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The Strength of Hume’s “Weak” Sympathy

ANDREW S. CUNNINGHAM

Introduction

Hume’s understanding of sympathy in section 2.1.11 of the *Treatise*—that it is a mental mechanism¹ by means of which one sentient being can come to share the psychological states of another²—has a particularly interesting implication. What the sympathizer receives, according to this definition, is the passing psychological “affection” that the object of his sympathy was experiencing at the moment of observation.³ Thus the psychological connection produced by Humean sympathy is not between the sympathizer and the “other” as a “whole person” existing through time, but between the sympathizer and the other’s current mental state, detached from his or her diachronic psychological life.⁴ Some commentators profess themselves dissatisfied with the impersonality of this “limited sympathy” (as I will call it). John Bricke, for example, argues that the Humean sympathizer sympathizes with “atomistically rendered desires of some individual who is, thus far, of no further concern,”⁵ while Philip Mercer writes more bluntly that Hume’s definition omits the “practical concern for the other” that is the essence of sympathy’s contribution to moral psychology.⁶

Hume was not unaware or entirely unaccepting of this sort of criticism. Indeed, it was he who first called the sympathy of T 2.1.11 “limited” and “weak” (T 2.2.9.15; SBN 387). He understood and recognized as something of a weakness the fact that limited sympathy entails that “we sympathize only with one impression”—the

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one experienced by the object of our sympathy at “the present moment”—rather than with the whole person (T 2.2.9.15, 2.2.9.13; SBN 387, 385). Such statements are puzzling—and indeed take on an air of paradox—in light of Hume’s emphatic *praise* for sympathy as the “animating principle” of the passions and the most “remarkable” quality of human nature (T 2.2.5.15, 2.1.11.2; SBN 363, 316).⁷ How, one wonders, could Hume have attributed such potency to a form of sympathy that he recognized as limited?

The remainder of this paper will focus on what seem the two most plausible solutions to this “weak sympathy problem.” For want of better names, the possible solutions can be called the *abandonment thesis* and the *strength-in-weakness thesis*, respectively. The first asserts that Hume responds to the problem by abandoning limited sympathy in favour of “extensive sympathy,” the stronger version of sympathy introduced in T 2.2.9, while the second maintains that limited sympathy is not only adequate to support Hume’s ethical theory but uniquely suited to that purpose. After discussing these possible solutions in sequence, I conclude by discussing the deeper significance of the matter for Hume’s moral theory.

The Abandonment Thesis

“Extensive sympathy” in Book 2

According to the abandonment thesis, Hume introduces the concept of extensive sympathy in T 2.2.9 as an improvement upon the limited sympathy of T 2.1.11. Before we can evaluate this claim, it is necessary to consider the meaning and purpose of extensive sympathy. In T 2.2.9, Hume is adamant that there is nothing essentially “new” about it. It is a product, he insists, of the interaction of associative and sympathetic principles introduced earlier in the *Treatise* (T 2.2.9.11–13; SBN 385–6). While this interaction is rather complex, its essential elements can be set out as follows: (1) According to the double relation theory, when A sympathetically receives an idea of the momentary psychological state of B, that idea is enlivened by the relation between A’s impression of B and A’s strong impression of himself, to the point that it becomes an impression—A’s impression—of B’s psychological state. (2) Because the force of this sympathetic communication varies with the force and vivacity of the communicated impression, A may sympathize more or less “perfectly” with B. (3) Extensive sympathy is a sympathetic event in which the force and vivacity of the communicated idea exceeds what is required to transform it into an impression of the greatest possible strength and vivacity. (4) Under such conditions, surplus force and vivacity “overflows” the momentary impression and is channelled by the relations of contiguity, resemblance, and cause and effect to those ideas most nearly related to that impression, namely the ideas of “all the circumstances of that person, whether past, present or future; possible, probable or certain.” (5) Should there be sufficient surplus force and vivacity, these ideas will

in turn become impressions of past and future states. (6) In this manner, what is initially merely limited sympathy with a "time-slice" of a person's existence may be extended along the dimension of time so as to become extensive sympathy with him or her as a diachronic being.⁸

This convoluted process is introduced in T 2.2.9 for the express purpose of explaining pity, the subject of that section.⁹ The reason for this is that the benevolent feelings associated with pity cannot easily be explained in terms of limited sympathy. If the pitiable tend to be miserable, then Humean "limited" sympathizers ought to be made miserable by the very sight or thought of them. This in turn would imply that we tend to hate those whom we pity, a conclusion that would sit rather uncomfortably with what is meant to be a *descriptive* account of human psychology (T 2.2.9.1; SBN 381).

Extensive sympathy solves the problem, Hume believes, although again the argument is rather tortuous. The first step is straightforward: because pity characteristically arises on the apprehension of "a great degree of misery" (T 2.2.9.15; SBN 387), it tends to produce the exceptionally vivid impressions required by extensive sympathy. The second step, showing that extensive sympathy produces benevolence, is harder to follow. Let us imagine, first, a sympathizer ("S") who has extensively sympathized. S has in his or her mind, all at once, a set of impressions, consisting in the psychological state resulting from the initial event of limited sympathy with the object of his or her sympathy ("O"), together with a series of related psychological states that S takes to be (some of) O's past and future states. Now, some of the members of these series may be painful and others pleasant, but what most attracts S's attention is not the content of O's mental states *per se*, but a certain *consistency of correspondence*: that is, the fact that O's pleasant states invariably produce pleasant states in S, while O's painful states always cause him or her pain. This correspondence is what Hume calls S's "bent" or "tendency," and it produces what we might call S's "pattern of attitudes" toward O.

Having pointed out this correspondence, Hume proceeds, in the third and final step of the argument, to demonstrate its significance. This requires recourse to another correspondence. Hume observes that the same perfect coincidence of pleasures and pains that attends pity also accompanies benevolence, the appetite associated with love. In other words, when we love someone, we also feel pleased with that person's pleasure and pained by his or her pain (T 2.2.9.2; SBN 381). Hume makes much of this second correspondence:

A man, who from any motive has entertain'd a resolution of performing an action, naturally runs into every other view or motive, which may fortify that resolution, and give it authority and influence on the mind. To confirm us in any design, we search for motives drawn from interest, from honour, from duty. What wonder, then, that pity and benevolence

. . . , being the same desires arising from different principles, shou'd so totally mix together as to be undistinguishable? (T 2.2.9.4; SBN 382)

In other words, the mind moves readily from pity, to the pattern of attitudes produced by pity, to the similar pattern of attitudes produced by benevolence, and finally to benevolence itself. Because this “progress of the affections” is so easy and natural, pity and benevolence invariably occur together. And so, by means of a fortuitous confusion that would seem providential (were this not Hume), we love those whom we pity.¹⁰ It remains true that we tend to hate or despise those whose misery is presented in a feeble manner, or whose misery is simply not enough to shock us—as Hume reminds us:

Benevolence . . . arises from a great degree of misery, or any degree strongly sympathiz'd with: Hatred or contempt from a small degree, or one weakly sympathiz'd with; which is the principle I intended to prove and explain. (T 2.2.9.15; SBN 387)

The upshot is that the ordinary operation of limited sympathy produces the contempt that we feel for the ordinarily miserable, while the extraordinary operation of extensive sympathy converts that contempt into benevolence in the cases of those whose misery is so extreme as to strike us strongly.

Book 3 “extensive sympathy” and the abandonment thesis

Having made sense of pity in T 2.2.9, extensive sympathy is not referred to again in Book 2, or in either of the first two parts of Book 3. Its return in T 3.3 therefore comes as something of a surprise, particularly in view of the praise that Hume heaps upon it. In two passages near the end of the *Treatise* we are informed, first, that “extensive sympathy” is that “on which our sentiments of virtue depend” (T 3.3.1. 23; SBN 586) and second, that it is also the correct explanation of the “sense of morals” that Hutcheson had mistakenly attributed to “original instincts of the human mind” (T 3.3.6.3; SBN 619). Because these two passages from Book 3 appear to confirm that the extensive sympathy of T 2.2.9 is actually the basis of the moral theory of the entire *Treatise*, they constitute crucial evidence in favour of the abandonment thesis.

Let us now turn our full attention to that thesis, which, it must be said, is more often assumed than argued for by current scholars. Bricke is something of an exception, maintaining that Hume introduces extensive sympathy in an attempt to inject a much-needed measure of “holism” into his “officially atomistic” view of sympathy.¹¹ This implies that the extensive sympathy of T 2.2.9 has a purpose that transcends that section. It is Jennifer Herdt, however, in *Religion*

and Faction in Hume's Moral Philosophy, who works out what we are calling the abandonment thesis in the greatest detail. Her claims will accordingly be the focus of this section.

Herdt begins by cautioning her readers that "Hume's initial discussion of sympathy should not . . . be taken as his last word on the subject" (42). In her view, extensive sympathy is intended to modify and refine (42, 44) this initial limited account, by working into it a greater awareness of "the other person as such" (47). She accordingly proceeds to discuss the moral theory of Book 3 on the basis of the conviction, grounded in the two passages cited above, that the sympathy referred to throughout Book 3 must be "extensive sympathy" in the sense of that term developed by Hume in Book 2. Thus she writes:

It is extensive sympathy, in particular, which Hume specifies is the sort of sympathy which is involved in moral evaluation. This makes sense, because the capacity for moral judgment involves a sensitivity, not only to how people are immediately affected by actions, but also to how these affections fit in with their situation as a whole, and this is what is distinctive about extensive sympathy. (50)

The claim that Hume intends extensive rather than limited sympathy throughout Book 3 is essential to Herdt's broader thesis that his focus on sympathy is an anti-providentialist response to Francis Hutcheson. Hutcheson, recognizing that the moral sense is incapable of "judging" its own judgments (or of approving of itself), was delighted to take recourse in providence as an explanation of how the moral sense keeps itself on course (cf. 58–9). Herdt argues that "Hume's assertion of the centrality of sympathy was therefore highly subversive of Hutcheson's attempt to show that human moral practices are inextricably linked with Providence" (58). It is not altogether clear why Herdt believes that the extensive sympathy of Book 2, rather than limited sympathy, is necessary to ground her argument. It appears that the reason might be that sympathy can approve of itself only if its activity is to some extent voluntary. While limited sympathy, being more or less automatic and inherently non-deliberative, is unsuitable for that purpose, extensive sympathy has at least the potential, Herdt maintains, of being cultivated and strengthened through deliberate effort: "It seems, in particular, that we might strive to extend our sympathy beyond its initial, limited form, even if that first sympathy is basically involuntary" (74–5).¹² It also seems likely that Herdt shares with Mercer, Bricke, and others,¹³ the general intuition that limited sympathy could not suffice as a basis for morality. One who makes such an assumption might well find it difficult to believe that, having introduced a strong form of sympathy in T 2.2.9, Hume would have reverted to his weak and (supposedly) inferior version when it came to Book 3's sympathy-based ethics.

Weaknesses of the abandonment thesis

Though not without appeal, the abandonment thesis has some weaknesses. If, for example, the extensive sympathy of T 2.2.9 is indeed intended to supersede the painstaking elaboration of limited sympathy of T 2.1.11 and to serve as the foundation of much of Book 3, one might have expected Hume to signal its importance somewhere in T 2.2.9. But there are no such indications: as he moves from T 2.2.9 to T 2.2.10, there is no hint that he has just discovered the principle that is to ground his entire ethical theory. And, had Hume come to regard extensive sympathy as a solution to the weak sympathy problem, one might have expected it to feature even more prominently in his *Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*. However, extensive sympathy is dropped altogether from the second *Enquiry's* discussion of pity.¹⁴ The abandonment thesis fares no better when we extend our search to still later works: as Herdt acknowledges, these typically refer to “the immediate sort of limited sympathy which Hume first discussed in the *Treatise*.”¹⁵

In addition to the structural points just canvassed is a more substantive distinction between the extensive sympathies of Books 2 and 3. The “extensive sympathy” passage in T 3.3.6, it will be recalled, concerns what Hume refers to as “extensive sympathy with mankind.” Now, if anything is unambiguous in T 2.2.9, it is that extensive sympathy is rather an exceptional event, occurring only where the communicated impression of the other being is unusually strong and with the help of a “great effort of imagination” (T 2.2.9.14; SBN 386). The most that Hume will say for it is that it “may contribute” to the kindness that we show “our relations and acquaintance”—that is, *kindness* (not *virtue*) and *our relations and acquaintance* (not *everyone we meet* or *mankind in general*) (T 2.2.9.20; SBN 389). The reference in Book 3 to extensive sympathy *with mankind* must surely suggest, therefore, that what is intended is something distinct from Book 2 extensive sympathy.¹⁶

“Extensive sympathy” in Book 3

In attempting to establish what Hume might mean by “extensive sympathy” in Book 3, the following passage is instructive:

[M]oral distinctions arise, in a great measure, from the tendency of qualities and characters to the interest of society, and . . . 'tis our concern for that interest, which makes us approve or disapprove of them. Now we have no such *extensive concern for society* but from sympathy. (T. 3.3.1.11; SBN 579; emphasis added)

This is the culmination of the long argument at the beginning of T 3.3 in which Hume describes what might be called a second “direction” of sympathizing. His prior discussions of sympathy had focused on “backwards” inferences from an

effect (facial expressions etc.) to a cause (an internal psychological state), with which we then sympathize (producing that same psychological state in ourselves). In T 3.3, however, he considers a "forwards" sympathetic inference connecting the cause of an emotion (generally, an action), to its projected effects (feelings of pleasure or pain in members of the class affected by the action), with which effects—or the *thought* of them—we sympathize. Hume makes much of this, crediting it as the source of aesthetic and moral sentiments alike, approvals of the former kind being in virtue of our sympathy with the happiness that a beautiful object gives its possessor¹⁷ and approvals of the latter kind being in virtue of our sympathy with the pleasure that certain actions tend to bring to whomever they affect—whether that be just a few people, or, presumably, in the case of actions of the greatest moment, even mankind in general (T 3.3.1.8–11; SBN 576–9).

This points out the crucial distinction between the two types of extensive sympathy. In Book 3, "extensive sympathy" refers to sympathy that potentially extends to any or all members of society, while in Book 2, "extensive sympathy" refers to sympathy extending along the temporal dimension of a single human being—sympathy that extends beyond the communication of a passing mental state so as to produce an acquaintance with, or understanding of, the diachronic person. It is perfectly understandable that Hume used the term "extensive" to describe each of these forms of sympathizing—the distinction between them having to do with that over which they extend rather than their "extensiveness" *per se*.¹⁸

As interpreted here, "Book 3" extensive sympathy has the additional advantage of consistency with two related expressions found in Book 3. At T 3.2.2.19 (SBN 495), the expression "extensive benevolence" is used to refer to benevolence extending to many members of society, while in the following paragraph "extensive generosity" is employed in a similar way. Hume's message in these paragraphs¹⁹ is that human beings do *not* manifest extensive generosity or benevolence—which, again, is very difficult to square with an interpretation, such as Herdt's, that tends to assimilate Humean sympathy to benevolence.²⁰ Human beings do, however, share a propensity to sympathize, in the "limited" sense of T 2.1.11, with a broad range of those affected by characters and actions, and it is *this* extensive sympathy, rather than any universal benevolence or generosity, that grounds their morality. Thus Hume observes, in the first of the two Book 3 passages (here reproduced with more of its context):

[W]e may easily remove any contradiction, which may appear to be betwixt the *extensive sympathy*, on which our sentiments of virtue depend, and that *limited generosity* which I have frequently observ'd to be natural to men, and which justice and property suppose, according to the precedent reasoning. (T 3.3.1.23; SBN 586)

As the context and typographical emphasis make clear, Hume is contrasting two things. But, although it might seem a subtle distinction at first, those two things are *not* “extensive sympathy” (a certain *type* of sympathy) and “limited generosity” (a certain *type* of generosity), but rather “sympathy, *which is* extensive” (in the Book 3 sense) and “generosity, *which is* limited.” That sympathy and generosity have these opposing characters is what he had laboured to establish in T 3.3.1 (sympathy) and T 3.2.1 (generosity or benevolence).²¹ If the sympathy referred to in this passage were Book 2 extensive sympathy, there would be no apparent contradiction to address—and if he had wished to address the point for a readership with “little attention” for “books of reasoning,”²² Hume could have done so by reiterating that sympathy extends across the existence of individual beings while generosity *does not* extend across the range of such beings, and that this is far from a contradiction.

The Strength-in-Weakness Thesis

Proponents of the abandonment thesis might, as a last resort, grant all of the arguments made to this point, conceding (perhaps) that this reflects Hume’s view as he states it in the *Treatise*, while yet insisting that their own constitutes a superior “Humean” view. Any such position would likely be grounded in the conviction that—almost as a point of logic—“limited” sympathy must provide shakier support for morality than the “extensive” sympathy of Book 2. If a weak form of sympathizing can ground morality, then surely a strong form must ground it that much better.

According to the strength-in-weakness thesis, the objection is mistaken. To understand why, we need to remind ourselves of the central role of sympathy in Hume’s moral psychology, which is to secure a common perspective from which moral evaluations may be made. Let us turn to this very briefly. For Hume, a moral “judgment” is really an expression of the pleasure or pain that one feels on contemplating a character (T 3.3.1.15; SBN 581).²³ Though this might sound like a subjectivist position, it is not. What distinguishes moral evaluations from other expressions of pleasure or pain is their *public* (i.e., *impartial* and *intersubjective*) nature.²⁴ Such evaluations are made pursuant to a consideration of the effects of the character on the person whose character it is and (perhaps more importantly) on those whom he or she affects. That these effects—being pleasures and pains of which the sympathizer has sympathetic awareness—should constitute the ground of our moral judgment explains the characteristic impartiality of these judgments, but it does not explain their intersubjectivity. That is, it does not do so *unless* the sympathetic process by which the pleasures and pains of other persons are communicated to the observer can be relied upon, by and large, to produce the *same* sympathetic response in all observers.

Limited sympathy’s supposed weaknesses and disadvantages—its mechanistic nature, impersonality, non-diachronicity, etc.—appear rather less encumbering

in this light. One might say that it makes a strength of its weakness, on the following grounds:

- (1) Being *mechanistic* and *non-deliberative*, it produces sympathetic reactions that are not contingent on intellectual powers (and inclinations to exercise those powers in appropriately sympathetic ways) that would be vary widely among potential sympathizers;
- (2) Being *impersonal*, it produces sympathetic reactions that are unlikely to vary with the varying emotional attachments of potential sympathizers; and
- (3) Being *non-diachronic* (i.e., focused on the *momentary* psychological state of the object of sympathy), it is unlikely to vary among observers on the basis of their capacity for imaginative (re)construction of past and future states of the object of their sympathy.

In short, as a simple transfer of momentary emotional states, it delivers the common perspective necessary to intersubjectivity in morals. As Gilles Deleuze observes of the sense of the interest of another person that is communicated by Humean limited sympathy:

Undoubtedly, such an interest touches us more feebly than our own, or those of our kin, peers, and relatives. . . . But at least it has the practical advantage, even when the heart is not in it, of being a general and immutable criterion, a third interest which does not depend on interlocutors—a value.²⁵

This can be illustrated with the simple case of a sympathizer ("S") contemplating a man of vicious character ("V"). Imagining the effects of V's actions, and the pain they will produce in those whom they affect (collectively, "A"), S sympathizes with A and, as a result, disapproves of V. Because the mental process that is required for this is limited and mechanical, with little room for interference by the peculiarities of our own situation or personality, the evaluative reaction of any one disinterested observer will generally be mirrored by the evaluative reactions of *other* disinterested observers.²⁶ The result is the capacity to talk with one another "on reasonable terms" about the moral agents that we encounter—a type of "socialization" that is quite literally for Hume a *sine qua non* of society (T 3.3.1.15; SBN 581).²⁷

Were these same sympathizers to be experiencing extensive sympathy, its advantages—its personality, diachronicity, etc.—would all promote a more diverse set of reactions to a given situation and create a diversity of evaluations. Thus what Hume considers the chief benefit of sympathizing—gaining a perspective that can serve as the basis of inter-subjective conversational agreement—would be lost. It

would then be true, as Deleuze observes in a related context, that “society finds its obstacle in sympathies rather than egoism.”²⁸

All of this is consistent with Hume’s overall outlook on man’s generosity and benevolence. He writes of the former, for example:

But tho’ [it] must be acknowledg’d to the honour of human nature, we may at the same time remark, that so noble an affection, instead of fitting men for large societies, is almost as contrary to them, as the most narrow selfishness. For while each person loves himself better than any other single person, and in his love to others bears the greatest affection to his relations and acquaintance, this must necessarily produce an opposition of passions, and a consequent opposition of actions; which cannot but be dangerous to the new-establish’d union. (T 3.2.2.6; SBN 487)

Limited sympathy has the distinct advantage of producing (or, at least, of being more apt to produce) identical states in the mind of each observer, with the result that a common view of the moral actor may more readily be arrived at. If at least one piece of common psychological ground is required to establish morality and society, it stands to reason that it should be derived from a process that is simple, mechanical, and impervious to the effects of emotion and unequal capacities for reason and deliberation.²⁹

Why This Matters: Hume’s Sympathy in Historical Perspective

That Hume champions a “limited” conception of sympathy is more than a matter of exegetical interest. It is an indication of a broader distinction between Hume and those of his contemporaries who would have held (with more recent critics) that limited sympathy is too mechanical and impersonal. One such contemporary was Adam Smith. In the opening pages of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Smith introduces a concept of sympathy that seems “rather more intellectual” (in Mercer’s words) than limited sympathy.³⁰ The sympathy of TMS is conceptually rather similar to Hume’s extensive sympathy. Nowhere is the resemblance more marked than in this passage:

By the imagination we place ourselves in his situation, we conceive ourselves enduring all the same torments, we enter as it were into his body, and become in some measure the same person with him. (1.1.1.2)

Thus a considerable effort of the imagination is often required before we sympathize, for only when we have brought the “agonies” of the object of our sympathy “home to ourselves” do they begin “at last to affect us.” (1.1.1.2)

On some occasions, to be sure, "sympathy may seem to arise merely from the view of a certain emotion in another person" (1.1.1.6). Thus there is some room for limited sympathy in Smith's philosophy. But he quickly makes it clear that this kind of sympathy is the exception, not the rule, arguing that it is generally mediated by an "intellectual" effort to understand the circumstances of the person whose emotion it is (1.1.1.6–7) and that, where it is not, the resulting sympathy is "always extremely imperfect" (1.1.1.9). Smith's point is that we often fail to sympathize *at all* with discrete emotional states: the process of sympathy will often simply *fail to operate* in the absence of adequate information about the person's circumstances. As he writes, sympathy often "does not arise so much from the view of the passion, as from that of the situation which excites it" (1.1.1.10). Thus it appears that Smith's sympathy is generally a two-step process: we must first develop an *understanding* of the circumstances of the person in question (1.1.1.7), and then we must *imagine* how we would feel, if we were he, in those circumstances (1.1.1.2).

Therefore, while the sympathy that interests Smith in TMS might not be generated by the process that Hume describes in T 2.2.9, it is nevertheless "extensive" in the sense used in that section—that is, in the sense that its object is the entire person, rather than a simple time-slice of human emotion. In any event, we can surely conclude that it is *not* limited sympathy: Smith devotes most of the first ten paragraphs of TMS to establishing that very point. Not only is it the point of departure of his book, it is (we might say) his point of departure from Hume's moral psychology.

Smithian sympathy, as developed in the remainder of TMS, differs in still other respects from Hume's limited sympathy. For example, Smith argues that all forms of sympathy—even the commiseration with pain that Lord Shaftesbury had called "mournful" sympathy³¹—have an inherent pleasantness. We are pleased, he writes, "when we are able to sympathize . . . , and . . . hurt when we are unable to do so":

We run not only to congratulate the successful, but to condole with the afflicted; and the pleasure which we find in the conversation of one whom in all the passions of his heart we can entirely sympathize with, seems to do more than compensate the painfulness of that sorrow with which the view of his situation affects us. (1.1.2.6)

This was the object of Hume's most serious criticism of his friend's account of sympathy. In a letter of 28 July 1759, Hume advised Smith to revisit his argument, observing that, were it correct, "An Hospital would be a more Entertaining Place than a Ball," and adding (as though to emphasize his view that sympathy is mechanical and not essentially connected with any particular sort of emotion) that "the Sympathetic Passion is a reflex Image of the principal [passion, and] must partake of its Qualities, and be painful where that is so."³²

One useful way of characterizing the difference between Smith's and Hume's treatments of sympathy is to note the greater affinity of the former with the "sentimentalist" strain in eighteenth-century literature and philosophy. The idea that even mournful sympathy is inherently pleasurable is one of the hallmarks of sentimentalism, as is a "deep"—in Humean terms, "extensive"—identification with the object of one's sympathies as a whole person.³³ Both of these are present in TMS, as we have seen, and one finds them in the works of countless sentimentalist writers. Two of these were Henry Mackenzie and Samuel Jackson Pratt, whom I mention specifically because of the popularity of their works and because they both cited Smith as the source of their sentimentalist conceptions of sympathy.³⁴

Sentimentalist sympathy took many forms, of which these passages from Pratt, David Fordyce, and Shaftesbury may be considered representative:

- (1) O pain to think that fellow-men there be
Whose breasts ne'er felt the touch of Sympathy!
Who view unmov'd the sorrow-delug'd eye
O'erflow with bitterness, and hear the sigh
Heave from the sealed heart; yet still severe,
Ne'er knew the solace of a pitying tear;
Who, stern, can see a neighbour's whelming fate
Bend him to earth beneath misfortune's weight;
Who the blest throb of tenderness ne'er felt,
Pangs that delight, and agonies that melt!³⁵
- (2) As the good man is conscious of loving and wishing well to all Mankind, he must be sensible of his deserving the Esteem and Good-will of all; and this supposed Reciprocation of social Feelings is, by the very Frame of our Nature, made a Source of very intense and enlivening Joys. By this Sympathy of Affections and Interests he feels himself intimately united with the Human Race.³⁶
- (3) So insinuating are these pleasures of sympathy, and so widely diffused through our whole lives, that there is hardly such a thing as satisfaction or contentment of which they make not an essential part.³⁷

The tone of these descriptions of sympathy distinguishes them from the calm and dispassionate accounts in Hume's *Treatise*. A few words from T 2.1.11 will serve to remind us of the difference:

When any affection is infus'd by sympathy, it is at first known only by its effects and those external signs in the countenance and conversation, which convey an idea of it. This 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. (T 2.1.11.3; SBN 317)

In contrast with the sentimentalists, Hume is primarily concerned with the *process* of sympathy. And, as I have argued, when he does uncover it, the sympathy that he finds turns out to ground moral judgments, not by producing identification with others as whole persons,³⁸ but by means of a more limited response.

Hume's limited sympathy is therefore quite unlike the sentimentalist sympathy of many eighteenth-century philosophical and literary moralists. I have argued that Smith held some typically sentimentalist views, though perhaps less univocally³⁹ than Shaftesbury, Mackenzie, Fordyce, and Pratt (a list that could be extended to include numerous other prominent philosophical and literary moralists of Hume's time).⁴⁰ Sentimentalism was notoriously a response to the "pessimistic" view of human nature shared by Hobbes and the Puritans,⁴¹ but Hume's view can hardly be classified with these (not least because he clearly rejects the view of Hobbes, Rochefoucauld, and others who saw self-interest at the root of the sympathetic virtue of pity).⁴² In spite of this, it would be a mistake to conclude that Humean sympathy stood entirely apart from the intellectual currents of its day, for there is at least one further possible source of Hume's limited and unsentimental understanding of sympathy, as I will suggest in the remarks that follow.

That possible source is illustrated by the following passages, whose formal and substantive resemblance to Hume's account of sympathy will be readily apparent:

The idea of pain and pleasure, even of others, if heightened by imagination, becomes in some degree realized in ourselves; and the solids and fluids sympathize accordingly.⁴³

[T]here is a remarkable sympathy, by means of the nerves, between the various parts of the body; and . . . it appears that there is a still more wonderful sympathy between the nervous systems of different persons, whence various motions and morbid symptoms are often transferred from one to another, without any corporeal contact or infection. In these cases the impression made upon the mind, or *sensorium commune*, by seeing others in a disordered state, raises, by means of the nerves, such motions or changes in certain parts of the body, as to produce similar affections in them.⁴⁴

These passages are found in the works of Charles Collignon and Robert Whytt. Collignon and Whytt were *medical* academics: the one Professor of Anatomy at Cambridge and the other Professor of Medicine at Edinburgh. Their interest in sympathy was part of a long tradition of medical writing on the topic—a tradition that developed separately from that of sentimentalist moralists, but which in the early eighteenth century began to draw closer to it. That is, while sympathy had

traditionally been seen by physicians as a principle of communication between parts of a *single* human body, some eighteenth-century medical writers broadened this conception to embrace the *inter-personal* communication of sensations and emotions.⁴⁵ Hermann Boerhaave, the famous professor at Leiden, is a particularly important early example—important because many Scottish and English medical students studied under him, or with his colleagues and successors, at Leiden.⁴⁶ These students, incidentally, included both Whytt and Collignon.⁴⁷

Hume was likely familiar with eighteenth-century medical discussions of sympathy. Whytt, for example, was an Edinburgh contemporary and almost certainly an acquaintance,⁴⁸ and William Cullen, Hume's personal physician, wrote and lectured on the topic.⁴⁹ In addition to these "local" influences, another medical connection bears consideration. One of Boerhaave's fellow students at Leiden, himself the son of an illustrious medical family, was Bernard Mandeville,⁵⁰ the future controversialist and author of *The Fable of the Bees*.⁵¹ Mandeville was also one of the "late philosophers in England" whose contributions to the establishment of a "science of man" Hume praises in the Introduction to the *Treatise*.⁵² In Remark (C) to *An Enquiry into the Origin of Moral Virtue*, Mandeville resorts to a mechanical and physiological account of sympathizing in explaining the phenomenon of blushing at another's indiscretion:

That we are often ashamed, and blush for others . . . is nothing else but that sometimes we make the Case of others too nearly our own; so People shriek out when they see others in danger: Whilst we are reflecting with too much earnestness on the Effect which such a blameable Action, if it was ours, would produce in us, the Spirits, and consequently the Blood, are insensibly moved after the same manner, as if the Action was our own, and so the same Symptoms must appear.⁵³

In the *Treatise*, Hume considers a remarkably similar case of blushing at another's indiscretion. The chief difference is that in Hume's case the "other" is oblivious to his folly, making the identity of that with which the sympathizer sympathizes something of a mystery (which Hume purports to solve by reference to "general rules").⁵⁴ Whether or not there was a historical connection between these two discussions of "sympathetic" blushing, the essential point remains that Hume's argument, like Mandeville's (1) envisages a mechanical and involuntary psychology of sympathizing and (2) connects it with physiological events (the motion of the blood involved in blushing).

It is therefore not inconceivable that Hume's moral psychology might have been influenced, directly or indirectly, by the doctrines of such physicians as Mandeville and Boerhaave. Hence, however unusual it might have appeared in the context of eighteenth-century sentimental ethics, Hume's work on sympathy ap-

pears to fit quite comfortably into the important parallel medical tradition. Because many simply assume that Hume was allied, more or less, with moral-philosophical sentimentalism, the possibility that his views on sympathy have sources beyond specifically "ethical" writings is rarely broached. If the thesis that Hume was influenced by the physicians' understanding of sympathy turns out to be correct, then the notion that all Humean sympathy is "extensive sympathy," grounding morality through the production of concern for others as whole persons, would be, at best, a misguided attempt to assimilate Hume to the *wrong tradition of thought concerning sympathy*. Such an error would in turn encourage significant misinterpretations of Hume's approach to moral philosophy, which is the meticulous and clinical approach of the moral psychologist rather than the enthusiastic advocacy of the literary or philosophical sentimentalist—or, as Hume puts it in the conclusion to the *Treatise* (and with a noteworthy bow to the medical profession), the approach of an anatomist rather than that of a painter (T 3.3.6.6; SBN 620).⁵⁵

NOTES

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1 Hume's sympathy is described as "mechanical," "mechanistic," or a "mechanism" by numerous commentators, including Terence Penelhum, *David Hume: An Introduction to His Philosophical System* (West Lafayette, Ind.: Purdue University Press, 1991), 155; and Stephen Darwall, "Hume and the Invention of Utilitarianism," in *Hume and Hume's Connexions*, ed. M. A. Stewart and John P. Wright (University Park, Penn.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), 58–82, 68. Hume himself explicitly uses the language of mechanism in describing his theory of the "production and conduct of the passions" in "Of the Passions," *Four Dissertations* [1757] (Bristol: Thoemmes, 1995), 119–81, 181, and writes of sympathy in the *Treatise* itself as comparable to the communication of vibrations between strings of a musical instrument (T 3.3.1.7; SBN 576). References to Hume's *A Treatise of Human Nature* (hereafter "T") are to the edition prepared by David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000). Passages are cited by book, part, section, and paragraph, followed by a page reference to *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 2nd ed., revised by P. H. Nidditch ("SBN") (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978). References to *An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals* ("EPM") are to the critical edition prepared by Tom L. Beauchamp (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998). Passages from EPM are cited by section and paragraph, followed by page number in David Hume, *Enquiries concerning Human Understanding and concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 3rd ed., revised by P. H. Nidditch ("SBN") (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975).

2 Specifically, he writes:

When any affection is infus'd 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. This 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. (T 2.1.11.3; SBN 317)

This process is “mechanical” in the sense that it proceeds automatically, without any conscious effort. By way of contrast, Adam Smith’s “passions of which the expressions excite no sort of sympathy, but before we are acquainted with what gave occasion to them . . .” require us to make a judgment about the affected person’s “situation” before producing their effects. See *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* [1759], ed. Knud Haakonssen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 1.1.1.6–10.

3 This is simplified somewhat, inasmuch as sympathy can occur in the absence of direct observation—for example, when we contemplate historical or literary figures.

4 The structure of the sympathetic process in T 2.1.11 requires this—it “infuses” (paras. 2, 3; SBN 316–17) a particular psychological state of A into the mind of B. Given an idea of A’s current psychological state (communicated by facial expression, voice, etc.), the process turns it, generally “instantaneously” (para. 3; SBN 317), into the current state of B (i.e., an impression of his own, resembling that experienced by A). There is no place in this process for the communication of anything else about A beyond a momentary psychological state. Extending this conception of sympathy beyond the communication of “momentary pain or pleasure” (T 2.2.9.2, 2.2.9.11; SBN 381, 385) is the subject of T 2.2.9, discussed at length below.

5 John Bricke, *Mind and Morality: An Examination of Hume’s Moral Psychology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 134.

6 Philip Mercer, *Sympathy and Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), 21. To this we can add the complaints of Nancy Hirschmann (that “the experience of sympathy in Hume’s account does not seem to alter [the sympathizer] in any deep way,” and Jennifer Herdt (that Hume has “straitjacketed” himself with a narrowly associationist definition of “sympathy”). See Nancy Hirschmann, “Sympathy, Empathy, and Obligation,” in *Feminist Interpretations of David Hume*, ed. Anne Jaap Jacobson (University Park, Penn.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000), 174–93, 180, and Jennifer Herdt, *Religion and Faction in Hume’s Moral Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 42.

7 Note that these references occur before “extensive sympathy” is introduced in T 2.2.9, indicating that Hume attributes these strengths to the very form of sympathy that he calls “limited” in that section.

8 For point (1), see T 2.1.5.11 (SBN 289–90). For points (2) to (6), see T 2.2.9 generally, and particularly T 2.2.9.14 (SBN 386).

9 Along with malice, its opposite, to which Hume gives very little attention and which I will ignore, both on that ground and for the sake of brevity.

10 Hume asks himself whether this is all mere ad hocbery:

Is it becoming a philosopher to alter his method of reasoning, and run from one principle to its contrary, according to the particular phænomenon, which he wou'd explain? (T 2.2.9.11; SBN 385)

He concludes that it is not (T 2.2.9.12; SBN 385).

11 Bricke, 133.

12 Herdt also writes, "Implicit in Hume's account is the possibility, once the importance of extensive sympathy to moral judgment is recognized, of beginning to cultivate and extend it intentionally." (60)

13 See note 6, above. In her eagerness to establish this point, Herdt claims that Páll Árdal "complains" that Hume's sympathy is mechanical. In the cited passage, however, he merely states this as a matter of fact. See Herdt, 42, citing Árdal, *Passion and Value in Hume's Treatise* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1966), 45.

14 See EPM 6.33 n. 34 (SBN 248 n. 1). That Hume maintained the primacy of limited sympathy in the second *Enquiry* is strongly suggested by his comments on sympathy at EPM 5.42 (SBN 229). Curiously, extensive sympathy *is* referred to in the abridged counterpart of T 2.2.9 in the dissertation "Of the Passions" (161–2). Perhaps the most interesting occurrence of a form of extensive sympathy occurs in section 3 of the first *Enquiry*. The context is a discussion of the use of the three principles of association in narrative compositions. Hume argues that in certain types of literature, particularly epic poetry, the imaginations of writer and reader are so "enlivened," and their passions so "enflamed," that any break in the narrative connections between events will be uncomfortably jarring to the reader's mind (EHU 3.11; SBN omitted). Throughout this discussion, Hume emphasizes the readiness with which the reader of such poetry sympathizes, not only with the current psychological states of the characters described, but with other characters and objects that are "strongly related" to them. Thus "Our sympathy and concern for Eve prepares the way for a like sympathy with Adam" (EHU 3.12; SBN omitted). While this is not explicitly "diachronic" sympathy, Hume does return to some of the imagery of sympathy as "overflowing" that is found in T 2.2.9. As is the case in that section, however, the type of situation that produces this form of aesthetic "extensive" sympathy is explicitly said to depend on an unusually heightened state of the emotions (in this case, that created by epic poetry of an exceptional quality). Thus its presence does not indicate that Hume adopted extensive sympathy as his paradigm of sympathizing in general. It should also be noted that the entire discussion was deleted by Hume in the amendments he made for what became the edition of 1777.

15 Herdt, 80.

16 Herdt acknowledges the problem, at least implicitly, but speculates that, in Book 3, Hume may turn to *urging* us to sympathize extensively with mankind. This claim is problematic in its own right, however, for prescriptive moralizing is precisely *not* the purpose of the *Treatise*, a work of descriptive psychology devoted to discovering the springs of human behaviour, including moral behaviour, such as it is.

17 Hume's associationist-utilitarian aesthetic theory is in evidence throughout the *Treatise*, notably at T 2.2.5.18, 2.2.5.19, 3.3.1.8 (SBN 364, 364–5, 576), whose respective subjects are landscapes, paintings, and houses.

18 One might wonder whether Hume intends “extensive sympathy” as a term of art at all. It appears in that precise form only twice in T 2.2.9 (counting one occurrence of “extensive or limited sympathy”), and once each in T 3.3.1 and T 3.3.6, together with a few slightly more oblique references. It is quite possible that he is simply using the word “extensive” as an adjective in two distinct contexts, without intending, in either case, to name a new concept.

19 See also T 3.2.1.12 (SBN 481), where Hume asserts that “there is no such passion in human minds, as the love of mankind, merely as such.”

20 It must do this, of course, because, according to Herdt, Hume (largely) abandons limited for what he defines in T 2.2.9 as “extensive” sympathy, and, according to this definition, this form of extensive sympathy is naturally assimilated to benevolence.

21 See especially T 3.2.1.12 (SBN 481–2).

22 See the “Advertisement” to Book 3.

23 See EPM App. 1.11 (SBN 290): “The approbation or blame, which then ensues, cannot be the work of the judgment, but of the heart; and it is not a speculative proposition or affirmation, but an active feeling or sentiment.”

24 This public nature is spelled out brilliantly at EPM 9.6 (SBN 272), where Hume observes: “But when he bestows on any man the epithet of *vicious* or *odious* or *depraved*, he then speaks another language, and expresses sentiments, in which, he expects, all his audience are to concur with him. He must here, therefore, depart from his private and particular situation, and must choose a point of view, common to him with others.”

25 Gilles Deleuze, *Empiricism and Subjectivity: An Essay on Hume’s Theory of Human Nature*, trans. Constantin V. Boundas (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 41–2.

26 Hume suggests as much when he credits (limited) sympathy with producing the “great uniformity” in the “humours and turn of thinking” that one finds in members of a particular nation (T 2.1.11.2; SBN 316–17).

27 None of this means that moral disagreement is not possible: even limited sympathy is likely to be somewhat idiosyncratic, after all, and in any event our judgments will be affected by our ability to “correct” our limited sympathies, as discussed in note 29, below.

28 Deleuze, 39.

29 The greater intersubjective agreement produced by limited sympathy might be thought unnecessary given Hume’s argument in the *Treatise* that we “correct” our sympathies to achieve what seems a similar result (T 3.3.1.15–16, 3.3.1.30, 3.3.3.2; SBN 581–2, 591, 603). But the “correction” of sympathy has to do with variations in the *intensity* with which sympathetically communicated mental states are felt—variations that result from the *distance* that each particular sympathizer stands from the objects of sympathy. Because such variations could be expected to exist even where the sympathies in question were *limited* sympathies, there is no reason to take “correction” as duplicating the function of limited sympathy. My thanks to Satoshi Niimura for raising this point.

30 Mercer, 85. The degree of intellect or deliberation involved in Smith's sympathy seems noteworthy only in relation to the total absence of such elements in Hume's version. It was nonetheless a common complaint among those later writers who argued that Smith's sympathy was an artificial rather than a natural quality of human nature. See, for example, James Hutton's *An Investigation of the Principles of Knowledge*, 3 vols. [1794] (Bristol: Thoemmes, 1999), 3: 252.

31 Lord Shaftesbury, "An Inquiry Concerning Virtue or Merit," in *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, ed. Lawrence E. Klein (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 163–230, 204.

32 David Hume, letter to Adam Smith, 28 July 1759, in *Correspondence of Adam Smith*, revised ed., ed. E. C. Mossner and I. S. Ross (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 43.

33 See Andrew S. Cunningham, "Was Eighteenth Century Sentimentalism Unprecedented?," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 6 (1998): 381–96.

34 On Mackenzie's debt to Smith, see Gerard A. Barker, *Henry Mackenzie* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1975), 28 (citing a letter from Mackenzie to William Carmichael). For Pratt's view, see "Sympathy, a poem," in *Harvest-Home*, 3 vols. (London, 1805), 3: 495–551, 547–8. By way of contrast, Pratt's *Apology for the Life and Writings of David Hume, Esq.* (London, 1777), was full of praise for Hume's intellectual independence and honesty but accorded no special attention to him as a sympathizer or man of compassion. Similarly, Mackenzie's "Story of La Roche," published in *The Mirror* three years after Hume's death, said of Hume (its unnamed protagonist) that "he was not easily melted into compassion," although "it was, at least, not difficult to awaken his benevolence" (*The Miscellaneous Works of Henry Mackenzie, Esq.* [New York: Harper & Brothers, 1836], 480).

35 Pratt, *Harvest-Home*, 518–19.

36 Fordyce, *The Elements of Moral Philosophy* (London, 1754), 265.

37 Shaftesbury, 204.

38 With the partial exception of pity, of course.

39 For example, Smith's well-known discussion of the rope dancer at TMS 1.1.1.3 is clearly an acknowledgment of the possibility of non-deliberative, physiological sympathizing.

40 See, for example, Henry Grove, *A System of Moral Philosophy*, 2 vols. (London, 1755), 1: 392–3 and "The Blessedness of those that Mourn," in *Sermons* (London, 1742), 330–80, 370; Hugh Blair, "On Sensibility," in *Sermons*, 2d ed., 4 vols. [1777] (Romsey, n.d.), 2: 169–82, 175–6; and "A. B.," letter in *Man: A Paper for Ennobling the Species*, no. 43 (22 October 1755), 4.

41 See R. S. Crane, "Suggestions toward a Genealogy of the 'Man of Feeling,'" *ELH* 1 (1934): 205–30 and Norman Fiering, "Irresistible Compassion: An Aspect of Eighteenth-Century Sympathy and Humanitarianism," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 37 (1976): 195–218.

42 See F. B. Kaye's introduction to his edition of Bernard Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees: Or, Private Vices, Publick Benefits*, 2 vols. [1705–1732] (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1924), 1: xc–xcii. Mandeville refers to Thomas Hobbes, *Elements of Law* (1640),

1.9.10, and Duc de la Rochefoucauld, *Maxims*, 5th ed. [1778], trans. Stuart D. Warner and Stéphane Douard (South Bend, Ind.: St. Augustine's Press, 2001), 52–3.

43 Charles Collignon, *Moral and Medical Dialogues*, in *The Miscellaneous Works of Charles Collignon, M.D.* (Cambridge, 1786), 191–263, 254.

44 Robert Whytt, *Observations on the Nature, Causes, and Cure of those Disorders which are commonly called Nervous, Hypochondriac, or Hysterical* [1764], in *The Works of Robert Whytt, M.D.* (Edinburgh, 1768), 487–713, 583.

45 Scottish examples include James Crawford, “Practical Remarks on the Sympathy of the Parts of the Body,” *Medical Essays of Edinburgh* 5 (1742): 480–90; William Cullen, *Clinical Lectures delivered in the Years 1765 and 1766* (London, 1797), 30–33; and Alexander Monro *primus*, *Works of Alexander Monro, M.D.* (Edinburgh, 1781), 348.

46 Boerhaave's former students dominated Scottish medical education in the first half of the eighteenth century. See his “On the great and extensive powers of sympathy over the human frame; extracted from Boerhaave's academical lectures on the diseases of the nerves, published by his disciple J. Van Eems, physician at Leyden,” extracted in *Annual Register* 4 (1765): 80–83.

47 R. K. French, *Robert Whytt, the Soul, and Medicine* (London: Wellcome Institute of the History of Medicine, 1969), 4; and the anonymous *A Short Account of the Late Dr John Parsons; Dr Richard Huck Saunders; Dr Charles Colignon [sic]; and Sir Alexander Dick* (Edinburgh, 1786), 13–15.

48 Whytt (1714–1766) and Hume were respectively Vice-President and Secretary of the Philosophical Society of Edinburgh in the early 1750s, for example. Moreover, there is a conceivable connection at Rheims, where Hume stayed in 1734–1735 and Whytt graduated M.D. on 2 April 1736—though not, it seems, after any extensive period of residence there. See Raymond Klibansky and E. C. Mossner, *New Letters of David Hume* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1954), 34 nn. 1, 3; E. C. Mossner, *The Life of David Hume*, 2d ed. (Oxford University Press, 1980), 99, 257; and French, 4.

49 See note 45 above.

50 Mandeville was registered at Leiden between 1685 and 1690, graduating in medicine in 1691 after a first degree in philosophy. See Kaye, 1: xviii–xix. Boerhaave, too, began with a course in philosophy (1684–1690) before switching to studies in medicine, completed in 1693. See F. L. R. Sassen, “The Intellectual Climate in Leiden in Boerhaave's Time,” in G. A. Lindeboom, ed., *Boerhaave and His Time* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1970), 1–16.

51 Sassen, 1; Kaye, 1: xviii.

52 T (Introduction) 7 (SBN xvii).

53 Mandeville, 1: 66.

54 T 2.2.7.5; SBN 371.

55 Our consideration of the origin of Humean sympathy seems to bring us, through both Boerhaave and Mandeville, to Holland. This in turn suggests the possibility of a connection with Spinoza's thought, particularly as expressed in proposition 27 of part 3 of the *Ethics*. This question, too complex to be treated properly here, will be the subject of a separate paper.