VIII. THE PLEASURES OF TRAGEDY

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DAVID Hume begins his little essay “Of Tragedy” with the observation: “It seems as unaccountable pleasure which the spectators of a well-written tragedy receive from sorrow, terror, anxiety, and other passions that are in themselves disagreeable and uneasy.” Here Hume addresses a paradox that has puzzled philosophers of art since Aristotle: tragedies produce, and are designed to produce, pleasure for the audience, without supposing any special callousness or insensitivity on its part (in fact, quite the opposite). I will introduce a distinction which enables us to understand how we can feel pleasure in response to tragedy, and which also sheds some light on the complexity of such responses. The virtues of this approach lie in its straightforward solution to the paradox of tragedy as well as the bridges the approach builds between this and some other traditional problems in aesthetics, and the promising ways in which we are helped to see their relationships. In particular, we are helped to understand the feeling many have had about the greatness of tragedy in comparison to comedy, and provided a new perspective from which to view the relationship between art and morality. The very close connection which is seen to hold here between pleasures from tragedy and moral feelings also gives rise to a potential problem, which is examined in the last three sections of the paper.

Hume himself alleged that imagination, imitation, and expression are all “naturally” pleasurable to the mind, and argued that when they “predominate” over the unpleasant feelings the latter are “converted” into the former. But it is not clear how the “dominance” of imagination and expression is to be achieved. It is not insured by the fact that what is depicted is fictional, or even by our knowledge that it is fictional, since Hume discusses a play where the events depicted (even though fictional) are so gory that no amount of expression can “soften” them into pleasure. More puzzling, however, is the process of “conversion” which imagination performs on the unpleasant feelings (and which those feelings, when dominant, perform on the natural pleasantness of the imagination). Pains are not merely mitigated by the pleasure, but converted or transformed into something different. The mechanics of this conversion are never explained, and as long as they remain obscure, even if we accept other features of Hume’s view, many of which are quite insightful, we have merely substituted one puzzle for another.2

I. PRELIMINARIES

The paradox of tragedy presupposes a position on the more general problem of how we can (not irrationally or absurdly) respond emotionally to a work of art at all, given that we do not really believe the events or characters depicted in it are real. I shall adopt the perspective of Ralph Clark who suggests a way of handling this more general problem which is ingenious for its simplicity.3 Emotional responses to art are the result of entertaining various counterfactual conditionals: what would it be like if... (Iago were real, a 300-story building caught fire and all the elevators went out, someone had the characteristics and experiences of Anna Karenina).4 Though this perspective is not essential to my view on the pleasures of tragedy, it does coincide nicely with some points I wish to make later. There are, moreover, some works of art for which Clark’s approach will not do. But these tend to be parodies or other sorts of works within the comic genre, rather than tragedies. That is, such works make us laugh because there is no, or little temptation to entertain the supposition that that might really happen (Godzilla Eats Toledo, etc.). Even in those cases, however, we can imagine what it would be like to be a person...
about to suffer (and hence such works can excite fear) even as a result of something deliberately far-fetched. One could even argue that it is just the juxtaposition of such seemingly incompatible responses which often produces delight, or pleasure. But I am interested here in how to explain pleasure deriving from tragedy, rather than the problems of how we can respond emotionally to manifestly unrealistic works, or to any works of art at all. Clearly, my problem presupposes an answer to the more general problem, but in addition requires the resolution of a seeming incongruity between the pleasures produced and the feelings the tragic subject matter seems, morally, to call for.

It would not be surprising to find someone claiming that aesthetically developed persons do not feel pleasure or enjoyment from tragedy at all, and, that the appropriate response to such works of art is to be unnerved, disturbed, depressed, or even horrified. If this were true and this were all there was to say about the matter, then it would be very difficult indeed to understand why tragedies are so revered. People who pursue them would seem to be morbidly fixated on achieving their own unhappiness, which is more a sign of mental imbalance than aesthetic sophistication. The paradox of pleasure from tragedy would be replaced, then, by a different paradox: why we seek out things that displease us so.

Further, it would be difficult to accept that tragedy produces pleasure if pleasure were thought to be merely a kind of gaiety involving smiles or laughter, or a purely sensuous, of short term interest and limited duration. But pleasures come in many shapes and sizes. Not all are highly spirited. Some are serene and calm, and may as well involve profound feelings of satisfaction. Pleasures from tragedy are of these latter sorts. Tragedy provides worthwhile experiences because it answers to important human interests, not superficial ones. These experiences include, as I shall argue, some of the most gratifying feelings human beings recognize themselves to possess. If this is so, and it is still claimed that these experiences are not pleasurable, then it seems we have embarked upon a merely terminological dispute.

Traditionally, the puzzle which is my topic has been posed as how we can derive pleasure from tragedy, and I shall follow suit. But I am using “tragedy” in a broad sense, including under this rubric the appropriate works in film, literature, dance, as well as theatre (operas and plays). My remarks here could even be extended, with appropriate modifications, to apply to paintings and sculpture—even though “tragedy” is not used to categorize works in those mediums. What this shows is that certain conclusions about the pleasurable nature of tragedies are also seen to hold for other works as well, since the pleasures derive from comparable features of tragedies on the one hand and certain paintings and sculpture on the other. Naturally, then, my remarks do not apply merely to the narrow, Aristotelian sense of tragedy, in which sense there is question about whether such works as, e.g., Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman or Eugene O'Neill's A Long Day's Journey Into Night are tragedies. I am concerned here with, to put it bluntly, the class of works of art with unhappy endings (even though the unhappiness of the endings is often punctuated with something we would judge to be felicitous—such as Othello's knowledge of Desdemona's faithfulness, or Alfredo's discovery of Violetta's love in La Traviata—in fact, one could argue that the “felicitous” discoveries are more poignant precisely because of the accompanying grief). To extend the concept to paintings and sculpture one would have to change this to “works with unpleasant subject matter.” “Unhappy endings” and “unpleasant subject matter” are neither of them technically precise, but they do capture the feature of tragedy which leads to the puzzle. The unhappiness of endings and unpleasantness of subject matter are the aspects of works of art which give rise to the perplexity about how such works can give pleasure to anyone who is not an unfeeling brute, malicious, or unbalanced. It is unfortunate that Hume himself was not very clear on this, as he writes, “One scene full of joy and contentment and security is the utmost that any composition of this kind
can bear; and it is sure always to be the concluding one." Quite the contrary, scenes of joy are generally the opening ones, and tales with happy endings are not likely, in anyone's vocabulary, to be called tragedies.

Though my own discussion of the pleasures of tragedy does not utilize such notions as imagination and passion on which Hume depended, it does have its own special presuppositions. I shall speak of two kinds of responses to art: a direct response and a meta-response. A direct response is a response to the qualities and content of the work. A meta-response is a response to the direct response. The distinction is not one of epistemological or ontological status; I presuppose no view about sense data, epistemologically "primitive" experiences, or incorrigibility of mental status. A direct response is direct only in the sense that it is a response to the qualities and content of the work of art. Of course, there are complex questions about what is "in the work" and what constitutes the "work itself," but those need not be resolved for the purposes of this discussion. The important contrast is not between a direct response to the work as opposed to a direct response to what is not really in the work. The important contrast is between a direct response and a meta-response which is a response to the direct response: it is how one feels about and what one thinks about one's responding (directly) in the way one does to the qualities and content of the work. The meta-response is what Ryle called a "higher order" operation: it depends on (and is partly a function of) another mental phenomenon, i.e., a direct response. Ideally, my remarks will be independent of any specific view of the "logical category" of pleasure itself, and I fear perhaps the term "response" may cause some unwarranted discomfort in that sphere. Let me therefore make the following caveats: (1) by calling pleasure a response I do not imply that it is not essentially connected to its source (what one finds pleasurable), i.e., it is not distinguishable as a response independently of what the pleasure is a pleasure in; (2) a response is not necessarily a mental episode or occurrence (a fortiori it is not necessarily a private mental episode) but it may turn out to be a mood or even a disposition or a change of disposition, or some other type of thing.

Both direct and meta-responses exist in ordinary life as well as in artistic contexts. For example, the remains of a spectacular car crash may titillate our curiosity, and we may feel disgusted with ourselves for being so morbid. On the other hand, we may enjoy the enticement of hawkers outside seamy strip joints, and be pleased with ourselves for having overcome a puritanical upbringing. We can be depressed at our failure to meet a challenge, impressed with our ability to rise to an occasion, disgusted with our lack of sympathy for a friend's bereavement, or pleased with the commitment we are inclined to make to help a neighbor. It should be noted that in ordinary as well as aesthetic contexts the two kinds of responses cannot be distinguished merely by what words are used to describe them. "Pleasure," "shock," "melancholy," and "delight" may all describe direct or meta-responses, and the two are not always clearly distinguishable from each other. A blush of embarrassment may be intensified by embarrassment over the blush. That two things being distinguished cannot be infallibly distinguished, and that there are unclear cases of how and even whether the two are distinguishable, does not necessarily undermine the utility of the distinction.

II. A Solution

Direct responses to tragedy are responses to the unpleasantness of the work, and they are hence unpleasant experiences we would expect to have from works having unpleasant subject matter and/or unhappy endings. Direct responses draw on our feelings and sympathies: tear-jerkers jerk tears because of our sympathy with persons who are ill-treated or the victims of misfortune. Many people, in fact, dislike attending depressing plays and violent movies, or reading lengthy books and poetry, precisely because these experiences are unpleasant and consequently depress and sadden
them, making them too well aware of the evil of people and the perils of existence. These works of art, rather than being uplifting and inspiring, often instead produce feelings of torpor and futility as one is overwhelmed by the amount and variety of viciousness in the world. A dose of direct response unpleasantness is a good antidote to creeping misanthropy, as it feeds off of our concern for others. It is also, as John Stuart Mill discovered, a cure for ennui. Mill reported in his Autobiography (Sec. V) that it was his crying over the distressed condition of Marmontel as related in his memoirs that initially jogged Mill out of his “mental crisis” by showing him that he did have feelings, concerns, and cares, and that he was not just “a logic machine.”

It is the nature of these direct responses to tragedy which we expect and in fact receive which gives rise to the question in the first place, how do we derive pleasure from tragedy? Certainly the typical person who appreciates and enjoys such works of art doesn't feel the direct response any less poignantly than those described above who don't enjoy these works. Lovers of Dostoyevsky, Verdi, and Shakespeare, let us hope, are no more callous than those who find them too hard to take. But whence the pleasure? It is, I suggest, a meta-response, arising from our awareness of, and in response to, the fact that we do have unpleasant direct responses to unpleasant events as they occur in the performing and literary arts. We find ourselves to be the kind of people who respond negatively to villainy, treachery, and injustice. This discovery, or reminder, is something which, quite justly, yields satisfaction. In a way it shows what we care for, and in showing us we care for the welfare of human beings and that we deplore the immoral forces that defeat them, it reminds us of our common humanity. It reduces one's sense of aloneness in the world, and soothes, psychologically, the pain of solipsism. Perhaps this is something like what Kant had in mind when he spoke in the Critique of Judgment of a “common sense.” We derive pleasure from the communica-

bility or “shareability” of a response to a work of art: it is something which unites us with other people through feeling something which could, in principle, be felt by anyone.

These meta-pleasures should not be confused with the pleasures from crying or other kinds of emotional release. The pleasure from giving vent or expression to one’s pent-up feelings of anger, frustration, or sadness is different from the pleasure from being aware of the fact that you are the kind of person who feels those emotions in response to particular situations as represented in tragic works of art. The emotional release, stressed with a somewhat different emphasis by Aristotle, may in fact be pleasant, leaving one feeling refreshed and renewed. But these external expressions need not accompany one’s feelings in any obvious way; many feel embarrassed about them and hence strive to avoid them (or, what is more unfortunate, to avoid the works of art which produce them). This may lead to a kind of frustration or it may not, I do not feel qualified to undertake any such “psychoanalysis.” Nevertheless, one need not engage in overt expressions of feelings in order to have them, and hence one need not engage in the expression of the feelings (i.e., expressions of the direct responses) in order to feel the pleasures from tragedy. If so, we can conclude that the pleasures from tragedy are not derived merely from the expression of grief, sadness, etc. but must have some other source.

III. TRAGEDY AND COMEDY

The observation is often made that tragedies are much more important or significant artworks than comedies. The great works of Shakespeare are Hamlet, King Lear, and Macbeth, notwithstanding the brilliance of Twelfth Night and As You Like It. The greatest plays of antiquity are the Oedipus Trilogy and the Oresteia, despite the cunning wit of Aristophanes. The greatness of Voltaire’s Candide is due more to his portrayal of the fate of humankind than his avowedly clever humor. There are great comedies, but the significance of the greatest is not thought to reach the significance of even less great tragedies. Why?
It is not due, as one might suppose on first blush, to some essential morbidity in the outlook of those who defend this judgment. If it were, the greatness of tragedy would be due to the simple truth of the basic picture drawn by tragedy of the nature of man's lot: doomed to suffer unjustice, wage war, suffer defeat, and be overcome by conniving women, conniving men, mistakes in judgment, accidents of birth, ignorance, and foolish advice. Tragedy then would be taken to confirm, or at least to echo, one's solemn conviction in the nastiness of human life. The pleasure from tragedy would then also be a morbid one, like the evil-doer who, in his every act, enjoys providing more evidence against the existence of a benevolent god. Whether or not one does believe in the existence of such a god, the pleasure taken in providing evidence against its existence by performing acts of evil is undoubtedly a morbid one.

But the greatness of tragedy is not due to any supposed truth of "profound" pictures such as these, and our pleasure in it is not therefore in recognizing this unpleasant truth. Tragedy is anything but morbid, for if people did not feel sympathy with their fellow human beings we would not have the initial negative responses we do to the tragic situation, the unpleasant direct responses. At the foundation of the aesthetic pleasure from tragedy is the same feeling which makes possible moral action: sympathy with, and a concern for, the welfare of human beings qua human beings, feelings which are increased if those human beings bear any special relationship to oneself such as friends or family, with an attendant increase in moral commitment to them. I do not wish to argue about the basis of morality, but I do wish to suggest that the basis for our judgments of the aesthetic significance of tragedy (as opposed to the lesser significance of comedy) can plausibly be its calling forth feelings which are also at the basis of morality. Judgments about tragedy's greatness derive from a recognition of the importance of morality to human life.

In comedy there must be a "butt" of the joke. The pleasure from comedy, then, is generally a direct response to the failures, defects, or absurdities of whomever (or whatever) is the object of ridicule or fun. Of course not all laughing is laughing at people—there is also laughing with people—and the two kinds of responses also provide a means for explaining what this means. One laughs with people when one is among those being laughed at. Depending on the joke, one's own emotional reactions to parts of the work may be the object of fun, or perhaps what one remembers having done or imagines one would have done under circumstances presented in the work. The response has then become more complex, requiring a kind of self-awareness, much like the metaresponse that pleasure form tragedy requires.

Moreover, responses to comedy are to failures or defects judged to be insignificant. This judgment is important because if the imperfections were thought to be of great significance, the work would then take on the air of tragedy rather than comedy, it would be saddening rather than amusing that people were subject to such flaws. The arrogance and pomposity of Trissotin in Moliere's *The Learned Ladies* is comic because he is a parochial poet with little influence outside of an equally insignificant small circle of dotty old ladies. But the arrogance of Jason is of cosmic proportions: it ruins Medea, and she in turn destroys his children, his bride, his future father-in-law, and by that act uninstabilities the very order of society. Human foibles may be minor or major, and it is precisely the latter ones which tear at (rather than tickle) the hearts of an audience. Comedy, one might say, is skin deep: it generally goes no further than direct response, and requires that one's responses be to things which do not play major roles in maintaining the happiness and security of human life. Presuming an imperfection to be insignificant makes it possible to laugh at it, but believing it to be important makes one cry. The person who laughs at tragedy may justifiably be called "callous," and one might sensibly harbor serious doubts about that person's morality.

**IV. IMMORAL ART**

This excursion into the importance of tragedy as opposed to comedy has opened the back door to
another issue concerning aesthetic value, one which has been infusing the discussion: the nature of the relationship between aesthetic and moral value. I have described the importance or significance of tragedy in comparison to comedy as due to an appreciation of the pleasure from tragedy being derived from feelings of sympathy with other human beings, which provide for the direct response, and the sympathy itself can plausibly be argued to be the basis also of moral feeling. The greatness of tragedy reflects the importance of morality in human life, and the aesthetic judgment of a particular work's greatness, therefore, would be an aesthetic judgment which reflects one's own particular moral commitments. Hume says at the end of his essay "Of the Standard of Taste" (in what seems to be a reluctant confession) that we cannot admit a work of art to have value unless we approve of its morality. That is, a necessary condition of judging a work of art to be good is that it does not conflict with one's own ethical views. This is necessary in order to feel the direct response, and consequently to feel the pleasure of the meta-response which is dependent on it. Hume illustrates this with some of his own moral judgments, but they of course involve cases where evaluators may differ.

I imagine that a work which conflicts with one's own ethical views would be called an immoral work, though both the conflict and the immorality of the work are hard to pin down. This is because a judgment that a work is immoral is a relational judgment, a judgment of the relationship between one's own ethical convictions and something about the work—what it expresses, says, shows, or approves. Judgments of immorality of a work will then vary according to different ethical convictions as well as different interpretations of the work. A work's supporting multiple interpretations even further complicates any judgment of its immorality.

Nevertheless, assuming good grounds can be given for a given interpretation of a work and, therefore, for the legitimacy of a given direct response, an immoral work would be one which manipulates our responses in a way which has us responding favorably towards something which we would in fact judge as evil, and unfavorably toward something we would in fact judge as good (to put the matter in black-and-white terms). Hypothetically, one might rewrite Othello so that one is led to feel pleasure at the victory of Iago, for example, though note there might be some doubt then about whether such a work should be called a tragedy (and if called a tragedy, it would be so called for quite a different reason—because of the eventual capture of Iago, not because of Desdemona's death). Some contemporary American horror films could also serve as examples. I am thinking specifically of a number of spin-offs of the well-reviewed film Halloween from a couple of years back. The morally horrifying thing about these films is that they are told through the eyes of the rapist/killer, as if to say "you, too, can feel what it is like to be a homicidal maniac," as if there is something worthwhile in having that experience. We don't learn about their psychopathology, nor are we encouraged to identify with the victims since their characters are not developed enough to do so (but only enough to present them as victims). The thrill of the movie is, so to speak, the thrill of the chase. The point is that one finds a work morally disturbing when there is a conflict between the (immoral) feelings it produces (or attempts to produce!) in us and our (ordinary) judgments of morality. It is certainly a conflict which can occur, and which in general leads us to shun the work ourselves and, most likely, to arm our children against it.

The charge of a work's being immoral identifies the work's fault as influencing us immorally, or, if we have the strength of character to resist, attempting to do so. An immoral work, then, is one which encourages a direct response to which we have an unfavorable meta-response. The direct response, as manipulated by the author, if successful, would be pleasurable (exciting, enticing, etc.) but, given the state of one's ordinary moral feeling, one's meta-response would be displeasure at finding that one is capable of such callousness. (The work may be so successful as to prevent all of
one's moral feelings, but notice that then the problem disappears, at least in one's own mind, for one no longer judges the work to be immoral). That is, in an immoral work one could not have the meta-pleasure characteristic of pleasure from tragedy, and hence one would certainly not judge it as good on the basis of that pleasure.

I have advanced this characterization of immoral art intending only to capture the possible immorality of tragedy. The meta-pleasure we feel in response to tragic situations is absent in immoral works, and this absence leads to a negative judgment of the work's aesthetic value. This characterization of immoral art could also be applied in obvious ways to comedy and even pornography. One may think it inhumane to laugh at people slipping on banana peels, or base to enjoy explicit depictions of sexual activity. In these one may also recognize the talent (if it takes talent) of the artist in producing the appropriate direct responses, but ultimately reach a negative verdict of its value because one disapproves of people having those sorts of responses to that sort of subject matter.

V. A POTENTIAL PROBLEM

Given that, on this analysis, the same feelings are at the base of both morality and aesthetic pleasure from tragedy, it is necessary to explain how, consistently with this, one might respond aesthetically and be, for all intents and purposes, an immoral person, and also how one might be morally very upright but aesthetically insensitive. The first is what John Ruskin calls somewhere the "selfish sentimentalist." One can weep, groan, and cringe over a novel or in the theater, but remain blasé if the fictional events were to occur in reality. The pride one feels in one's theater tears is a selfish pride, and has actually very little to do with any concern for human welfare, or, consequently, one's virtue (though it may have a lot to do with one's supposed virtue). Wouldn't such an account as mine have to suppose that the moral feelings exist when one is in the theater, but that they dissolve when one walks outside?

In The Concept of Mind, Gilbert Ryle says, "Sentimentalists are people who indulge in induced feelings without acknowledging the fictitiousness of their agitations." Their agitations are not real since their concern is not: without a genuine desire for people's welfare there is no opposition between that desire and the fate that eventually befalls them. They pretend a concern for the poor devils, and then feel real distress when they suffer only because their pretense has been so effective. But then one wonders how people can feel real distress over pretended concerns.

There should be another way of explaining the situation which does not involve so much self-delusion. Indeed, there is. One might genuinely care for others but not nearly so much as for oneself. Hence, when there is no risk to oneself all the tears come pouring forth out of compassion: as a casual reader or theater-goer one is merely a witness to, and cannot be a participant in, the proceedings. That is one of the delights of fiction (even tragedy): one is free to feel as one wishes at no risk to oneself, incurring no obligation, requiring no money, time, or dirty fingernails. But once one gets outside, the situation changes, and one's concern for others may just not be strong enough to overcome self-interest. Concern for others does not miraculously disappear when one travels from the theater to the marketplace—it is overpowered by concern for self. And there is still another way to view the phenomenon, consistently with what I have said about sympathetic responses and meta-responses. Perhaps one identifies with the character in the novel, film, or play, and hence one's concern is self-interested in the sense that it exists only because of that identification. What one may never have learned to do is to be concerned about others even when one does not feel at one with them. In this case there is a genuine sympathetic response, but one's capacity for sympathy is limited. I, at least, would expect such individuals to show rather pronounced patterns of likes and dislikes with respect to fictional material: only characters with certain salient properties (divorced women, perhaps, or aristocrats, or
characters plagued by self-doubt, etc.) would excite their compassion, while others (bachelors, immigrants, or the chronically self-assured, etc.) leave them cold. One of the things we generally expect from a good work of art is a capacity to evoke sympathetic feelings in us for some of its characters, and it is a measure of its goodness that it can melt the hearts even of those not disposed to any concern for others. Of course, there are "cheap" ways of doing this which we all recognize: there are tools for manipulating an audience that practically no one can resist. One such tool is to introduce someone who is young, intelligent, and good, but dies an untimely death (Love Story, Death Be Not Proud), and another is to capitalize on adorable youngsters who have been wronged in all their innocence and goodness (Cio-Cio-San's child, Trouble, in Madame Butterfly). Both are effective in disturbing even the weakest sense of injustice.

The other side of the problem is the unimaginative moralist, whose behavior is always exemplary but who cannot get worked up over a fictional creation. Isn’t it even more difficult to explain how such a person will not respond sympathetically to fiction although he or she will do so in reality? We certainly do not have a case here of one’s sympathy being overpowered by self-interest. The key to the solution is that this moralist is unimaginative, for it takes more effort of imagination to respond to a work of art than it does to respond to real life. In art one has to overcome the conventions of the medium, contemplate counterfactuals, and make the appropriate inferences and elaborations on the basis of them. Perhaps this is why some have thought that developing an appreciation of appropriate works of art is a good ingredient of moral education: if one can learn to respond morally in the imagined case, then it will be even easier to do so in reality. Too little, it seems to me, has been written on the role of imagination in art appreciation. The discussion has instead focused on the role of belief, and how we can respond emotionally without believing (or suspending disbelief) in the reality of the characters and events. if we pursue the suggestion mentioned earlier that our responses to art are from entertaining counterfactuals, which, qua counterfactuals are imagined characters and events (not believed ones), then the way is opened for examining traits of imagination which are involved in doing this. It seems we are at last, led back to Hume and imagination, in a way which has more potential for understanding our responses to art than his notion of imagination did. But this is a matter for separate study. For these purposes, we can explain the unimaginative moralist’s failure to respond to art by virtue of that person’s being unimaginative in a way which is required in the aesthetic context but not required in the actual moral one.

VI. Meta-Responses to Art and to Life

Given the nature of pleasure from tragedy as analyzed here, it is not surprising to find philosophers alleging the existence of special "aesthetic emotions," unlike those which exist in real life. Indeed, we don’t generally feel pleasure from our sympathetic responses to real tragedies, and there needs to be some explanation of why the pleasurable response is appropriate to fiction and not to reality. The fact about fiction which makes this so is that in it no one really suffers; the suffering is fictional, but the fact that perceivers feel genuine sympathy for this imagined suffering enables perceivers to examine their own feelings without regard for other people. In real life, the importance of human compassion is easily overshadowed by the pain of human suffering. It is not possible in real life to respond to the importance of human sympathy as a distinct phenomenon, since that sympathy depends on, one might even say "feeds on," human misery. It is not, in life, an unequivocal good. In art, however, one experiences real sympathy without there having been real suffering, and this is why it is appropriate to feel pleasure at our sympathetic responses to a work of art, whereas it is not appropriate to feel pleasure at our sympathetic responses in reality. There the sympathy comes at too great a cost.
In real life, it is more appropriate to feel satisfaction, pride, or even pleasure with what one has done rather than with what one has felt. Though one should have some caution in how one feels about what one has done (because of unforeseen consequences), “caution” isn’t the right word to describe the hesitation one should have in responding to how one felt. Actions can be completed so that one can respond to them in themselves in a way inappropriate with feelings. One can go to a funeral, and be glad, looking back on it, that one had the courage to do so, but sadness over the person’s death has no determinate end. Feelings are not the sorts of things which can be completed; they are not tasks to be performed. Feelings reveal one’s sensitivities, which can be revealed not only in first-hand experience but also when one simply thinks about or remembers a situation. In real life, to be pleased with the feelings one had reveals a smugness, self-satisfaction, and complacency with what one has already felt. To be pleased that one once was sensitive (though now insensitive), is to be (properly) pleased very little, because one is at best pleased that one once was a feeling person (and, as explained above, one is pleased—because one’s sympathy exists—at the expense of other people’s misfortune). One should be more displeased that one has lost the sensitivity one once had. Pleasurable meta-responses in real life are foreclosed by the continued call for direct (unpleasant) responses, even when one is confronted with just the idea or memory of the event.

But such is not the case with a work of art. The direct response is to the work of art as experienced in its totality, in the integration of all its sensuous elements. The direct response is possible only in the presence of the work; take away the work and one is left merely to memories and meta-responses. In this sense, a direct response to art has “closure” (unlike feelings in real life and somewhat like actions) so that those responses can, without smugness, self-satisfaction, and complacency, themselves be singled out and responded to.

Though a meta-response of pleasure to sympathy felt in real life would reveal smugness and self-satisfaction, a meta-response of displeasure to one’s lack of sympathy is appropriate and even laudable. This shows that it is not the case that meta-responses are always inappropriate (or impossible) in real life, but that it depends on the nature of the situation. Discomfort, disgust, or dissatisfaction with oneself is desirable because it shows that we are aware of defects in our character, which is a first step to self-improvement. It is courting temptation to concentrate on how well one has done, for this makes us inattentive to the ways in which we might do better. It is also true that when one doesn’t “reap the benefits” of, i.e., gain pleasure from, one’s sympathy, we can be reasonably sure that it is genuine.

The differences between responses and meta-responses to real situations and to art have to do both with (1) the important role actions play in morality but not in our responses to art, and (2) the differing roles which emotions themselves play in the two cases. This latter, at least, turns out to be a very complicated matter, a complete examination of which would require an analysis of the importance of a first person, direct experience of a work of art for an appreciation of it (a phenomenon which I have suggested allows for “closure” of feelings in response to art which is not present in real life). But, most fundamentally, the meta-response of pleasure to the sympathy we feel for other people is appropriate to art but not in life because in the former there is no real suffering to continue to weigh on our feelings. In the latter case, real suffering easily commands our attention, so that any desirability of sympathy is of miniscule importance in comparison with the perniciousness of the conditions which gave rise to it.

In summary, pleasures from tragedy are meta-responses. They are responses to direct responses to works of art, which are themselves painful or unpleasant. But given the basis for the direct response, sympathy, it gives us pleasure to find ourselves responding in such a manner. That is, it is a recognition that there can be a unity of feeling among members of humanity, that we are not alone, and that these feelings are at the heart of morality itself. The judgment that tragedy is a great art form, much greater than comedy or
farce, is based on the fact that our pleasures in it derive from feelings which are essential to the existence and maintenance of human society. Further, one’s judgment of the goodness of a tragic work of art is dependent upon one’s moral approval of it, since disapproval (or indifference) would not generate the pleasurable metaresponses on which judgments of a work’s value are based. It is, of course, possible to respond appropriately to art, even when those responses require sympathy, and not with the appropriate sympathy in life, as it is also possible to be morally upstanding in life but insensitive to art. EXplanations of these phenomena involve intricacies of their own, but they reinforce rather than resist the analysis given of pleasure from tragedy as a metaresponse. The fact that pleasurable metaresponses to our sympathetic responses to tragedy are appropriate to art but not in life suggests one respect in which aesthetic emotions are different from emotions of life, and also has to do with the importance of direct experience of a work for an appreciation of it. The peculiarity of the responses hinges on the fact that what one initially responds to is not real, thus making continued sympathy idle, and allowing one to reflect on the sympathy one previously felt.

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NOTES

5. Hume, op. cit., p. 29.