

*published in: *The Cambridge Kant Lexicon*. Edited by Julian Wuerth. Cambridge University Press, 2021, pg. 427-9.

Sympathy (*Sympathie, Mitgefühl, Mitleid, Mitfreude, Theilnehmung*). Kant defines sympathy in his 1797 *Metaphysics of Morals* as follows: “*Sympathetic joy* [*Mitfreude*] and *sympathetic sadness* [*Mitleid*] (*sympathia moralis*) are sensible feelings of pleasure or displeasure (which are therefore to be called “aesthetic”) at another’s state of joy or pain (shared feeling, sympathetic feeling).” (MM, 6:456/CEPP:574-5)

Sympathy is consistently captured by a cluster of related terms throughout Kant’s writings. Kant focuses on what he dubs “moral sympathy” (MoVi, 27:677 [1793-4]/CELE:409; cf. MoHe, 27:65-7 [1762-4]/CELE:30-2; OFBS, 2:222 [1764]/CEAHE:35; OFBS, 2:218 [1764]/CEAHE:32), where “[o]ne sympathizes with others by means of the power of the imagination.” (A, 7:238 [1798]/CEAHE:341) Moral sympathy is “*free*” (MM, 6:456/CEPP:575) in the sense that it signifies “the *capacity* and the *will to share in others’ feelings*” (ibid.), and is thus the active participation [*Theilnehmung*] in the feelings of others by means of thought, specifically the imagination but also reason (see MoVi, 27:677/CELE:409). Kant was likely influenced here by Adam Smith’s *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (3rd ed 1767), a book he likely read and which posits a similar link between sympathy and the imagination.

At times Kant states that sympathy is the “sadness” “about the evil that fate imposes on other human beings”, rather than the evil “they do to themselves.” (Rel, 5:276 [1793]/CERRT:157;) Kant says, for example, that we sympathize with someone killed by fate, but not with someone who commits suicide (cf. MoMr, 27:1504 [1782]; MoMr, 27:1501; and MoCo, 27:367/CELE:143) meaning we only sympathize with what we judge to be virtuous. In contrast, vice does not inspire sympathy, but implies “antipathy in fundamental principles.” (CPJ, 5:276 [1790]/CECPJ:157; cf. MoHe, 27:69; 16:688; and 15:516)

As for the role of sympathy in Kant’s moral philosophy, Kant does seem to view sympathy positively when he claims that torturing animals is forbidden only because doing so “weakens and gradually uproots a natural predisposition that is very serviceable to morality in one’s relations with other people” (MM, 6:443/CEPP:564), namely the ability to share in others’ sufferings. (cf. MoHe, 27:85) At the same time, because “there cannot possible be a duty to increase the ills in the world” Kant argues there cannot be a duty “to share the sufferings (as well the joys) of others.” (MM, 6:457/CEPP:575) However, the mere “active participation [*Theilnehmung*] in the fate” of others, as an act of thought or the imagination, is a duty (ibid.), making it also an indirect duty to visit the “poor”, “sickrooms or debtors’ prisons” (ibid.) and other occasions for such participation.

Sympathy can be a an incentive [*Triebfeder*] to action (see Rel, 6:30-1/CERRT:78; and 28:1279; 20:36), but such an action - “however much it conforms with duty, however amiable it may be – still has no true moral worth, but stands on the same footing as other inclinations.” (G, 4:398 [1785]/CEPP:53; cf. MM, 6:457/CEPP:575) Indeed, Kant groups sympathy among the “pathological” incentives (see CPrR, 5:85 [1788]/CEPP:208; 29:626), and lists three main reasons against counting sympathy as a moral incentive. First, actions caused by sympathy do not universally and consistently lead to virtuous actions (see OFBS, 2:218/CEAHE:31-2; OFBS, 2:217/CEAHE:31; OFBS, 2:222/CEAHE:35; and Rel, 6:30/CERRT:78), and thus like all pathological actions “it is purely accidental that these actions agree with the law, for the incentives might equally well incite its violation.” (Rel, 6:30/CERRT:78) Second, as a pathological incentive it is based on pleasure and thus can be

too easily overcome by self-interest (see OFBS, 2:217/CEAHE:31). And third, even moral sympathy requires the presence of stimuli (cf. MoCo, 27:293/CELE:85; MoMr, 27:1441; MK2, 28:744 [1790-5]; and MM, 6:443/ CEPP:564; MM, 6:457/CEPP:575), which means it is a dependent and thus not a free, spontaneous incentive. At the same time, Kant does say that sympathy is “one of the impulses that nature has implanted in us to do what the representation of duty alone might not accomplish.” (MM, 6:457/CEPP:576) and for this reason it “seems to be an incentive to good actions” (28:1279, and OFBS, 2:217/CEAHE:31) and thus is among the “adopted virtues” (OFBS, 2:217-8/CEAHE:31).

Related terms: feeling, incentive, virtue, duty, pleasure, pathological, inclination, spontaneity

Michael Walschots