The Three Modes of Conversion: Defending Hume's Solution to the Paradox of Tragedy

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Abstract: Our experience of tragic art is highly paradoxical: how can something especially designed to engender pain can also simultaneously induce pleasure? David Hume's "Conversion Theory" presents an effective answer to this question but its utility remains obscured and unobserved due to our semantic mode of engagement with the term 'conversion'. In this paper, I offer three distinct ways which our understanding of the word bundles up: metamorphosis, modification and adaptation. My proposal is that analysing conversion through the distinguished lens of adaptation alone, as I do in this paper, can provide the right support to the Humean hypothesis that it has hitherto been denied and push us closer to settling the tragedy paradox further from where Hume found himself.

Keywords: Tragedy, paradox, Hume, conversion, art, aesthetics

I

The field of aesthetics is marked with paradoxes. 18th century British philosopher, David Hume, tried to analyse some and poise a few, while ultimately getting entangled in those springing from his own theories. There is an epistemological paradox: if it is our strong claim that beauty is subjective then why do we defend our own opinions on the beautiful against possible disagreements? Rephrasing the epistemological paradox in a certain manner could help us land on an ontological paradox: do we perceive beauty because it actually exists in the real world or is such perception entirely dependent on our humane subjective constitution? There is then a metaphysical paradox having to do with a potential universal standard of taste: does good art shape ideal sensibilities or do ideal sensibilities define good art? Before taking a difficult stand on each of these, Hume struggled with a phenomenon where contradicting emotions thrive in a paradox of tragedy: why do we have an appetite for sadness served in the diverse platter of art when sadness in itself is quite distasteful to our sentimental palette?

This paper attempts to give a general outline of Hume's theory concerning the paradox of tragedy in art, popularly known as the "Theory of Conversion". I propose that conversion has three semantic modes: metamorphosis, modification and adaptation, and the two main criticisms that Hume's understanding of the paradox has faced across relevant literature arise from our apprehension of conversion in the second mode i.e. the mode of modification. The aim of this paper is to analyse his theory in the third mode to see if it could make us more sympathetic to his referential framework.

II

The solutions on offer by French authors Jean-Baptiste Du Bos and Bernard Le Bovier de Fontenelle were of particular interest to Hume. The first was of the opinion that when life is too peaceful and unhappening we require something, anything, that stirs our passions and rescues us from our persis-

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tent state of boredom. We would therefore rather partake in a tragedy of fiction that makes us grieve, that unsettles us and leaves us distressed, than spend all our real waking moments counting imaginary sheep. Hume agreed that the mirror most difficult to face is the one that reflects our own thoughts. Forcing to confront it is a cruel kind of oppression that humankind keeps inventing new ways to delay, if not overcome. Though this appears to be an acute observation of our mortal state, Hume explains why it falls short of delivering us from the particular paradox in question. A real-life tragic situation, he says, would keep us equally occupied and stressed as would a work of tragic art but we, however, almost never wish to choose bearing close witness to a fatal disaster for the sole sake of escaping our own mind.

Fontenelle, on the other hand, claimed that such is the nature of the human heart that it desires to be worn on the sleeve, to be uniformly swayed between the various pleasures and vicissitudes of life. The safest setting that protects it against getting butchered in the process, literally and figuratively, is the one provided by the false world of fiction. The remotest knowledge of the fact that what we are involved in is a deliberate play of events significantly dilutes the extremity of our pretentious plight. So the injuries that we suffer from fighting in the battle of inconvenient narratives are imminently nursed by the medication of myth served in the right dosage. He termed this mixture of pain and pleasure, uniquely entertained in art such as to form a single feeling, an "agreeable sorrow". For Fontenelle, thus, pain lies on the flip side of pleasure. Just as some pleasure stretched too far can turn into pain, so can a pain shrunken from its saturation be an able cause of pleasure. The first chocolate tastes pleasant; the tenth causes aversion. An actual tragedy induces pain; a false portrayal of it brews elation.

While Hume was largely convinced of Fontenelle's account, he thought that it overlooked an important case: since all art is not fictitious, when we derive pleasure from a novel yet original representation of some brutal historic event, what softens the blow of this very real tragedy, if not the cushion of make-believe? Unlike what a modest understanding of Fontenelle's analysis seems to suggest, the mark of a great tragedian lies in not how much he can alleviate grief but rather on how far he can elevate it. If his play does not arouse tears in its receptive audience then it is perhaps not the best of its kind. How is it that the excruciating details of a real disaster's graphic description can merit our positive praise? In responding to this question, Hume presented to us his own insights into the operations of the supposed paradox. The Conversion Theory entails that the sour emotions fed to us in a tragedy cannot be separated from the sweet skill of a creative artist's genius that composes it. This leads to a conflicting negative-positive imbalance of passions in its consumer which is only eradicated when the latter, i.e. the positive, takes entirely over the former, i.e. the negative; or, to rephrase, when the former *converts* into the latter.

The reason why such a conversion works wonders in the genre of tragedy is due to the very nature of tragedy. The violent turbulence of passions that a sorry tale elicits cannot be matched by a story that evokes only calmer surges. The chaos of one's rage, anguish, loss, pity and helplessness channels through an art into meaningful forms while simpler events of the mundane kind only invite art like glitter on confetti. Artists are well-known, after all, to not be as fond of registering celebrations as they are of recording catastrophes.

Hume took help of certain occasions as examples to support the postulate of conversion that regulates our enjoyment of a tragedy. There is the occasion of newness or novelty; the occasion of suspense; and the tribulations of sickness, friendship, love and death – 1) An unprecedented encounter with something new multiplies the emotion that an expected meeting with the same object would have otherwise borne. 2) An intentional delay in the supply of some invaluable information augments one's impatience, as was the case with Shakespeare's Othello, till a feeling hitherto dubious turns more concrete, as happened with Othello's jealousy. 3) A weak child seeks great affection and gets delivered just the same, the pain of rearing it getting constantly subsumed in the parent's larger love. 4) We often mourn the absence of a dear friend more than we had even cherished their presence. The colours of life can somehow be seen more vividly in the darkness of death. 5) The

right amount of jealousy compliments the right idea of romance and so does the right distance. 6) The final works of celebrated artists, whether concluded or not, receive the highest attention in comparison to all their other refined works. It thrills us as much as it kills us to learn what heights the artist was capable of reaching and exactly how short was she made to stop instead.

Hume sought to prove with the help of the instances above that nature has built the pulpit of the positive pleasures on the platform of their negative counterparts. Tragedy is no extraordinary exception and nothing quite so paradoxical. Art, particularly the tragic kind, is then for him an efficient venture of rendering pain subordinate and converting it into predominant pleasure.

III

Although Hume's theory has been acknowledged to have more explicatory advantages over Du Bos's or Fontenelle's, it has nevertheless faced similar and also graver charges of inadequacy by later thinkers. I summarise the two main criticisms levied against him as follows: firstly, it has been argued that Hume does not address how the calmer passions aroused by the form of a work of tragedy are able to exercise the power of their dominance over the violent ones that its content originally provokes. We often see in ordinary dispositions that between the two, it is the violent tides of passions that actually devour the peaceful waves. Hume has let the details of the conversion's actual functioning remain a mystery.[1] Secondly and more seriously, it has been alleged that Hume introduces a gap between one's reception of the tragedy-induced negative emotions while watching a sad play and the art-induced positive emotions that one later walks out of the theatre harbouring. There is no temporal simultaneity between the two kinds of emotions as one comes before and the other comes after. It is pointed out that the essence of the paradox, however, lies in us experiencing the two contradictory emotions *at the same time* and not one after the other. What strongly follows then is the suggestion that Hume never really defeated the true paradox but an alternate self-constructed strawman version of it.[2]

In an attempt at absolving him from the pitfalls of his analysis, Yanal interprets Hume's theory to not be one of conversion at all. To say that it is possible for the negative emotions to convert into the positive through tragic art is like saying that it is possible to convert and lose the bitterness of coffee through the addition of sugar into its sweetness. The 'overall' pleasure that we do receive from tragedy, he implies, has nothing to do with the sorrows in depiction but everything with our appreciation of the art alone. Neill responded to Yanal by expressing why the latter's reading of Hume is untenable. Though it does save Hume from a few varying versions of the first main criticism, it immediately shoves him into the second by maintaining an irreconcilable dichotomy between the pain of tragedy and the pleasure of art. It also apparently slurs over Hume's explicit construal of a real conversion that unpleasant emotions do very much undergo for him in tragedy.

IV

The word 'conversion' has limited connotations, which is why it appears to philosophers that their conflict with Hume's theory of the paradox has its source less in what the word could mean in a specific Humean context and more in how our ordinary conception of conversion fails to grasp the strangeness of tragedy. There is, after all, no deliberation on Hume's part regarding any implications of the term – he did not even use 'conversion' as a name for his theory, only responsive literature baptized it so.

It is obvious that for Hume conversion does not refer to an absolute *metamorphic transfiguration* of the base emotions. He clarifies: "You may by degree weaken a real sorrow, till it totally disappears; yet in none of its gradations will it ever give pleasure…" ("Of Tragedy"). Conversion, therefore, is not about pain morphing into pleasure in the way Kafka's salesman transformed into a bug. The only other road open for conversion to take place then, it is assumed, must be through *modification*. Our

raw, rocky emotions are rather chiselled and smoothened, painted and glazed, in and by art. "The passion, though, perhaps, naturally, and when excited by the simple appearance of a real object, it may be painful; yet is so smoothed, and softened, and mollified, when raised by the finer arts, that it affords the highest entertainment." Debates follow on whether the tool of art is sharp enough or the surface of thick passions penetrable enough. Most objections against Hume's hypothesis emerge from recognizing conversion as modification, including the two broad concerns mentioned earlier.

Striking out both metamorphosis and modification, since both do not seem to yield positive results for Hume, I propose a third alternative of engaging with his idea of conversion: *adaptation*.[3] We do not ordinarily make a huge fuss about the underlying difference between adaptation and modification because in order to adapt to something one needs to modify one's own or some other (material/psychological) self as per the requirements of the thing or circumstance which demands being adapted to. Adaptation and modification are intimately related, they are however not the same. To adapt often means to succumb to a largely slow natural process while to modify is, in the usual sense, to actively make quick artificial changes. It is typically understood from Hume's theory of conversion that the flair of fine art can make mechanical modifications to pain through 'spirit', 'genius', and 'eloquence' such that it formally appears more appealing than appalling. But this is not in fact, I argue, all what art does or Hume could have suggested that all it does.

Our internal landscape is marked by the rocky terrain of unstable, shifting emotions that is difficult for the rational mind to navigate. It is far easier for it to carve and pave its way into the external world. Greek philosophers, Plato and Socrates, thus deemed our fluctuating passions to be an impediment in the functioning of our rationality and consequently ruled out the possibility of art's utility in leading us to any kind of truth about the reality whatsoever, art being a solely passionate enterprise. Conquering and harnessing the many intimidating forces of nature over millions of years has given our race much cause to take pride in the prize of the human intellect and its astounding capabilities. Tragedy for Hume, who rejected the supremacy of reason over passions, I argue, can be realized to be but a peculiar recurrence of a similar feat.

Seizing control over the highs and lows of our internal environment ought to fill us with a sense of satisfaction equal to what we feel on gaining mastery over our natural external surroundings. What art does through tragedy is throw us into an uncomfortable milieu that we are unacquainted with. Gradually, with the progress of its narrative, we adapt to the unfortunate state of affairs on display. Such an adaptation is spontaneously subtle and not as forced and violent as what modification would ensue. If the hero emerges victorious, we take pride and pleasure in his successful triumph against all odds, just as we take pride and pleasure in the survival of our species against all natural odds. If, instead, he is made to taste defeat, we obtain the important reminder that life, being a part and product of nature, is cruel likewise, so we need to accept and submit to it without expecting any mercy or miracles. It is comforting to know that we are not alone in the state of our helplessness as great heroes worthy of admiration have too suffered a similar fate. Art is also a powerful reminder that just because something is excruciating does not mean it is beyond the scope of human creativity, and that is again a fact we can all marvel at.

A good objection to the above conversion-as-adaptation model would be to point out that the pleasure we beget from the activity of adapting is reflective and measured, and not as immediate and overwhelming as the gratification that one is served in art. Eric Hill brings out a key subject-object distinction that guides Hume's conversion theory which we can use to answer the objection. Hume takes the notion of art to be an object capable of causing pleasure in us even when its subject embodies substantial misery. Conversion then, says Hill, constitutes in the object taking over the subject. I would like to hold that art as an object causes an immediate kind of pleasure while its content or subject matter is responsible for reflective pleasure. The two kinds of pleasures are not exclusive but complementary to each other. Hume's idea of conversion depends entirely on immediate pleasure and mine greatly, though not entirely, on the reflective. While watching a movie,

good direction and decent acting captivate us instantly while the plot requires some reflective action on our end to be sentenced commendable. It often so happens that we may endorse a movie to have good direction and acting but poor plot. Immediate pleasure cannot cause any conversion in us but only reflective pleasure through immediate pleasure can have such an effect. If a movie has poor direction and poor acting, the circuit of pleasure will be broken in the immediate phase itself and never reach the reflective level. No conversion could then take place. The pleasure that Hume has said one walks out of the theatre harbouring is reflective pleasure. The critics are right in registering that this does not happen always but wrong in claiming why. Understanding conversion to mean adaptation is advantageous in accommodating Hume's broader view.

Immanuel Kant's idea of the sublime captures how disinterested engagement with a force that defies one's comprehension can still instil in one an immediate sense of beauty. The sublime, just like tragedy, is unsettling. It is in the nature of the human intellect to make an attempt at deciphering the depth of reality. But when a profound, 'sublime' force eludes both our understanding and imagination, we begin to wonder with surprise at the esteem of our human status. The one purpose of our aesthetic values is probably to retain our modest sense of what it means to be human no matter what. This retention is reflective though our aesthetic appreciation is immediate. Tragedy does both jobs really well. It would not be a reach to say that the only fruitful attempt that can be made at engineering the sublime is through art.

Among the Greeks, we find a synthesis of the views held by Du Bos and Fontenelle in the Aristotelian concept of *katharsis*, a term whose contextual meaning is philosophically debated. Since our routine existence in the affairs of the everyday life does not leave us with much scope of traversing the full and wide spectrum of human emotions, Aristotle's *Poetics* argues that we push ourselves to take a dive in the depths of an art such as tragedy because it allows our emotions, be they negative, to optimally intensify before they can ebb and settle – a course that leads to the 'purification' or 'cleansing' of our sentimental self. The controlled environment of a tragic drama is compared to a medical procedure because it inflicts pain that does not turn into assured trauma and on the whole improves upon our emotional health. We could add 'adaptive conversion' to the myriad of interpretations looking to fit the blank Aristotle has left on how *katharsis* in tragedy leads to a favourable outcome. From purgation to purification, however one may define *katharsis*, it is undeniable that the process it involves enriches our emotional well-being. It is hard to see how such welfare can be brought about through any temporary modification. If Aristotle thought that tragedy makes long-term, if not permanent changes to our character, it is likely that he would be more inclined towards conceding to the conversion-as-adaptation model.

The instant modifications are a thing of an immensely technical and digitalized world of today, humanity otherwise has taken a very long time to adapt to the natural forces that surround us and constantly seek to dominate us. And the process is hardly over yet as we still try to extend our boundaries of adapting. We carry out space expeditions, deep water explorations, all so we can adapt better and modify quicker. The history of our aesthetic taste has been just as evolutionary. Our taste in art keeps changing over time, over longer periods as well as shorter, as we keep adapting to our own dynamic psyche constituted by changing beliefs and knowledge systems. In *Of the Standard of Taste*, Hume writes: "A young man, whose passions are warm, will be more sensibly touched with amorous and tender images, than a man more advanced in years, who takes pleasure in wise, philosophical reflections, concerning the conduct of life and moderation of the passions. At twenty, Ovid may be the favourite author; Horace at forty; and perhaps Tacitus at fifty." He acknowledges that as we adapt to the experiential stock of our building rationale, we seek to improve upon our aesthetic taste. I purposely do not include the social factors that affect such changes but nevertheless accept that they are undeniably significant.

Reading a difficult text in philosophy could often prove torturous and the confusion could prompt us to leave it immediately, but once we adapt to the text's language and the bumpy track on which

runs the philosopher's train of argumentative thought, we might and usually do derive great pleasure from it. Of course we do not appreciate the confusion, but we do appreciate its inevitability. Similarly, we do not appreciate the sorrows imbibed in a tragedy, but we accept that they cannot really be done without.

It would have been slightly better if Hume had included love itself as a subordinate emotion as one his instances listed in section II and not just the emotion of jealousy in love. Loving someone is painful, all the poets and the musicians agree. Besides jealousy, the weight of other heavy emotions crashes on us alongside the misfortunes of love to bring us down. To adapt to a beloved's mean indifference about our very existence is not an easy affair. Yet, with passing time, we do get used to it. Once we heal, we feel stronger and wiser. We do not enjoy the torment of the pace with which we recuperate one bit but we are well aware that it is our endurance and resilience that strengthens our personality to make us who we truly are. We do not merely empathise with a tragedy's hero, a sad song, a melancholic poem, but we actively relate our own affliction to theirs. It is not "*If* I was this person, I would be feeling the same way", it is "I have been this person or I *am* this person and I have felt or do feel the exact same way". Human beings share a mutual sense of adaptation, and it would be worth pondering if therein lies the elusive universal standard of taste.

We can now work out, in response to the first criticism, how our softer emotions harden to get accustomed to the louder ones before they can articulate themselves even more emphatically. There is no need for any particular set of emotions to devour any other group of emotions. Such a picture only fits the conversion-as-modification model and not when we take conversion to mean adaptation. It is not the responsibility of the calmer passions in tragedy to pacify the violent ones. The instrumentality of art neither consists in 'fixing' pain to alternatively produce pleasure, nor in overshadowing the one with the other outright. It instead lies in aiding the adaptive process that allows the two to tune with and adjust to each other. Secondly, there can indeed be no temporal simultaneity between two antithetical emotions. But the pleasure we feel in the aftermath of tragedy is not devoid of the lessons of the preceding pain. Yanal deserves to be credited for getting this much right. When the sweetness of sugar adapts to the bitterness of coffee what we savour is the blend of the sweet and bitter and not just the sweetness alone. It would be going far right to say that the sweetness alone is responsible for our pleasure, as Yanal perhaps does.

To conclude, art helps us make better sense of our inner world by introducing us to its unexplored dimensions and thereby contributing to our psychological evolution. We can introspectively gauge the emotional and intellectual stretch that is brought about in us after our watching a good tragedy, or after our engaging in any other great artistic piece, for the matter. We are a different person after each movie, each book, each poem and each song that 'moves' us. This movement is often towards an affective growth that makes flexible and extends the range of our maturity.

We do not just expect a conversion but we hope for it, and where possible even demand it, which is why most stories are designed to have happy endings. Since we are only familiar with the pain of our own wound, art introduces us to the sores of others so we know how to cope with the tragedy we call life. It is in the hoping and the coping that we find pleasure, to quote Yeats, "We only begin to live when we conceive life as a tragedy". The measure of a good art is how far it keeps us hoping and how rich it keeps us coping. Hume's solution to the paradox holds true for me since it best captures the essence of the unique nature of the human sentiment.

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Notes

[1] See, for example, Paton's "Hume on Tragedy."
[2] See, for example, Packer's "Dissolving the Paradox of Tragedy."
[3] It is important to note here that while Hume did not consciously commit to the view that I am set to present, doing so would have granted him greater immunity. And that is just the point this paper aims to make.

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