

Adam Smith's letter about the death of David Hume

On 9 November 1776, the economist Adam Smith wrote to William Strachan about the death of his friend, the philosopher David Hume. Extracts from this letter can be found on the right of the page. The letter illustrates the very humanist understanding of mortality held by Hume and the humanist approach he adopted to his situation.



In Greek mythology Charon is the ferryman who carries the souls of the dead across the river Styx to Hades. Hume's reference to Charon is made not because he believed in the myth or in an afterlife. Rather he is making reference to the idea that people believed they might be able to delay their death by making excuses to the ferryman. These would include pleas about how they had not yet fulfilled their goals in life and so deserved more time. Hume was saying that he has no excuses. His life felt complete. He had achieved all he wanted to do with his time. This is a humanist ambition – to have made the most of our lives in the here and now and to support others to do the same. It can support non-religious people to come to terms with death.

How might one live one's life in a way that leaves one with no excuses to make to the ferryman?

Upon his return to Edinburgh, though he found himself much weaker, yet his cheerfulness never abated, and he continued to divert himself, as usual, with correcting his own works for a new edition, with reading books of amusement, with the conversation of his friends; and, sometimes in the evening, with a party at his favorite game of whist. His cheerfulness was so great, and his conversation and amusements run so much in their usual strain, that, notwithstanding all bad symptoms, many people could not believe he was dying.

He said that he felt that satisfaction so sensibly, that when he was reading, a few days before, Lucian's Dialogues of the Dead, among all the excuses which are alleged to Charon for not entering readily into his boat, he could not find one that fitted him; he had no house to finish, he had no daughter to provide for, he had no enemies upon whom he wished to revenge himself. 'I could not well imagine,' said he, 'what excuse I could make to Charon in order to obtain a little delay. I have done every thing of consequence which I ever meant to do; and I could at no time expect to leave my relations and friends in a better situation than that in which I am now likely to leave them. I therefore have all reason to die contented.'

Three days after I received the following letter from Doctor Black: 'DEAR SIR,—Yesterday, about four o'clock, afternoon, Mr. Hume expired. The near approach of his death became evident in the night between Thursday and Friday, when his disease became excessive, and soon weakened him so much that he could no longer rise out of his bed. He continued to the last perfectly sensible, and free from much pain or feelings of distress. He never dropped the smallest expression of impatience; but when he had occasion to speak to the people about him, always did it with affection and tenderness. I thought it improper to write to bring you over, especially as I heard that he had dictated a letter to you desiring you not to come. When he became very weak, it cost him an effort to speak, and he died in such a happy composure of mind, that nothing could exceed it.'