14. HUME'S CONFUSION ABOUT SYMPATHY

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ABSTRACT. David Hume argues that the prevalence of human sympathizing justifies our attributing to humans a certain degree of benevolence. This move from sympathy to having a concern for others has been challenged by recent critics. A more fine-grained look at Hume's concept of sympathy may reveal the reasons why he thought that experiencing sympathy implied having a benevolent attitude. Two arguments from the Treatise are analyzed and found wanting. It is suggested that Hume's confusion may derive from ambiguities surrounding the term "sympathy" and a lack of attention given to the intentional aspects of sympathizing.

A linchpin in David Hume's story about how sympathy leads to the adoption of a moral point of view is the belief that sympathy causes in individuals a benevolent concern for the good of others and of society in general. In the Treatise, Hume argues that the moral sentiments of approval and disapproval arise from a widely held concern for the good of society. This concern in turn arises not from a "universal love" or "publick interest" (T480) but from sympathy.1

Now as the means to an end can only be agreeable, where the end is agreeable; and as the good of society, where our own interest is not concern'd, or that of our friends, pleases only by sympathy: it follows that sympathy is the source of all the artificial virtues (T577).

If indeed "we have no such concern for society but from sympathy" (T579), it is important for Hume's moral theory that sympathy sufficiently grounds this concern for others.2 Recent scholarship, however, has raised questions about the adequacy of sympathy to serve as the source of this benevolent attitude. Pall Ardal, for example, notes that Hume "seems not to be adequately alive to the need to explain why a communication of sorrow or unhappiness from another should occasion in us a concern about the other person".3 This paper will explore more closely Hume's analysis of sympathy in the Treatise in search of resources to which he might have appealed to address this problem.
In Book II of the *Treatise*, Hume speaks of "that propensity we have to sympathize with others, and to receive by communication their inclinations and sentiments, however different from, or even contrary to our own" (T316). Sympathy is not a passion itself; instead, it is a pervasive, common and powerful disposition to vicariously experience feelings like or similar to those observed in others. Though Hume denies that most people naturally experience a universal love for mankind (T481, 602), sympathy apparently has great power to "involve us" in the fortunes of others. Thus "the pleasure of a stranger, for whom we have no friendship, pleases us only by sympathy" (T576).

While in the *Enquiry* Hume refuses to investigate the ontogeny of sympathy, in the *Treatise* he offers a complex psychological analysis. The most significant treatment of the concept comes in the context of a discussion (II.1.11) of the love of fame. Hume offers a number of examples of sociability which illustrate how individuals are affected by, and often conform to, the emotions and beliefs of those who surround them. The first principles of this "communication" process are then described as follows:

When any affection is infused by sympathy, it is at first known only by its effects, and by those external signs in the countenance and conversation, which convey an idea of it. The idea is presently converted into an impression, and acquires such a degree of force and vivacity, as to become the very passion itself, and produce an equal emotion, as any original affection (T317 cf. 575-6).

What is striking is the almost mechanistic tone of Hume's discussion. Sympathizing is not something that emerges from our desires so much as from an unpreventable exchange or transference of emotional energies. Two steps are involved in the process, which are:

1. Recognition of the presence of an emotion in another person through an inference from its behavioral manifestations. An idea of the emotion is thus conveyed to the sympathizer's mind.

2. The idea is "enlivened", acquiring a comparable degree of force and vivacity for the sympathizer as the emotion had for the other person; it is thus converted into an impression.

John Jenkins has recently compiled some of the problems with this account, particularly with the first step.4 Jenkins criticizes Hume's suggestion that a person's feelings can be inferred from their behavior. He argues, for example, that "it must surely be a precondition of its [sympathy's] occurring that I know what x is angry about. It is precisely this that I may not know merely by observing the external symptoms of anger". This criticism misses a later addition by Hume to his account. Hume views the inference in step one as involving a reading of the circumstances, as well as the behavior of the other person. It is true that he speaks of how a "cheerful countenance infuses a sensible complacency and serenity into my mind" (T317)—language
which suggests a direct connection between "external signs" and the experience of sympathy. When reviewing the process in a later section (III.3.1), he adds that sympathy arises not just from observing the effects of the other's passion but also from a perception of its causes:

In like manner, when I perceive the causes of any emotion, my mind is conveyed to the effects, and is actuated with a like emotion. Were I present at any of the more terrible operations of surgery, 'tis certain that even before it begun, the preparation of the instruments, the laying of the bandages in order, the heating of the irons, with all the signs of anxiety and concern in the patient and assistants would have a great effect upon my mind and excite the strongest sentiments of pity and terror. No passion of another discovers itself immediately to the mind. We are only sensible of its causes or effects. From these we infer the passion: and consequently these give rise to our sympathy (T576).

As regards the enlivening or intensifying process described in step two, it may be understood if divided into two distinct components. First, an energy source is required if the somewhat dull and unstimulating idea is to be transformed into a lively impression. The energy source, Hume informs us, is "the impression of ourselves". Since "tis evident that we are at all times intimately conscious of ourselves, our sentiments and passion"; the result is that "their ideas strike us with greater vivacity than the ideas of the sentiments and passions of any other person" (T339). Numerous critics have speculated about how this is to be reconciled with earlier statements about the problem of personal identity.

Most likely, Hume is referring simply to a "connected succession of perceptions" (T277) as opposed to the sort of underlying substance he criticizes in Book II. We might construe Hume's impression of the self as the set of remembered personally-experienced impressions and sensations. Since the memory of our own past experiences is stronger than the inferred idea of someone else's experiences, anything which could bring to mind or resuscitate these rather powerful memories would, through the association, stand a chance of itself being enlivened or transformed.

Regarding the nature of the connections between the "lively ideas" of another's emotion and the energy source, Hume discusses two relations, resemblance and contiguity (ruling out the third member of the triad, causation). Noting the "great resemblance of all humans", Hume asserts that "The minds of all men are similar in their feelings and operations, nor can any one be actuated by any affection, of which all others are not, in some degree, susceptible" (T575-6, cf. 605-6). Presumably this means that we have all felt a similar repertoire of emotions, such that observing someone else's response elicits memory of our own experiences. As Passmore has pointed out, however, it is not clear how observing someone else's emotional behavior, however similar to mine, is transformed into my own emotion.

This argument involves the abandoning of every distinction between impressions and ideas except liveliness; but, even then, our 'idea' is
of 'X's' being angry, not simply of 'anger'—we sympathize with a particular person—and however vivid this becomes it can never be converted into my anger: for such a conversion would involve a change in content as well as in vividness.5

Pace Passmore, it seems clear that for Hume, an intensified idea of another's emotion (i.e., an impression) would be my emotion. If I feel x's emotion then it has become my feeling. What then becomes of the "otherness" quality of the vicarious feeling? We will suggest in the next section that Hume views this as being transformed into the object of a concurrently-arising "indirect" passion. The other's pleasure becomes my pleasure, but also induces love, the object of which is the other person.

Contiguity also plays a role, as is evidenced by the lesser impact which the experience of those have who are "far remov'd from us". It is difficult to know what a "contiguous sentiment" would be unless Hume means that observing another's circumstances, if sufficiently 'close' to our own state of affairs, enables the imagination to foresee our being affected in a similar way. This makes his account vulnerable to a Hobbesian reduction of sympathy to self-concern, a charge he later sought to refute in Appendix II of the Enquiry.

HUME'S MOVE FROM SYMPATHY TO BENEVOLENCE

It is sympathy which "takes us so far out of ourselves, as to give us the same pleasure of uneasiness in the character of others, as if they had a tendency to our own advantage or loss" (T579). This statement suggests that vicariously-experienced pleasure and pain might serve to link sympathy to a concern for the well-being of others. Late in the Treatise (III.3.1), Hume claims that "wherever an object has a tendency to produce pleasure in the possessor, or in other words, is the proper cause of pleasure, it is sure to please the spectator, by a delicate sympathy with the possessor" (T577). Note how this approximates Hume's concept of benevolence, defined earlier in the Treatise as "an original pleasure arising from the pleasure of the person belov'd, and a pain proceeding from his pain: from which correspondence there arises a subsequent desire for his pleasure and aversion to his pain (T387).6 In sympathy, the pleasure of the other person induces the pleasure of the sympathizer. It becomes pleasurable to the sympathizer to observe the other's pleasure, and his suffering causes the sympathizer displeasure. Since pleasure and displeasure create natural action tendencies (desire/aversion), the vicariously-experienced emotion of the other person creates action-tendencies in the sympathizer, i.e., a desire for the other's good and an aversion to his pain, better known as benevolence.

A second link between sympathy and benevolence is observed in section II.2.9, where Hume offers a detailed description of how "from a sympathy with [the other's] pleasure, there arises love; from that of his uneasiness, hatred" (T384). The occasion is the challenge to explain why it is that even though pity creates a sympathetically-induced uneasiness which should cause us to resent the one pitied, we instead often respond in a benevolent or compassionate way. His answer involves a highly complex discussion of a "double relation of impressions and ideas".

Earlier in the *Treatise*, Hume had put forward the following somewhat convoluted principle:

When an idea produces an impression, related to an impression, which is connected with an idea, related to the first idea, these two impressions must be in a manner inseparable, nor will the one in any case be unattended with the other (T289).

Hume argues that the "indirect passions" (pride, humility, love, hatred) derive their emotional energy from the more direct passions of pleasure and pain through an association of their related ideas. As an example, Hume describes how the idea of a quality causing pleasure (an impression) if connected to the idea of myself, generates the impression of pride. If the quality of being rich causes pleasure, and riches are connected to myself through my son's being rich, then I will likely feel proud (of having a rich son). There is a double relation of ideas (the idea of being rich is related to myself through the idea of my son) and impressions (the pleasure of being rich elicits a pleasure which has my self as its intentional object). In the same way, but directed toward a different object, a pleasurable quality in another person produces love by this double relation. If my enjoyment at a party is associated with Sam's being the life of the party, then I will probably feel a certain love for Sam. The problem arises in the case of a hybrid passion such as pity. Since it is caused by observing the quality of another's sufferings, pity ought to, by the double relation, derive its emotional energy from pain or discomfort and in turn generate hatred. But unless it is construed in a Nietzschean manner, pity normally elicits a very different response from hatred.

Pity evokes love and benevolence, instead of hatred, due to a sort of resonance or induction which Hume calls a "parallel direction of the affections". When we pity a suffering person, sympathy generates an immediate sensation of uneasiness corresponding to the sufferer's pain. In addition, if the sympathetic connection is strong enough, the sensation of the other's pain arouses in the sympathizer a "secondary sensation." "The vivacity of the conception is not confined merely to its immediate object [the other's suffering], but diffuses its influence over all the related ideas" (T386). These ideas include the sufferer's "future prospects", which are presumably better and more pleasant to think about than his present condition. This less discomforting interest in his "general fortune" induces a parallel pleasure which overrules the current discomfort at his pain.

Instead of just feeling objectless pain, in pity we experience the pain of another. This sense of otherness opens up a store of images associated with the other person, many of which are pleasurable. The intense occurrent agitation energizes the mind's move to these images. The indirect pleasure induced by considering these images is identified by Hume as love. But love is "naturally attended" by benevolence (T382), the desire for the other's happiness. Pity then, leads to love, which is attended by a benevolent action tendency directed towards the other person. What began as a source of agitation becomes an enriched concern for the other as a human.
Hume notes an exception to this process, in what he calls weak or feeble sympathy. In this case, the sympathizer is not drawn heavily enough into the condition and world of the sufferer. The result is that she responds to the sufferer only out of the immediate uneasiness induced by observing the sufferer's pain. Since we don't like discomfort, this leads, through the double association of ideas [the sufferer and his suffering] and impressions [the sensation of discomfort and one's attitude toward its source] to a response of scorn or contempt toward the sufferer. Hume gives as an example "a barren or desolate country" which "always seems ugly and disagreeable, and commonly inspires us with a contempt for the inhabitants" (T388). He notes that this reaction is still inspired by sympathy, but only a weak sympathy. In this case, the parallel direction of the affections has failed to occur, and "when we sympathize only with one impression, and that a painful one, this sympathy is related to anger and to hatred, upon account of the uneasiness it conveys to us" (T387). Here there is only a "resemblance of sensations" which is not sufficient to induce an interested desire in the other's happiness.

Hume is thus able to speak of "this phaenomenon of the double sympathy, and its tendency to cause love" (T389). His move from sympathy to benevolence is clearly outlined in the last sentence of II.2.9 when he asserts: "nothing that concerns them is indifferent to us: and as this correspondence of sentiments is the natural attendant of love, it readily produces that affection" (T389).

**SOME PROBLEMS**

Hume attributes our benevolent concern for others, and even for society's good, not to a saintly "universal benevolence", nor to an egoistic self-love, but to the results of a relatively involuntary (almost mechanistic) process of emotional transfer called sympathy. The fact that sympathy is experienced extensively and often can be cited as ground for reasonable hope that most people will have the concern for other's well-being necessary to energize the moral point of view. However, Hume's move from sympathy to benevolence appears to rely on the truth of the following somewhat dubitable premise:

* If S is affected by [is not indifferent to] R's condition, then S cares [is concerned in some way] about R's welfare

It is hard to believe that Hume would accept this premise when he himself cites cases, such as that of malice, in which the pain of R causes S pleasure. Something more is needed to enable a judicious move from "is affected by" to "cares about". From our review of relevant passages in the Treatise, we discovered two Humean justifications for this move; both attempt to provide links in the form of more fine-grained descriptions of what occurs in sympathizing. The first link (III.3.1) employed as something of a hedonistic middle term the pleasure/pain of the sympathizer. The second link (II.2.9) consists of Hume's account of how the diffusion of emotional energy incited by intense sympathizing leads to an enhanced appreciation of (and desire for) the other's well-being as a person. We will evaluate each account in turn.
Stated more formally, Hume argues in III.3.1 that if $S$ is affected by $R$'s condition, and $S$ is affected in such a way that $R$'s pleasure causes her to feel a similar pleasure (and $R$'s pain a similar pain), and if $S$ desires pleasure and detests pain, then $S$ will desire $R$'s pleasure and will detest $R$'s pain. And what is it to desire another's pleasure and detest their pain but benevolence?

At first sight, Hume argument appears inescapable. If $R$'s sympathetically-experienced pain causes $S$ pain or displeasure, how can she but desire its extinction? Hume glides from desiring the extinction of personal pain to desiring extinction of the sufferer's pain, but this seems a natural move inasmuch as it is $R$'s pain which is the originating cause. By the same token, if $S$ is pleased by $R$'s happiness, then surely this implies that she wishes $R$ well. To respond that one may be either pleased or displeased with the sympathetic experience of another's pleasure seems to lead to one of Gilbert Ryle's infinite regresses, such as "being pleased at being pleased" or "finding pleasure pleasurable". To experience pleasure in response to another's pleasure just is to be pleased at their well-being, which implies having a benevolent attitude towards them.

Or so it may seem. Hume himself notes the difference, and contingent connection, between feeling pleasure (a direct passion) and being pleased at or with someone (an indirect passion, viz., love). Hume speaks, for example, of the misanthrope who derives pleasure from the misfortunes of others and displeasure from the momentary sense of cheerfulness felt when observing another's good fortunes. Perhaps we must grant Hume the conclusion that where no other motivational forces are at work, it is most natural or the easiest course to respond to sympathetically-felt pleasure with love. Examples such as that of the misanthrope suggest, though, that the process is not so automatic as Hume portrays it; sympathetic pleasures can be and perhaps often are overridden.

Attempts to rework the argument by deriving concern for the sufferer from the desire to avoid sympathetic pain are even more problematic. Hume's concept of sympathetic pain is that of a process by which the perception of $R$'s pain becomes $S$'s pain (otherwise, Hume is open to Passmore's criticism, supra), but only through a non-necessary move of the mind as described by the associative principles of contiguity and resemblance. $S$'s pain "is" $R$'s pain only in the sense that it is caused by $R$'s pain. $S$'s natural hedonistic desire to relieve her pain is thus only contingently linked to dealing with $R$'s pain, this because $R$'s suffering is perceived as the cause of her pain. $S$ does not feel pain at $R$'s suffering, in the sense of being intentionally oriented towards it. Rather, $S$ feels pain as a causal effect of (the perception of) $S$'s pain, as associatively processed by $S$'s mind. $S$ feels pain because of $R$'s pain, but one must be careful not to confuse this with the kind at distress of another's suffering which arises from a previously-held concern for the other person.

The fact that it is unpleasant for $S$ to vicariously feel $R$'s pain is motivating, but not necessarily toward $R$'s welfare or relief. All that is implied by the experience of sympathetic pain, since it has become $S$'s pain, is a desire for its release. If extinction of $S$'s pain can be accomplished only by the extinction of the $R$'s pain, then presumably $S$'s desire will be to end it (as a means to ending her own). If there are other
ways for S to extinguish her pain, such as escape from the situation or mental diversion, then she may well adopt those means, caring nothing about the sufferer.

One can think of cases in which the pain of another functions merely as an irritant for the sympathizer. The persistent whining of my neighbor's toddler causes me considerable uneasiness (I know he wants his bottle), but this does not create in me a desire for his pleasure, or any kind of care for him at all. I may sympathetically sense the shame and embarrassment of the politician caught in a compromising situation, yet respond to this with a certain mocking or even sadistic glee. Or again, as Camus pointed out, there are many who would not be willing to throw the switch which activates the electric chair. The uneasiness caused by bringing this penalty upon the criminal does not, however, entail a desire for his good. I may still feel that he deserves to be punished, even though I would find it a discomfort to be the one doing the punishing.

Hume was well aware of such cases; as we noted above, he cites a few of his own when discussing the phenomenon of weak sympathy. His response constitutes a second ostensible link, viz., the argument found in II.2.9. Unfortunately, Hume's discussion on this point is not well written. At best, Hume makes a well-supported empirical observation: increased participation "over all the related ideas" of R's present situation, as well as his past history and future prospects, makes it harder to deny him personhood. As a result, S knows R too well and finds it hard not to desire for him what she would normally desire for herself. As we get to know a person better, we become more likely to care about what happens to him.

Even granting this generalization, Hume still has not established that becoming familiar with another's circumstances and prospects amounts to a sufficient condition for benevolence. Some people know their enemies or rivals well, but desire their failure all the more. There is also the aphorism, "familiarity breeds contempt". Increased familiarity with the person's life may cause cognitive dissonance if we try to stereotype them, but there are plenty of ways to reduce dissonance besides caring for the other person. It is also not clear by what mechanism a powerful experience of another's suffering causes a review of the other's "more favorable prospects". Intensification of sympathetically-induced emotion may only lead to a stronger motivation for emotion-extinction in whatever way is convenient.

These criticisms are not intended as arguments for psychological egoism. They merely point out that Hume's description of what occurs in sympathizing does not contain within it a sufficient explanation for the occurrence of a benevolent attitude. Hume may have been on the right track in describing how the quality of otherness (not his term) helps to transform the emotional agitation experienced when sympathizing into a more full-fledged concern about the other person. Unfortunately, Hume was overly concerned to reduce what occurs in sympathizing to a semimechanistic story whose chief players are the brute emotional energies of pleasure and pain. As a result, he did not adequately address the question of whether sympathy contains within itself a form of other-regarding intentionality, a topic whose day awaited Scheler's Wesen und Formen der Sympathie, the Husserl/Heidegger discussions of intersubjectivity, and the work of Edith Stein.
One other historical comment: What makes Hume's inference appealing is that it cites the ubiquity of sympathy to argue for a similar ubiquitous benevolent impulse. But Hume may well have fallen victim to a confusion which had entered into the use of the term "sympathy". The term had come to mean not only "being affected by another's condition" but also "having a care for him". Hume equivocated between the former and the latter nuances. The problem is that from the former, he did not manage to infer benevolence, while to employ 'sympathy' in the latter sense (which he clearly does in the *Enquiry*) goes beyond the concrete evidence concerning the pervasiveness of our being affected by others' emotions, thus begging the question about the extent of human benevolence. This ambiguity was removed c. 1904 when German psychologist Theodor Lipps introduced the term "empathy" (*Einfühlung*) to stand exclusively for the former, more limited sense of being affected by another's pleasure or pain. It is a distinction which would have served Hume well.

ENDNOTES


2 This statement is even more powerful if seen in its full context:

But what makes the end agreeable? The person is a stranger: I am in no way interested in him, nor lie under any obligation to him: His happiness concerns not me, farther than the happiness of every human, and indeed of every sensible creature: That is, it affects me only by sympathy. From that principle, whenever I discover his happiness and good, whether in its causes or effects, I enter so deeply into it, that it gives me a sensible emotion. The appearance of qualities, that have a tendency to promote it, have an agreeable effect upon my imagination, and command my love and esteem (T588-9).


6 "I have endeavor'd to prove, that power and riches, or poverty and meanness: which gives rise to love or hatred, without producing any original pleasure or uneasiness: operate upon us by means of a secondary sensation deriv'd from a sympathy
with that pain or satisfaction, which they produce in the person, who possesses them. From a sympathy with his pleasure there arises love: from that of his uneasiness, hatred" (T384 cf. 382, 417).

7 Hume asserts that there is an "original and primary connection between love and benevolence" (382).


9 This example is taken from II.2.9, where Hume notes the problem with his account that "This love of a partner cannot proceed from the relation or connexion betwixt us; in the same manner as I love a brother or countryman. A rival has almost as close a relation to me as a partner" (T383). Hume resolves the problem by noting the absence of a parallel direction of the affections, due to a "contrariety of sentiments" (the same "as arises in comparison and malice") between the sympathetically-experienced pleasure at the rival's successes and "our concern for our own interest" (T384). However, it was just this concern which sympathy was supposed to override or at least equalize in the cases of close relationship.


11 See section 5, part 2 of the Enquiry where Hume equates sympathy with "a fellow-feeling", "feelings of humanity", "a concern for others", "a warm concern for the interest of our species", and "the benevolent principles of our frame".