that aspects of that dialogue help us understand Hume's behaviour better. Hume may well have had in mind both *Kataplous* and the *Dialogues of the Dead*.

### Epicurean or Pyrrhonian Thanatotherapist?

The dying days of important intellectuals were imbued with significance in eighteenth century Europe, as indeed they were in antiquity. The dying person was meant to be setting an example through word and deed (Miller 2001). Much that has been published about Hume makes clear that he conformed to his role. Various people noted his remarkable composure and his attempt to calm his friends in the face of his impending death. He clearly was trying to imply that being dead is of no great importance. It is also clear that he would have expected his behaviour and his words to be widely reported. What was he trying to say by imitating characters in Lucian?

Hume was a central figure of the enlightenment. He is now known as a philosopher. However, in his time he was known principally as the author of a popular *History of England*. Through much of his work Hume criticised religious, and in particular, Christian claims. Recently, Paul Russell has argued that Hume was in part a modern Lucretian; a follower of the Greek philosopher Epicurus, whose views are best known via his Roman disciple Lucretius. Epicurus is well known for his criticisms of the role of pagan

religion in human life. For Russell, Hume's philosophy and history were intended as part of an Epicurean style program of liberation from Christianity (Russell 2008).

Martha Nussbaum and others have shown that Epicurus thought that philosophy is a form of therapy by means of rational argument - it aims to liberate us from troubled emotional states of mind by helping us attain *ataraxia*, mental tranquillity (literally absence of emotional disturbance). Indeed, Epicurus declares that "Empty are the words of that philosopher who offers therapy for no human suffering. For just as there is no use for medical expertise if it does not give therapy for bodily diseases, so too there is no use in philosophy if it does not expel the suffering of the soul" (Epicurus 1987, 155). On Epicurus' account, an irrational fear of death blights our lives and leads us into religious belief that empowers priests to terrify us and manipulate us. Epicurean philosophy aims to liberate us from the dangerous influence of religion principally via making us see that the fear of death is irrational. Thanatotherapeia is a central element in Epicureanism (Nussbaum 1994; 13-15, 195-238).

A striking feature of Epicureanism is its reversal of common judgements about materialism. It is common to believe that the religious person is in a more hopeful situation than the materialist as she believes in a life after death. By contrast, in a letter he wrote shortly before his death, the materialist Epicurus argued that "that most frightful of evils, death, is nothing to us, seeing that when we exist death is not present, and when death is present we do not exist" (Epicurus 1987, 150). That is, as we have ceased to exist when we are dead, death cannot be bad for us. Indeed, nothing can be good or bad for us when we have ceased to exist. On the Epicurean story, once we realise this we can begin the process of liberating ourselves from religion. This means that we can re-organise our lives to enjoy the present rather than organising it around a non-existent future.

It is also common to believe that religious people will be better people, but Epicureans try to reverse this judgement. They think that fear of death not only allows us to be manipulated by money-grubbing and fanatical priests - it can also lead us to engage in a senseless and dangerous desire to pile up enormous wealth and to conquer others to leave absurd posthumous monuments to ourselves (Lucretius 1999; 5, 71-2). Epicureans claim that, by contrast, they pursue only very moderate wealth and power as they

see that the pursuit of these things is pointless. We will never live to enjoy them, and what happens after our death is of no relevance to our welfare.

Now Russell does not claim that Hume strictly followed Epicurean doctrine. Indeed, as he notes, Hume was attracted to ancient scepticism both as a philosophy and as a therapy (Russell 2008, 204-222). The ancient sceptics wanted to attain ataraxia, but they wanted to attain it in a different way to the more dogmatic Epicureans. Our best account of the strategy of ancient sceptics for attaining ataraxia comes from the sceptical disciple of the Greek philosopher Pyrrho, Sextus Empiricus. Sextus says that “scepticism is an ability to place in antithesis, in any manner whatever, appearances and judgements, and thus - because of the equality of force in the objects and arguments opposed - to come first of all to a suspension of judgement and then to mental tranquillity [ataraxia]” (Sextus Empiricus 1985, 32-33). So if he were trying to deal with someone’s fear of death, the Pyrrhonian might put equal arguments for and against a benign afterlife to her until she reached a suspense of judgement, thereby eliminating much of her fear.

Hume is, however, critical of Pyrrhonism. In his *Treatise* he argues that the state of mind “that fantastic sect” want to attain is unattainable (Hume 2007, 123). In an anonymous pamphlet that defends his views, he calls Pyrrhonism “a kind of *Jeux d’Esprit*”. He declares that, unlike Pyrrhonians, he merely wishes “to abate the pride of *mere human reasoners*, by showing them, that even with principles which seem the clearest ... they are not able to attain a full consistence and absolute certainty” (Hume 2007, 425). The point is elaborated in his first *Enquiry* (Hume 2000, 119-121). Nevertheless, he does seem to want his method of pursuing philosophy to be one which involves something like ataraxia. He describes himself later in the *Treatise* as wanting to “contribute a little to the advancement of knowledge, by giving in some particulars a different turn to the speculations of philosophers, and pointing out to them more distinctly those subjects, where alone they can expect assurance and conviction”. He notes that if this manner of doing philosophy comes more into fashion, he can avoid both spleen and indolence. He appeals to the reader who finds himself in the “same easy disposition” to follow his future speculations. He claims that “[T]he conduct of a man, who studies philosophy in this careless manner, is more truly sceptical than that of one, who feeling an inclination to it, is yet so over-whelm’d with doubts and scruples as to totally reject it. A true sceptic will be diffi-

dent of his philosophical doubts, as well of his philosophical conviction; and will never refuse any innocent satisfaction, which offers itself, upon account of either of them” (Hume 2007, 177)<sup>2</sup>.

Baier points out that when Hume uses “careless”, he does not use it in the sense of not giving a damn, but in the eighteenth century sense of pursuing life and letters without unnecessary cares brought on by an overwrought imagination (Baier, 1991, 1-27). So it seems as if Hume saw himself as a true sceptic who sees one of the advantages of his scepticism to be the careless pursuit of innocent intellectual satisfaction. The carelessness is not a result of considering opposing arguments, but a way of pursuing philosophy.

Despite what I have said in the previous three paragraphs, Hume’s remarks to Boswell are Epicurean. Boswell reports that Hume “said flatly that the morality of every religion was bad, and, I really thought, was not jocular when he said that when he heard a man was religious, he concluded he was a rascal, though he had known some instances of very good men being religious”. In responding to Boswell, Hume also produced a variant of a Lucretian argument, often called the symmetry argument. (The symmetry argument is the argument that if being dead is bad for us, so too is the mere fact that we were not born earlier. The reason is that the loss of life is symmetrical at both ends of a life. Being born earlier would give us a longer life just as living longer with the same birth date. However, no rational person would be filled with woe at the mere fact of not being born earlier. Hence, it is irrational to fear being dead (Lucretius 1999, 96-97; Nussbaum 1994, 203).) Boswell reports that he “asked him [Hume] if the thought of annihilation never gave him any uneasiness. He said not the least; no more than if he had not been, as Lucretius observes” (Fieser 2005, 288-289). Hume stressed that he has no fear of being dead and no belief in an after life.

Hume’s making himself into an exemplar also reflects Epicurean practice. Epicurus is well known for having written letters to his disciples that he intended for release to a broader public about how well he was dying. Hume’s composure in the face of death and his attempts to calm his friends fit the Epicurean life style (Long and Sedley 1987, 149-151).

Does what I have said above support the view that Hume is a Lucretian who pursues Lucretian aims in a “careless” manner? Hume’s remarks to Boswell should be put into context. Hume would have known that Boswell

was sent by the orthodox Christian Dr Johnson who hoped for a last minute recantation by a man he saw as a dangerous atheist. Playing the role of an extreme Lucretian would have been a way of sending up Johnson. While Lucretians want to eliminate the influence of religious beliefs, we will see that Hume indicates that he thinks that it is unlikely or impossible, even if he feels it to be desirable<sup>3</sup>.

In any case, Hume's other remarks to Boswell indicate a degree of self-mockery which is not consistent with the serious role of a Lucretian. Epicurus and his followers converted Epicureanism into a soteriological cult. Their stance was hardly "careless", and there is nothing of sceptical doubt, let alone humour or self-mockery, in it. Indeed, without a trace of irony, Lucretius goes so far as to say that Epicurus is worthy of being a god (Lucretius 1999, 138)<sup>4</sup>. Boswell reports that he asked Hume "if it is not possible that there might be a future state. He answered it was possible that a piece of coal put on the fire would not burn; and he added that it was a most unreasonable fancy that we should exist forever..." (Fieser 2005, 288). Careful readers of Hume will understand. Hume struggles through much of book 1 of his *Treatise* to explain how inductive inferences can be proved. He argues in detail that the fact that every piece of coal we have encountered so far burns cannot prove that a future piece of coal will burn, nor can it be shown to make it probable that a future piece of coal will burn. He also stresses in Book 1 that he cannot show an inductive inference to be even reasonable. Rather, on his account, inductive inferences themselves rely on the imagination, that is, on what he calls "a seemingly trivial property of the fancy" – while objecting to Boswell's "fancy" he cannot show Boswell wrong by using reason alone (Hume 2007, 174). Boswell failed to understand the irony.

So is Hume playing the role of an Epicurean with a whiff of careless scepticism about his Epicureanism? Is that his thanatotherapy? I will argue that this is too simple. He is, rather, a Lucianic thanatotherapist.

## Hume and Lucian

When talking to his close friend Smith, Hume imitates Lucian. This is not peripheral to Hume's life and thought. Some years before, the Abbe' Morellet, a friend of Hume, sent his French translation of one of Lucian's dialogues to Hume seeking his opinion about the quality of the translation.



In his letter, he described Lucian as Hume's favourite author (Grieg 1939; 157-8, footnote 1). There are also many references to Lucian in Hume's published work. We also know that he admired Jonathan Swift who in turn imitated parts of Lucian<sup>5</sup>. Nevertheless, Hume's admiration of Swift was qualified by comparison to his admiration of Lucian. Understanding the ways in which it was qualified gives us a better understanding of the nature and style of Hume's satire.

In one of his essays, Hume describes Swift as the author of "the first polite prose" in English, though the praise is somewhat backhanded, as he makes clear that he thinks French and Classical authors are far superior to many of those writing in English (Hume 1987, 91). In a letter he says that he "can often laugh with" Swift and "can even approve" of his style, but surely "can never admire" it. "It has no harmony, no eloquence, no ornament, not much correctness, whatever the English may imagine" (Grieg 1939, 194). Another limitation Hume sees in Swift is that Swift takes his priestly role far too seriously. In another letter, Hume says "I have frequently had it in my intentions to write a supplement to Gulliver, containing the ridicule of priests. 'Twas certainly a pity that Swift was a parson. Had he been a lawyer or physician, we had nevertheless been entertain'd at the expense of these professions. But priests are so jealous, that they cannot bear to be touch'd on that head; and for a plain reason: Because they are conscious that they are really ridiculous. That part of the Doctor's subject is so fertile, that a much inferior genius, I am confident, might succeed in it" (Grieg 1932, 153)<sup>6</sup>. These remarks give us clues as to Hume's satire. Its object is primarily religion and it is more classical than that of Swift. Lucian is more of a model for him than Swift.

Who was Lucian? Lucian of Samosata was an influential second century satirist. He was very much a figure of the so-called second sophistic, a literary movement in the Eastern part of the Roman Empire that wrote in the Attic of the 5<sup>th</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE. It peppered its work with allusions to classical Greek literature and imitated its style. While Lucian knew classical Greek literature well, it has been very plausibly argued that his central concern is contemporary life. One of his central targets is frauds and hypocrites of various kinds, particularly religious frauds and hypocrites (Jones 1986).

Hume showed a particular interest in one of Lucian's critiques of a religious fraud, his *Alexander the false prophet* (Alexandros i Pseudomantis),

which is the story of how Lucian exposed the various frauds of the false pagan miracle worker Alexander of Aboneteichos (Lucian 1925). It is useful in understanding Hume's allusive uses of Lucian to examine his use of Lucian's *Alexander* in his "Of Miracles".

Hume points out that it is useful for a religious impostor to start his impostures in a remote and ignorant place. By the time the story arrives at a place with wiser people it will have been magnified and better information will be difficult to find. So it was, according to Hume, that Alexander was able to proceed gradually to Rome itself with his impostures. He now argues "[B]ut had Alexander fixed his residence at Athens, the philosophers of that renowned mart of learning had immediately spread, throughout the Roman empire, their sense of the matter; which, being supported by so great an authority, and displayed by all the force of reason and eloquence, had entirely opened the eyes of mankind. It is true; Lucian passing by chance through Paphlagonia, had an opportunity of performing this good office. But though much to be wished, it does not always happen that every Alexander meets with a Lucian, ready to expose and detect his impostures" (Hume 2000, 90-91).

Some readers of these remarks in Hume's time would have been well aware that Jesus's miracles were reported from Judaea, a relatively ignorant and backward part of the Roman Empire. Further, as far as we know, there was no Lucian to investigate Jesus's miracles. Hume has implied that those miracles might well have been fraudulent without mentioning Jesus<sup>7</sup>.

There is, however, a slyer strategy involved in Hume's remarks on miracles. This becomes clear when we read a part of it that was cut out of some later editions, perhaps because it made the point too obvious. The section says "[I]t may, perhaps, be objected, that I proceed rashly, and form my notions of Alexander merely from the account, given by him of Lucian, a profess'd enemy. It were indeed to be wish'd, that some of the accounts publish'd by his followers and accomplices had remained. The opposition and contrast betwixt the character and conduct of the same man, as drawn by a friend or an enemy, is as strong, even in common life, much more in these religious matters, as that betwixt any two men in the world, betwixt Alexander and St Paul for instance" (Hume 2000, 175).

To Hume's largely Protestant audience, St Paul is a central figure in Christianity. Yet all we have about St Paul is written by himself or by his followers and possible accomplices. We do not have an account by written

by one of his enemies. Neither do we have an unbiased and rigorously researched account. Further, Hume has stressed that had Alexander started his impostures in Athens, he would have been exposed. Readers of Hume's time would have known that even according to the writings of his acolyte who produced the *Acts of the Apostles*, Paul's preaching in Athens before an audience which included Epicurean and Stoic philosophers was hardly received with uniform enthusiasm. Some treated him as a babbler or scoffed at him (*Acts*, 17.18, 17.32). Although the author of *Acts* describes many supposed miracles produced by Paul, even he does not describe a Pauline miracle in Athens. Paul, of course, also started his preaching in a relatively ignorant and backward part of the Roman Empire. The implication is obvious. Just as we have no account that defends Alexander from Lucian, we have no account that criticises Paul to place against the account of Paul's Christian acolytes. Had Paul started his miracle working and preaching in Athens, he would likely have been exposed as a fraud.

I should emphasise, however, Hume shows pretty clearly elsewhere that he does not want to totally undermine an established religion, even if it is as preposterous as Christianity. Consider a remark Hume makes in his *History of England*. In discussing the reformation, he considers the issue of whether there should be state funded established religion. He considers the argument that just as artisans improve their goods in a free market economy, religion would be improved if there were a free market in religious preaching. However, he rejects the claim, arguing that what will happen is that "[E]ach ghostly practitioner, in order to render himself more precious and sacred in the eyes of his retainers, will inspire them with the most violent abhorrence of all other sects, and continually endeavour, by some novelty, to excite the languid devotion of his audience. No regard will be paid to truth, morals, or decency, in the doctrines inculcated. Every tenet will be adopted that best suits the disorderly affections of the human frame. Customers will be drawn to each conventicle by new industry and address in practising on the passions and the credulity of the populace. And, in the end, the civil magistrate will find, that he has dearly paid for his pretended frugality, in saving a fixed establishment of the priests; and that, in reality the most decent and advantageous composition, which he can make with the spiritual guides, is to bribe their indolence, by assigning stated salaries to their profession, and rendering it superfluous for them to be farther ac-

tive, than merely to prevent their flock from straying in quest of new pastures. And in this manner ecclesiastical establishments, though commonly they arose at first from religious views, prove in the end advantageous to the political interests of society” (Hume, 1778, 90-91)<sup>8</sup>.

Baier has emphasised the extent to which Hume is willing to praise religious hypocrisy for some greater good. As she notes after a survey of various comments in Hume’s history, he thinks religious sincerity is often more dangerous than religious hypocrisy (Baier 2008, 35-99). Indeed, in his history, Hume is also hypocritical. In his discussion of Charles I of England, he is wary of explicitly stating that doctrines that make the person of the monarch sacred are false. He states “[T]hat illusion, if it be an illusion, which teaches us to pay a sacred regard to the persons of princes, is so salutary, that to dissipate it by the formal trial and punishment of a sovereign, will have a more pernicious effects on the people, than the example of justice can be supposed to have a beneficial effect on princes, by checking their career of tyranny” (Hume 1778a, 545). Careful readers of various works of Hume would conclude that Hume must think that the view that the persons of princes are sacred is an illusion. Indeed, in his essay “Of the Original Contract”, Hume quite clearly says that “Almost all governments, which exist at present, or of which there remains any record in story, have been founded originally, either on usurpation or conquest, or both ...” (Hume 1987, 471). He also explains how the illusion of legitimacy and sacredness arises through habituation and various artifices.

As we can see from one of his letters, Hume does not apply this praise of religious hypocrisy merely to matters of state. James Edmonstoune wrote to Hume about a Mr Vivian. He says that Mr Vivian may be able to get a good living by taking a Bishoprick. However, Vivian now apparently thinks he ought not to take it because of his religious scepticism. Edmonstoune describes Vivian as a “sort of disciple” of Hume who has “given him notions not very consistent with his priestly character” (Grieg 1939, 353-4). He asks Hume to advise Vivian. Hume advises Edmonstoune to tell Mr Vivian to take the Bishoprick because “civil employments for men of letters can scarcely be found...” He continues “It is putting too great a respect on the vulgar, and on their superstitions, to pique one’s self on sincerity with regard to them ... If the thing were worthy of being treated gravely, I should tell him that the Pythian oracle, with the approbation of Xenophon, advised

everyone to worship the gods - nomo poleos [ie according to the customs of one's community]. I wish it was still in my power to be a hypocrite in this particular. The common duties of society usually require it; and the ecclesiastical profession only adds a little more to an innocent dissimulation, or rather simulation, without which it is impossible to pass through the world" (Grieg 1932, 439). Citing Apollo's oracle as an authority to a potential Christian bishop is laced with irony; particularly when coupled with the conditional "[I]f the thing were worthy of being treated gravely". Nevertheless, the remarks Hume makes about the place of religion in society indicate that he is ironically serious. As Baier says, "Hume's attitude to religion and established religion is a mix of realism, irony, despair, and moral satire" (Baier 2008, 96).

Lucian may have influenced Hume's attitude to religion, though there is no sign of despair in Lucian. Hume lived in a world recently devastated by religious fanatics. Lucian did not. Some scholars have been puzzled by Lucian's *On the Syrian Goddess* (*Peri tis Syrihs Theou*), in which he apparently quite credulously describes miracles, while elsewhere regarding such stories as absurd. Yet Lucian elsewhere provides a key to the puzzle. In *The Lover of Lies, or the Doubter* (*Filopseudis i Apiston*), two characters both marvel at lies, particularly lies told by the superstitious. It turns out that the lies that they think are bad are those that are useless or outright fraudulent. Lies told "to deceive the enemy, or a matter of life and death" are excused (Lucian 1961a, 196). Further, poets who seek to seduce with fables are excused, as are liars who "tell such stories from patriotic motives. Besides if you abolished such stories throughout Greece, all the official guides would starve to death, for foreign tourists (*xenoi*) have no wish to hear the truth about anything, even if they're not paying for it" (Lucian 1961a, 198). Lucian is a patriotic Syrian who is willing to fudge the truth a little for patriotic motives. In any case, Lucian gives the game away to the intelligent reader by writing *On the Syrian Goddess* as a parody of Herodotus written in Herodotus's Ionic dialect<sup>9</sup>. Literary figures of Lucian's own time wrote in Attic Greek. (Herodotus has been regarded by many as an arch liar (e.g. Plutarch 1965)).

Lucian's strategy in *On the Syrian Goddess* is similar to the much more explicit strategy that he adopts in *A True Story* (*Alethon Dihgimaton*), in which he distinguishes himself from all the other liars by telling the truth that he is lying. He there says "I myself thanks to my vanity, was eager to

hand something down to posterity, that I might not be the only one excluded from the privileges of poetic licence, and as I had nothing true to tell, not having had any adventures of any significance, I took to lying. But my lying is far more honest than theirs, for although I tell the truth in nothing else, I shall at least be truthful in saying that I am a liar” (Lucian 1913, 253). Nevertheless, in a later part of *A True Story*, he encounters liars on the isle of the damned, including Herodotus, and he comments “[O]n seeing them, I had good hopes for the future, for I have never told a lie that I know of” (Lucian 1913, 337). He thereby damns himself by lying about his earlier admission that he is lying. He also undermines his lying claim to have encountered Herodotus et al in the isle of the damned - in this way, he undermines his claim to having demonstrated that Herodotus is a liar while still asserting it.

A shallow reader of *On the Syrian Goddess* might take it to be an old fashioned patriotic work or perhaps a genuine arcane text. (Lucian seems to have written fake ancient philosophical texts to trap pretentious scholars (Jones 1986, 19).) A subtle reader would get the parody while indulging herself in some harmless patriotism.

Lucian shows himself to be sympathetic to Epicureanism. However, there is little sign that he is an Epicurean. The philosopher he presents most sympathetically is the Cynic Menippus, who wrote centuries before Lucian (Jones 1986, 26-32). In the *Double Indictment* (Dis Kategouremenos) Lucian puts into the mouth of Dialogue, one of his two accusers, the claim that on top of his many insults to Dialogue, “he even dug up and thrust upon me Menippus, a prehistoric dog (palaion kynon), with a very loud bark, it seems, and sharp fangs, a really dreadful dog who bites unexpectedly because he grins when he bites” (Lucian 1921, 147). In his *Dialogues of the Dead*, Lucian presents Menippus as eager to go to the land of the dead and to satirise villains who want to avoid punishment. Menippus also sends up various human vanities as preposterous in the light of death. Menippus does not appear in *Kataplous*, but Cyniscus (puppy) appears. Lucian often seems to take up a Menippean role.

### Lucianic Thanatotherapy

We understand Hume better by understanding his allusion to *Kataplous* and his Lucianic techniques. Hume dug up a prehistoric dog in the form of Lucian, though he here uses it in part to bite himself. Let me remind

the reader: in *Kataplous*, the tyrant Megapenthes tries to talk Clotho (one of the fates) out of shoving him into Charon's boat by stressing his important plans. Clotho is outraged that he will want nearly twenty years. In Smith's published version of the story about Hume's death, Hume says that he will tell Charon he wants to open up the eyes of the public about the prevailing superstition. Charon annoyedly tells him "that will not happen these many hundred years" and tells him to get into the boat (Fieser 2005, 300).

Hume's tyrannical attempt to hang on to life by bringing about the downfall of the Christian religion is shown to be absurd. First, it is more impossible to complete than Megapenthes' hubristic projects. It will, at best, take hundreds of years. Second, materialists should not be worried about dying, so it is hypocritical of Hume to hang on to life indefinitely. Third, eliminating religion is something no true sceptic would aim at. Hume plays both the role of Megapenthes and of the god who, by divine intervention, prevents him from causing further great suffering. He thereby is forced by literary divine intervention to see through Epicurean soteriology and take up the role of a "true sceptic" who enjoys the advantages of "careless" scepticism.

We get a greater insight into Hume's thanatotherapy by considering the behaviour of Menippus in Lucian. Menippus delights in bringing out the absurd vanities of the vain and powerful. However, Lucian not only does that through Menippus. He also brings out how meaningless the vanities of ordinary people are in Hades by depicting them in their final state. The beautiful are now mere skulls. The strong now have no muscles. And so on. There is a lovely section of Lucian's *Dialogues of the Dead* in which Menippus is sending up a pompous and corrupt philosopher who has to strip off his vanities. In response, the philosopher tells him to strip off his independence, plain speaking, nobility, laughter and cheerfulness - presumably because they are also meaningless in Hades. Hermes, however, tells Menippus that he should keep these things, as they are useful to us in floating down (kataploun) because they all carry well (eufora) (Lucian 1961, 112-115). Hermes's speech has a touch of irony; for his praise of Menippus's character traits is coupled with him calling them koufa - which can mean buoyant, but literally means empty or hollow. So it may be that there is a divine joke here at Menippus's expense<sup>10</sup>. Note that, in any case, we are not being told that these character traits are useful when we arrive, for nothing is useful when we arrive. That, however, does not matter for we have ceased to exist.

## Afterword

Is Hume right? To decide that question, we would have to engage in further discussion. We would also have to try his thanatotherapy. Will we dare to try it?

## Notes

- 1 In his letter, Smith has Hume saying things that are very close to *Kataplous*, except that he says that Hume talked about three ghosts in Lucian pleading for more time. In *Kataplous*, only Megapenthes's ghost pleads for more time (Mossner and Ross, 1977 203-4).
- 2 Potkay argues that one of Hume's primary aims is to be a therapist in the Hellenistic tradition (Potkay 2000, 12-16). However, in a dialogue Potkay quotes, Hume puts into the mouth of "The Sceptic" an argument against the therapeutic power of philosophy. He then puts an argument for its therapeutic power in a footnote correcting "The Sceptic". Hume was probably ambivalent on the matter (Hume 1987; 169, 177 footnote 17).
- 3 Perhaps in this respect Hume is closer to Epicurus than the fanatically anti-religious Lucretius. Epicurus, perhaps as a way of deflecting attacks on his supposed atheism, trod a fine line on the existence of the gods and the value of religious ceremonies (Long and Sedley 1987, 144-149).
- 4 For a jaundiced view of Epicureanism, see Green 1990, 618-630. For a more nuanced discussion, see Mistsis 2003, 467-471. Hume would not have known the details, but would have been aware of Lucretius's nauseating attitude to Epicurus.
- 5 The library of Baron Hume, Hume's nephew, contained a 12 volume edition of Jonathan Swift published in 1736. It had probably previously belonged to Hume (Norton and Norton 1996; 131, number 1227).
- 6 For a discussion of Hume's satiric style and his relation to Swift and Lucian, see Ross 1995 and Phiddian 2011. Those authors underestimate the degree to which Hume distances his style and targets from those of Swift.
- 7 I am using the notion of implying here to mean what Grice, in a wonderful turn of phrase, calls "implicating" (Levinson 1983, 97-118).
- 8 Hume is careful to say that he excepts the true religion from his remarks, but that is something he had to say to get his work published and read.
- 9 The arcane style is captured in Harmon's translation of Lucian into the style of the fake fourteenth century traveller John Mandeville (Lucian 1925a).
- 10 Lucian's (and Hume's?) point here may be similar to one Thomas Nagel makes in a discussion of the absurdity of human life. He says "[I]f *sub specie aeternitatis* there is no reason to believe anything matters, then that doesn't matter either, and we can approach our absurd lives with irony instead of heroism or despair" (Nagel 1981, 161). Joel Relihan seems to be correct in arguing that Menippus's (and Lucian's?) own vanities are in part the target of the *Dialogues of the Dead* (Relihan 1987).



## References

- Baier, Annette. 1991. *A Progress of Sentiments: Reflections on Hume's Treatise*. Cambridge (Mass): Harvard University Press.
- Baier, Annette. 2008. *Death and Character: Further Reflections on Hume*. Cambridge (Mass): Harvard University Press.
- Epicurus. 1987. "Letter to Menoecus." In *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, vol. 1. Trans. and ed. by A. Long and D. Sedley, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 149-150.
- Fieser, James (ed.). 2005. *Early Responses to Hume's Life and Reputation, Second Edition: volume 1*. University of Tennessee at Martin: Thoemmes.
- Green, Peter. 1990. *Alexander to Actium: The Hellenistic Age*. London: Thames and Hudson.
- Grieg, J. (ed.). 1932. *The Letters of David Hume, vol. 1: 1727-1765*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Grieg, J. (ed.). 1939. *The Letters of David Hume, vol. 2: 1766-1776*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hume, David. 1778. *A History of England, vol. 3*. Liberty Press online. [http://lf-oll.s3.amazonaws.com/titles/790/Hume\\_0011-03\\_EBk\\_v6.0.pdf](http://lf-oll.s3.amazonaws.com/titles/790/Hume_0011-03_EBk_v6.0.pdf).
- Hume, David. 1778a. *A History of England, vol. 5*. Liberty Press online. <http://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/hume-the-history-of-england-vol-5>.
- Hume, David. 1980. "My own Life". In Ernest Mossner, *The Life of David Hume*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 611-615.
- Hume, David. 1987. *Essays: Moral, Political, and Literary*, edited by Eugene Miller. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund.
- Hume, David. 2000 *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*. Edited by Tom Beauchamp. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hume, David. 2007. *A Treatise of Human Nature, vol. 1*. Edited by David Fate Norton and Mary Norton.
- Jones, C. 1986. *Culture and Society in Lucian*. Cambridge (Mass): Harvard University Press.
- Levinson, Stephen. 1983. *Pragmatics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Long, A. and Sedley, D. 1987. *The Hellenistic Philosophers, vol. 1*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lucian. 1913. "A True Story." In *Lucian, vol. 1*. Trans. A. Harmon. London: Heinemann: 248-357.
- Lucian. 1915. "The Downward Journey." In *Lucian, vol. 2*. Trans. A. Harmon. London, Heinemann: 1-57.
- Lucian. 1921. "The Double Indictment." In *Lucian, vol 3*. Trans. A. Harmon. London, Heinemann: 84-151.

- Lucian. 1921a. "The Pathological Liar." In *Lucian*, vol 3. Trans. A Harmon. London, Heinemann: pp. 319-381.
- Lucian. 1925. "Alexander the False Prophet." In *Lucian*, vol. 4. Trans. A. Harmon. London, Heinemann: 173-254.
- Lucian. 1925a. "The Goddess of Surrye." In *Lucian*, vol. 4. Trans. A. Harmon. London, Heinemann: 339-411.
- Lucian. 1961. "Dialogues of the Dead." In *Lucian*, vol. 7. Trans. M. MacLeod. London, Heinemann: 1-175
- Lucian. 1961a. *Satirical Sketches*. Trans. Paul Turner Middlesex: Penguin.
- Lucretius. 1999. *On the Nature of the Universe*. Trans. Ronald Melville, Oxford: Oxford World's Classics.
- Miller, Stephen. 2001. *Three Deaths and Enlightenment Thought: Hume, Johnson, Marat*. Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press.
- Mitsis, Philip. 2003. "The Institutions of Hellenistic Philosophy." In Andrew Erskine, *A Companion to the Hellenistic World*. Oxford, Blackwell: 464-476.
- Mossner, Ernest and Ross, Ian. 1977. *The Correspondence of Adam Smith*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Nagel, Thomas. 1981. "The Absurd". In E. Klemke, *The Meaning of Life*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Norton, David and Norton, Mary. 1996. *The David Hume Library*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh Bibliographical Society.
- Nussbaum, Martha. 1994. *The Therapy of Desire*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. 195-238
- Phiddian, Robert. 2011. "'Strange Lengths': Hume and Satire in the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*". In Craig Taylor and Stephen Buckle (eds.) *Hume and the Enlightenment*. London: Pickering and Chatto.
- Plutarch. 1965. "On the Malice of Herodotus." In *Plutarch's Moralia vol. 11*. Trans. Lionel Pearson. London: Heinemann: 2-129.
- Potkay, Adam. 2000. *The Passion for Happiness: Samuel Johnson and David Hume*. Ithaca (US): Cornell University Press.
- Relihan, Joel. 1987. "Vainglorious Menippus in Lucian's *Dialogues of the Dead*". *Illinois Classical Studies*, vol. 12: 185-206.
- Ross, Ian. 1995. "Hume's Language of Scepticism." *Hume Studies*, 21: 237-254.
- Russell, Paul. 2008. *The Riddle of Hume's Treatise*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Sextus Empiricus. 1985. Ed. P. Halle, trans. S. Etheridge. *Selections from the Major Writings on Scepticism, Man and God*. Indianapolis: Hackett.
- \* I would like to thank Robert Phiddian and various philosophers for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.