

## A Delicacy of Empathy: Hume's Many Meanings of Sympathy

Requinte da Empatia: Diversos Significados da Simpatia de Hume

Lou Agosta<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

The argument of this article is that Hume uses multiple definitions of “sympathy” and that they map closely to the multidimensional meaning of empathy, which distinguishes empathic receptivity, empathic understanding, empathic interpretation, and empathic responsiveness. The section on how Hume is relevant today uses “humanity” as a bridge between sympathy and empathy. A review of the literature on the debate about sympathy in the Hume literature is provided to establish what has been overlooked in the many meanings of sympathy, namely, receptivity, interpretation, and optimal responsiveness. These are then engaged in the sections on sympathy as receptivity to affects, interpretation, and optimal responsiveness, each correlated with the parallel aspects of empathy.

**Keywords:** Sympathy; empathy; receptivity; understanding; taste.

### Resumo

O argumento deste artigo é que Hume usa múltiplas definições para “simpatia”, que estão mapeadas próximas ao sentido multidimensional de empatia, o qual distingue a receptividade empática, a compreensão empática, a interpretação empática e a resposta empática. A seção sobre a relevância atual de Hume usa a “humanidade” como ponte entre a simpatia e a empatia. Uma revisão da literatura sobre o debate referente à simpatia na literatura de Hume estabelece o que passou despercebido nos diversos significados de simpatia, ou seja, receptividade, interpretação e responsividade ótima. Estas estão inseridas nas seções sobre simpatia como receptividade aos afetos, interpretação e responsividade ótima, cada um correlacionado aos aspectos paralelos da empatia.

**Palavras-chave:** Simpatia; empatia; receptividade; compreensão; gosto.

<sup>1</sup>Argosy University (Chicago), United States of America

### How Hume is Relevant Today

Hume's philosophy is part of the deep history of empathy, and it is as such that his work is engaged in this essay. The intention is not to evaluate Hume's work from the perspective of the limited understanding of empathy that we have today in neuroscience, but to appreciate anew the possibilities he saw for relatedness to other people that include recognition, acknowledgement, humor, friendship, compassion, taste, enlarged humanity, among others. Hume included himself on the list as a participant in many of these qualities. As such, he was an exemplary individual, a magnanimous and gracious spirit who envisioned possibilities for human development irreducible to mere self-interest or an austere formalism, embracing an enlarged humanity. Hume traced how our humanity emerges in a closely related set of qualities: delicate sensitivity to the affects of other individuals; human understanding as presence of mind and practical wisdom; interpretation of the other individual from the standpoint of a general but sym-

pathetic spectator, and optimal responsiveness as a facility of expression and fellow-feeling (e.g., Hume, 1751/1968, p. 67). These aspects of our humanity provide a foundation for the emerging understanding of empathy as that which provides one for our relatedness to the other individual in empathic receptivity, empathic understanding, empathic interpretation, and empathic language. These in turn point back at and fulfill an expanded definition of empathy, which makes it the foundation of human relatedness. “Humanity” is going to provide a leading thread as we connect the dots between Hume's several meanings of “sympathy” and the multidimensional process today called “empathy”.

Hume's humanity is front and center. This is also a terminological point. He sometimes used the word “humanity” as overlapping with “social sympathy” (Hume, 1751/1968, p. 83) or “fellow-feeling” (Hume, 1751/1968, p. 47). He writes about “the force of humanity and benevolence” (Hume, 1751/1968, p. 47), which, in turn, indicates what is altruistic, generous, and charitable. Likewise, he

writes about the “principles of humanity and sympathy” (Hume, 1751/1968, p. 57). In all these instances, the suggestion is that “humanity,” “sympathy,” “fellow-feeling,” and “benevolence” are closely related, yet distinct aspects of the larger phenomenon of his inquiry into the dynamics of human conduct and relations, or why would he call them out separately? To compound the terminological challenge, there is one passage in which Hume uses all three synonymously — “general benevolence, or humanity, or sympathy” (Hume, 1751/1968, p. 115) — but then the massive merger is limited. They are all alike only in the limited sense that none of the three is reducible to self-love. They are all distinct, though overlapping, once self-love is acknowledged as significant and important in human conduct, but it is not the foundation of morality, argues Hume. All these qualities — benevolence, humanity, sympathy — live in the hearts of mankind as separate and independent dispositions, calling forth moral approbation. Hume also understands “humanity” in a wider and deeper sense that encompasses the possibilities shared by all human beings:

[...] The humanity of one man is the humanity of everyone; and the same object touches this passion in all human creatures. But the sentiments which arise from humanity are not only the same in all human creatures and produce the same approbation or censure, but they also comprehend all human creatures (Hume, 1751/1968, p. 94).

“Humanity” is herein a general competence and capability underlying our capacity to experience and respond to morally-relevant behavior. Those readers who are familiar with the ethics of Kant may hear an echo of the second formulation of the categorical imperative of morality, which emphasizes the austere sentiment or emotion of respect that all human beings have for one another in virtue of being ends in themselves and not mere means to contingent purposes. Hume continues by proposing to distinguish and investigate “the sentiments dependent on humanity” that “are the origin of morals” (Hume, 1751/1968, p. 94). It is this “humanity” distinction that will enable us to connect the dots — or, to mix the metaphor, build a bridge — between Hume’s many meanings of sympathy in his early *Treatise of Human Nature* (Hume, 1739/1973)<sup>1</sup> and *An Enquiry*

*Concerning the Principles of Morals* (Hume, 1739/1973), and the multidimensional process of empathy that has emerged in our own time since 1995.

In addition, Hume provides an example of an exemplary individual, who, in his own personal self-description, transforms qualities of narcissism — self-love in a limited but not entirely negative sense — into positive ones of the self, such as humor, wit, wisdom that comes with experience, appreciation of finitude, and many qualities associated with an enlarged humanity. These are the sorts of characteristics that make a person a good friend, “someone worth knowing,” living life to its fullest, a credit to the community, and an exemplary human being. These transformations of the self are a useful reminder of the currency of Hume’s philosophical contribution to a time that knows the negative aspects of narcissism, exhibitionism, selfishness, and grandiosity without greatness.

While the main intention is to retrieve Hume’s forgotten contribution to the history of empathy, there is another scholarly agenda. The debates about the role of sympathy in Hume — where “sympathy” echoes “empathy” without the reduction of either one to the other — have overlooked the contribution of his aesthetic dimension. The role of taste as the appreciation of beauty in nature and in art comes into focus. For Hume, it was not the truncated, subsidiary ability with which we sadly regard and neglect it today. Taste was a capacity that along with sympathy — and frequently complementary with sympathy — provided a complement to our humanity as feeling, imagining, thinking people in relationship not only with art, but with several aspects of our relatedness to other human beings. And it is in this relatedness to the other person — the other as such — that the link is completed with empathy in the full, developed, mature sense. However, to appreciate the complex dynamics of the many meanings of “sympathy” in the context of Hume’s philosophical activity, a review of the literature is appropriate. We now turn to it.

### A Review of the Debate on Sympathy in the Literature on Hume

At the risk of over-simplifying Andrew Cunningham’s (2004) subtle approach to the development of sympathy into benevolence, he notes that

<sup>1</sup> Hereafter, “1973” refers to the Selby-Bigge addition of Hume’s 1739 *A Treatise of Human Nature*. “1968” refers to the widely available Library of Liberal Arts edition of Hume’s 1751 *An Inquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, edited by Charles W. Hendel.

Hume's initial definition of a limited, narrow sympathy in the *Treatise* (1739) gives way to an extensive one that is synonymous with the spirit of benevolence that became the basis of morality in Hume's later *Enquiry* (1751). Cunningham argues paradoxically in favor of the strength of "weak" sympathy. Although the explicit discussion of sympathy in either form is limited in Hume's *Enquiry*, Cunningham makes the nice point that the mechanism of sympathy in the limited sense is still required for a full blown moral psychology. Along the way, Cunningham quotes powerful passages from medical works by Robert Whytt (1764/1768) to which Hume arguably had access in early versions of Whytt's work that read as if anticipating a modern mirror neuron system. Cunningham then devalues such references as sentimentalist. For example, Whytt writes:

There 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 of 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* (Whytt, 1764/1768, p. 513).

The nervous systems of different subjects enable the transfer of impressions from one mind to another, producing similar affections. Human beings are related to one another — connected literally and physically through "action at a distance." Not indeed, physically by gravity — though that too in a trivial sense — but at a biological level by a "remarkable sympathy", a mechanism not well understood in Whytt's day or indeed in ours but now debated to be the "mirror neuron" system. We humans resonate together at the level of biology, which is neither full-blown, complete sympathy nor empathy as such, but provides input to processes, development, and elaboration that will ultimately produce these. Cunningham backs away from such an interpreta-

tion — as from an abyss of too much relatedness — saying in so many words that it presents a risk to our canonical reading of Hume as a moral psychologist rather than embracing "the enthusiastic advocacy of the literary or philosophical sentimentalist" (Cunningham, 2004, p. 251). It is known that Hume could do both, be a moral psychologist and a literary sentimentalist, since in his day "sentimentalist" also meant those refined passions that contributed to a delicacy of taste and sympathy with which human beings associate with one another, responding to examples of character qualities in other subjects that inspired similar qualities in oneself.

The challenge is that Hume's initial "narrow sympathy," as a psychological mechanism, is both expanded and restricted as "expansive sympathy," becoming a specific emotion of compassion or benevolence, itself overlapping but not identical with a kind of oneness with humanity. Hume's initial "narrow sympathy" in the mechanism of sympathy is defined as translating ideas into impressions, causing the suggestion of the first person to be communicated to another person as an idea, which, in turn, arouses the corresponding impression of the passion in the second person that was initially experienced by the first one (e.g. Hume, 1739/1973, pp. 319-320). In contrast, human beings have an extensive sympathy — namely, humanity — that is usable by other people to inspire altruistic acts and be agreeable in a high degree to the beholder, causing the feeling of a pleasing experience of approval: "[...] These principles of humanity and sympathy enter [...] deeply into all our sentiments, and have so powerful an influence, as may enable them to excite the strongest censure and applause" (Hume, 1751/1968, p. 57). While data analysis of the text is a limited approach, this indicates a kind of role reversal as "humanity" occurs nine times in the *Treatise* and 57 times in the *Enquiry*; whereas "sympathy" occurs 85 in the *Treatise* and 25 in the *Enquiry*.

Philip Mercer asserts that Hume's definition of sympathy in the narrow sense omits the "practical concern for the other" (Mercer, 1972, p. 21), which is the main point of sympathy's contribution to the foundation of morality. While the "practical concern for the other" may not be part of Hume's definition of sympathy in the narrowest sense, the "other" is definitely part of Hume's implementation of sympathy in the expanded sense and is discussed by him:

Our reputation, character, and name are considerations of vast weight and importance. Even the others of pride, virtue, beauty and riches have little influence, when not seconded by the opinions of *others*. In order to account for this phenomenon 'twill be necessary to take some compass, and first explain the nature of sympathy (Hume, 1739/1973, pp. 319-320).

Hume goes on to develop sympathy in the full sense as requiring a representation of the other as the source of experience of a passion, "conceived to belong to the *other* person" (Hume, 1739/1973, pp. 319-320). The same idea is expressed in different languages, substituting "society" for "others": "We have no extensive concern for society but from sympathy" (Hume, 1739/1973, p. 579). Finally, "reduce a person to solitude, and he loses all enjoyment, except either of the sensual or speculative kind, and that because of the movements of his heart are not forwarded by correspondent movements in his fellow-creatures" (Hume, 1751/1968, p. 48; 1739/1973, p. 220). Of course, Mercer is definitely correct to note that the association to an idea of the other individual is what is missing in the instance of emotional contagion. Hume does not restrict his account of sympathy to mere emotional contagion, though calling out the mechanisms of ideas and impressions in isolation from the context of human beings interacting in community can leave the reader with such impression.

The most famous proponent of the view that Hume changes his position deemphasizing, if not discarding, sympathy in favor of benevolence is Norman Kemp Smith, who argues that Hume changes his position, based on his deemphasizing the role of associationist psychology, from the *Treatise* to the *Enquiry*. However, in both cases, mankind judges and evaluates by means of feeling, not reason. "In matters of morals, as of aesthetics, feeling is the only possible arbiter" (Smith, 1941/2005, p. 196). Sympathy is what gives one person access to another's ideas and impressions, which, in turn, arouse moral approbation or disapproval. Hume is no utilitarian, even while praising the value of utility, and he is at considerable pains to limit the scope of self-love to make room for benevolence, friendship, and operation of positive

social sentiments. But the communication of such pro-social affects amongst the individuals in the community requires a mechanism — sympathy. Even in Hume's tough case of the so-called artificial virtue of justice, self-interest (self-love) alone is insufficient and he marshals sympathy to account for it: "Self-interest is the original motive to the establishment of justice; but a sympathy with public interest is the source of the moral approbation, which attends that virtue" (Hume, 1739/1973, pp. 499-500).

However, by the time the *Enquiry* was published (1751), "sympathy" was engaged significantly less and "humanity" (as expressed in benevolence and fellow-feeling) becomes the basis of morality. Hume does not merely "cool down" (as Kemp Smith writes) in his interest in a mechanistic, associationist account of sympathy, he finds an obstacle in principle to his own account and changes his mind. This obstacle concerns Hume's account of the self. He relates the indirect passions of pride and humility, love and hate, to the impression of the self, and when the latter becomes the target of a skeptical debunking — there is no impression of the self to be identified and the suspicion is that the self does not really exist — then the threat is to "take down" the entire edifice:

When we talk of self or substance, we must have an idea annex'd to these terms, otherwise they are altogether unintelligible. Every idea is deriv'd from preceding impressions; and we have no impression of self or substance, as something simple and individual. We have, therefore, no idea of them in that sense (Hume, 1739/1973, p. 633).

Hume needs a new account of the foundation of morality that does not rely quite so much on the self. He, in effect, backs away from giving an account of sympathy in terms of the self and in which sympathy regulates the boundary between self and the other. Perhaps, fearful that if he endorsed a robust sense of the self, he would give aid and comfort to the religious notion of the immortality of the soul, to which he was opposed, he finds himself in an impasse. The way out? Hume debunks the self as above (Hume, 1739/1973, p. 633), and, in relation to humanity, he "pulls a Newton," who famously indicated that his own prin-

ciple of principles, gravity, was not further analyzable. Likewise with Hume's humanity and fellow feeling:

It is needless to push our researches so far as to ask, why we have humanity or a fellow-feeling with others. It is sufficient, that this is experienced to be a principle in human nature. *We must stop somewhere in our examination of causes*; and there are, in every science, some general principles, beyond which we cannot hope to find any principle more general. No man is absolutely indifferent to the happiness and misery of others [...]. It is not probably that these principles can be resolved into principles more simple and universal, whatever attempts may have been made to that purpose (Hume, 1751/1968, p. 47).

Kemp Smith makes the point that the key phrase "happiness and misery of others" is a nice synonym for the operation of sympathy, which, however, has otherwise fallen out of the discussion to be replaced by "humanity or a fellow feeling."

Remy Debes (2007a, 2007b) argues back against Kemp Smith that there is a way of reconciling the *Treatise* and *Enquiry* if one follows the suggestion of Abramson (2000). Perhaps relying on the footnote previously cited (Hume, 1751/1968, p. 115), Abramson argues that "extensive sympathy" (Hume, 1739/1973, p. 586) is closely allied to Hume's reading of "humanity," which, in turn, is the source of a diversity of pro-social feelings, especially "benevolence." And it is benevolence that does the heavy lifting in the *Enquiry*. No discussion of the self need occur.

At the level of the text, the solution is at hand. Narrow sympathy is subordinate to extensive sympathy, which, in turn, is synonymous with humanity. Humanity, in turn, is what makes possible benevolence by generating it and a set of related pro-social sentiments (Hume, 1751/1968, p. 94). It does seem as though Kemp Smith is outvoted. Notwithstanding subtle differences in the details of their arguments, only Capaldi (1975) sides with Kemp Smith. Laird (1932/1967), Penelhum (1992), and Vitz (2004) align with the point of view that Hume does not renounce the psychological mechanism of associative sympathy, even if the mechanism is engaged ambivalently or not explicitly expressed in the *Enquiry*. Perhaps sensing

the looming "Holy War", Barry Stroud's position is a masterpiece of studied ambiguity: "Approving of benevolence or generosity results from our natural sympathetic propensity to feel certain sentiments of approval on the contemplation of acts of those [generous] kinds" (Stroud, 1977, p. 217).

In spite of Kemp Smith's close and indeed debate defining reading of the texts, Hume is more consistent than he seems to be. What all authors, including Kemp Smith, must remember is that Hume does not require textual evidence to develop and evolve his point of view. Sympathy in the narrower sense of a mechanism of psychology is not necessarily the basis of morality. It is the basis for experiencing what the other person is going through — the imaginative conversion of idea to idea and then to impression. What the person then does with the experience of the other person's suffering, etc. is based on the qualities of his or her own temperament, upbringing, and developed self. Hume's drawing back from his initial definition of the self — strictly speaking, personal identity — as a commonwealth of abilities, dispositions, and characters — hampered him in this regard (Hume, 1739/1973, p. 261).

Such an impasse did not need to have been the case. Though Hume famously goes in search of an idea or impression of the self and finds none, he might have tried harder. A strong candidate for such a key impression is the attribute of being *mine*, belonging to me, or more elegantly stated "mineness." What my experiences share are precisely that they are experienced as mine. It is a bold statement of the obvious — hidden in plain view — that all my experiences are mine, and, in Humean terms, the impression of mineness participates in every experience, even if only upon reflection. While every idea requires a corresponding impression, the ideas of space and time arise not from any particular impression but from the "manner" in which perceptions are delivered. As Annette Baier writes regarding "mine": "Perhaps they also come, for each person, in a personal manner, as mine not yours" (Baier, 2013, p. 51). The idea of the self is the manner of presentation of my personal identity as applied to my impression. However, even if Hume had resisted the skeptical debunking of the self, because he wanted to undermine ideas about the religious immortality of the soul, he might well have preferred to evolve the idea of sympathy into that of benevolence. An emergent distinction of sympathy in the narrow sense of a psychological mechanism might

well have been developed into a full unfolding of human and humane qualities, which are welcome in a flourishing community of benevolent fellow travelers on the road of life based on the underlying associationist notion of sympathy. This would lead to a full rich distinction of “extensive sympathy”, including aspects of what we today call a multidimensional process of “empathy”. But instead, Hume chose to narrow the foundation to “benevolence”, which operates as a particular sentiment and is synonymous with “compassion” and “altruism”.

The minimal essential constituents of the unified multidimensional definition of empathy include: receptivity (“openness”) to the communicability of the affect of others whether in face-to-face encounter or as human imagination artifacts (“empathic receptivity”), the paradigm case of which is vicarious experience; understanding of the other individual in which he/she is grasped in relatedness as a possibility — of choosing, making commitments, and implementing them (“empathic understanding”) in which the aforementioned possibility is implemented — this aspect will be treated lightly due to limitations of space; interpretation of the other person that identifies patterns of adaptation and templates of survival from first-, second-, and third-person perspectives (“empathic interpretation”) by means of the psychological mechanisms of a transient identification, with the target of empathy and a splitting into a participating and observing sector, resulting in the general view of an general observer; and articulation in optimal responsiveness in behavior and speech, including speech acts of this receptivity, understanding and interpretation, including the form of speech known as listening that enables the other to appreciate that he or she has been the beneficiary of empathy (“empathic listening”). Although admittedly complex, the approach of a multidimensional definition of empathy clarifies many of the disagreements in the literature, which are differences in emphasis, grasping a different part of the whole and misleadingly making it into the totality.

### Sympathy as Receptivity to Affects

What both Hume’s sympathetic individual and the aesthetic one share in common is a capacity for fine feeling distinctions (sensations and affects). Of course, the name for this in aesthetics (the theory of beauty) is “delicacy of taste”. “Taste” is the capac-

ity for judging the beauty of something by means of the feelings aroused by the object. A brief note on terminology is required since, for Hume, “delicacy” is an 18<sup>th</sup> century term for the ability to make “fine-grained distinctions.”

Contemporary science has engaged most energetically with mirror neurons, and that is well worth doing (Agosta, 2010; Decety, 2012). Although Hume does not have an implementation mechanism for sympathy that exists at the level of neurons, in a rightly celebrated passage, Hume appreciates that “the minds of men are mirrors to one another” and that emotions are “reflected” back and forth. Indeed, it does not matter if mirror neurons are a neurological fiction, existing only in monkeys and not in human beings. Given human relatedness, there is a regression to the substrate that there must be an implementation mechanism to account for the experiences that we do in fact have in emotional contagion, contagious laughter, motor mimicry, and subtle forms of imitation of bodily gestures, which characterize our conversations and interactions. By “sympathy”, Hume does not initially mean the particular sentiment (emotion) of pity or compassion or benevolence but rather the function of communicating affect in general. Sympathy reverses the understanding operation, which converts impressions of sensation into ideas. In such a case, the operation is in the other direction — from idea to impression. It arouses ideas in the recipient that are transformed into impressions — though this time impressions of reflection — through the influence of ideas. Thus, the operation of sympathy:

‘Tis indeed evident, that when we sympathize with the passions and sentiments of others, these movements appear at first in our mind as mere ideas, and are conceiv’d to belong to another person, as we conceive any other matter of fact. ‘Tis also evident, that the ideas of the affections of others are converted into the very impressions they represent, and that the passions arise in conformity to the images we form of them (Hume, 1739/1973, pp. 319-320).

For example, another individual expresses anger or displeasure. Speaking rhetorically in the

first person for clarity, I witness the other individual's expression of anger. I take up this sentiment ("emotion") as an idea in my mind stimulated by the expression of other's feeling, which is then converted into an impression of the same within me. The other's emotion is expressed and, through sympathy, is apprehended as an idea, which, in turn, is converted into an impression of my own. Thus, sympathy reverses the understanding operation, which transforms impressions of sensation into ideas. Sympathy arouses impressions through the influence of ideas. The functional basis of this sympathetic conversion will turn out to be the imagination. Thus, sympathy is not to be mistaken with some particular affect such as pity or compassion, but it is rigorously defined by Hume as "the conversion of an idea into an impression by the force of imagination" (Hume, 1739/1973, p. 427). The other's anger is expressed and is apprehended sympathetically as an idea, which is communicated to me, and, in turn, through the sympathetic work of the imagination, arouses a corresponding impression of my own. This is an impression of reflection that is fainter and calmer than the initial one (or impression) of anger. I thus experience what may be variously described as a trace affect, a counterpart feeling, or a vicarious experience — of anger.

Another paradigm example of the sympathy mechanism is found in the theatre. The experience allows for a kind of emotional contagion as when laughter contagiously spreads through the audience, but it is not limited to it:

A man who enters the theatre, is immediately struck with the view of so great a multitude, participating of one common amusement; and experiences, from their very aspect, a superior sensibility or disposition of being affected with every sentiment, which he shares with his fellow-creatures (Hume, 1751/1968, p. 49).

Each individual also has a "vicarious experience" of the emotions of the "several personages of the drama" — the actors — on the stage:

Every movement of the theatre, by a skillful poet, is communicated, as it were by magic, to the spectators; who weep, tremble, resent, rejoice, and are inflamed

with all the variety of passions, which actuate the several personages of the drama (Hume, 1751/1968, p. 49).

"Magic" is the conversion of idea to idea and idea to impression in a process that happens beneath the threshold of awareness. Every "movement [...] is communicated" by means of sympathy. The result is a vicarious experience — of the experience of the other. The "vicarious" in such experience is what one goes through in the theatre, in a film, or in engaging with a novel:

A spectator of a tragedy passes thro' a long train of grief, terror, indignation, and other affections, which the poet represents in the persons he introduces [...]. The spectator must sympathize with all these changes [...] Unless, therefore, it be asserted, that every distinct passion is communicated by a distinct original quality, and is not derived from the general principle of sympathy above-explained, it must be allowed that all of them arise from that principle [of sympathy] (Hume, 1739/1973, p. 369).

Hume's language of more or less "liveliness and vivacity" of impressions and ideas is well suited to clarifying the way vicarious experiences provide feelings that are attenuated, diluted, as it were watered-down. Sympathy provides a trace affect of the other's experience, a sample of the other's experience, and a vicarious experience of the other's experience. A "vicar" is a person who represents the community or the bishop and "vicarious" is a representational form of experience. Sympathy filters out the overwhelming presence of a totality of a tidal wave of affect, emotion, or (mostly negative) feeling. Yes, the sympathizer is open to the negative experience that the other individual in the drama is enduring, but as a trace sample, more of a Humean idea than an impression, not the entire bottomless sink of suffering. Yes, one suffers, but, unconventional as it may sound, only a little bit.

In the following passage, the communication of affects ("affections") is not accompanied by the concept of the other, i.e. by an awareness that the other is the source of the affect. The example falls back into emotional contagion. One is overtaken by affects as if

they were one's own, without an awareness that one is literally at the effect of the emotions of the others around me. Otherwise, we have an example of what one would also call a "vicarious experience", in which one recognizes that the cause of my emotion is another's experience or an imaginative recreation of the other's experience (say in a theatrical performance). Again the evidence is gathered by Hume:

A cheerful countenance infuses a sensible complacency and serenity into my mind; as an angry or sorrowful one throws a sudden damp upon me. Hatred, resentment, esteem, love, courage, mirth and melancholy; all these passions I feel more from communication than from my own natural temper and disposition (Hume, 1739/1973, pp. 316-317).

So close and intimate is the correspondence of human souls that no sooner any person approaches me, than he diffuses on me all his opinions, and draws along my judgment in a greater or less degree. And tho', on many occasions, my sympathy with him goes not so far as entirely to change my sentiments and way of thinking; yet it seldom is so weak as not to disturb the easy course of my thought (Hume, 1739/1973, p. 592).

Here, we have examples of emotional contagion and power of suggestion. In these cases, the only thing that happens is that a representation (idea or impression) of the other's feeling is aroused in the subject. The specific mechanism is not relevant to this point. However, in the case of sympathy, in the rigorous sense, two representations are conjoined; first, a representation of the other's feeling — i.e. a vicarious experience of what the other goes through — and, second, an awareness (a representation) that the other's feeling is the source of one's own.

This is the crucial difference between sympathy and emotional contagion in Hume: sympathy requires a double representation. What the other person feels is represented in a vicarious feeling, which is what sympathy shares with emotional contagion. Second, sympathy in the full sense used in this passage requires a representation of the other as the source of the first representation, "conceived

to belong to the other person" (Hume, 1739/1973, pp. 319-320), the latter being what is missing in the instance of emotional contagion. It is the emergence of the "other" in the context of receptivity to the impressions of the other subject that requires the transition from receptivity to understanding.

### Sympathy as an Interpretation of the Other

Hume has now established sympathy as the glue that affectively binds others to oneself and, by implication, a community of ethical individuals together. However, he finds that he is at risk of having undercut morality by giving to sympathy such a central role in creating community. Hume decides that he needs to marshal "general points of view" — a common point of view — from which to interpret the situation being assessed morally. How so? Experience shows that sympathy is diminished by distance of time and proximity and relatedness ("acquaintance"). We are much less affected by the pleasures and pains of those at a great distance than by those in our immediate physical vicinity or (say) close family relations. Therefore, an earthquake in China creates less sympathetic distress in me than one in Los Angeles (in my own country), even if I am perfectly safe in either case. A modern speaker would likely say "empathic distress." But, according to Hume, my moral approbation of (and obligations to) those at a great distance from me are no less strong than to those close at hand.

We sympathize more with people contiguous to us than with the ones remote from us; with our acquaintance than with strangers; with our countrymen than with foreigners. But notwithstanding this variation in our sympathy, we give the same approbation to the same moral qualities in *China* as in *England* (Hume, 1739/1973, pp. 580-581).

Is this then a counterexample to the possibility of founding a morality of sympathy? Is this a contradiction? Hume provides two answers, which are perhaps clues that he is a tad uncertain.

Firstly, Hume rejects the counterexample as incomplete. The variability of an individual's sympathy and the invariability of the moral esteem are reconciled by a general observer. It is not just any old, average Joe who describes and interprets by means of a sympathetic openness to the earthquake in China. It is not the bias of the first person or the intimacy



of the second one in a relationship of partiality. It is a third person point of view. It is a steady, general, common point of view that observes impersonally, describes, interprets, and opens the way to an experience of approbation or disapproval.

In order, therefore, to prevent those continual *contradictions*, and arrive at a more *stable* judgment of things, we fix on some *steady* and *general* points of view; and always, in our thoughts, place ourselves in them, whatever may be our present situation (Hume, 1739/1973, pp. 581-582).

Thus, to take a general review of the present hypothesis:

Every quality of the mind is denominated virtuous, which gives pleasure by the mere survey [...] 'Tis impossible men could ever agree in their sentiments and judgments, unless they chose some common point of view, from which they might survey their object, and which might cause it to appear the same to all of them (Hume, 1739/1973, pp. 590-591).

Having progressed from sympathetic resonance through sympathetic possibilities of conduct, Hume interprets sympathy by setting up a “general point of view” — an ideal observer — which, however, is also a sympathetic one. Of course, sympathy is otherwise unrelated to the disinterestedness of being a distant observer. The general observer and the sympathetic one are complementary at best, and possibly even contrary under one possible interpretation: being sympathetic reduces distance between individuals; being a general observer creates distance. These are not necessarily contradictory, since sympathetic *reduction* of distance is not inevitably the *elimination* of distance. However, if the distance were to be eliminated, the contradiction looms large between the general spectator, synonymously referred to as a “common point of view,” and a sympathetic observer of whatever is occurring. In either case, there is a tension here between the sympathetic and general observer — Hume considers this a single individual — inclining in opposite directions. Thus, he may have felt that his argument required additional support.

Let us analyze three possible ways of solving the tension between the general observer and sympathy as the basis for moral approbation and disapproval. The first is due to Stephen Darwall's reading of Hume

as going beyond moral sentiment (at least implicitly) to rule regulation in accounting for such artificial virtues as justice and related convention-based virtues like adhering to contracts. Hume says that the motivation to justice is produced through sympathy in observing the beneficial results of justice (Darwall, 1995, pp. 314-315). Indeed, he expresses what would become a very Kantian approach, though whether he does so consistently is an issue: “[W]e have no real or universal motive for observing the laws of equity but the very equity and merit of that observance.” And: “'Tis evident we have not motive leading us to the performance of promises, distinct from a sense of duty. If we thought, that promises had no moral obligation, we never shou'd feel any inclination to observe them” (Hume as cited in Darwall, 1995, p. 302).

I agree with Darwall's general conclusion that Hume points towards the result that a virtue such as justice requires a rule-based obligation, without explicitly embracing it, going beyond empirical naturalism to account for justice. Through Darwall's argumentative force, subtlety, and mastery of details, both sympathy and the general observer are undercut, resulting in a Hume that reads much like Kant. This is ultimately not Hume's point of view, though he envisions and anticipates Kant. Hume is not a closet Kantian. Not even close. The thesis of this article is that, in the final analysis, sympathy is a source of information about the experience of the other individual, not a source of morality. Hume's commitment is to both of these, especially the latter, and he is constrained to evolve “sympathy” in the direction of “compassion” and “benevolence” to maintain his program. Darwall does not follow him there, and, for that matter, neither do I.

The second approach to reconciling the tension between a sympathetic observer approving or disapproving the moral qualities of an individual in action and an general spectator doing the same is not a rule, but a kind of meta-rule conditioning the respective forms of the two approaches and constraining their convergences. The ability to take the point of view of another individual — to transpose oneself from a first person to a second person perspective — is fundamental to both the sympathetic and the general spectator. The latter is obvious, a matter of definition, the former less so. However, the key is the inclusion by Hume in his initial definition of sympathy of a double representation, especially as the source of a passion or sentiment “conceived to belong to another person”

(Hume, 1739/1973, pp. 319-320). The imagination is not only responsible for converting an idea into an impression, as in the above-cited quote, but also for transposing perspectives. Or is it? There is no additional explanation on the part of Hume, and one may invoke diverse mechanisms such as metaphorical identification or a false belief test in the context of a theory of mind to backstop the operation in terms of a function, not further analyzable. Identifying oneself with another individual in a vicarious experience is a special case of identification.<sup>2</sup>

The next approach is a reconstruction of the general spectator into the sympathetic one through the idea of “disinterest.” This key term means lacking a “conflict of interest,” not unsympathetic in the sense of inhumanly cold-hearted. The general spectator has to be sympathetic, not in the sense of benevolence (which “sympathy” has come to mean in part thanks to Hume’s usage), but in the meaning of openness to the communicability of affect. Appreciating what the other is feeling is a useful, though not always decisive data point, in evaluating the moral qualities of the target of the approbation judgment. It makes a difference in contemplating the moral worth of someone making a charitable gift whether it is done with the feeling of pleasure in being better than the poor wretches, who are its target, or with a trace feeling of the suffering the other individual is experiencing that one’s gift might ameliorate it. What the other is experiencing is useful input to the process of moral assessment of the character quality of the individual in question. As sympathy is enlarged beyond the narrow scope of one’s family and friends, it gives way to benevolence, an interest in the well-being of all mankind, as the basis of morality, while “sympathy” as a term itself falls back to the emotional contagion.

### Sympathy as Benevolent (optimal) Responsiveness

The debate goes on. On the one side, we have C. Daniel Batson (2012) with the empathy-altruism hypothesis. This basically means that empathy is essentially pro-social and, all other things being equal, tends to motivate altruistic behavior. Although all the details are different, Michael Slote (2007) elaborates

an ethics of care based on empathy along the same lines. On the other side, we have Heinz Kohut (1971) who maintained that the scientific use of empathy was indifferent to an active response to the other. Kohut’s famous example was the way that the Nazis attached sirens to their Stuka dive bombers the better to terrify the innocent civilians they were bombing. This was actually based on an empathic moment, albeit a distorted one, to get inside the heads of the victims in an uncanny way and further increase their distress.

Simon Baron-Cohen (1995) cites diseases of empathy, such as autism and criminality based on psychopathy, as further evidence of the independence of morality and empathy. Under this interpretation, empathy such as that envisioned by Kohut would entail an optimal response different than benevolence. The neutrality and anonymity of the psychotherapist are designed to allow the patient’s autonomy to grow rather than be taken away as the would-be helper jumps in and “solves” the problem. The patient needs to learn how to fish, not be given a fish. The gracious and generous listening of the friend without giving advice would indeed be pro-social, but not altruistic. The potential for negativity — the misuse of empathy to diabolically increase suffering — would always still be present.

Ultimately, Hume lines up with Batson regarding sympathy as pro-social, but not without engaging in many dynamic intellectual gymnastics. Whether we are aware of it or not, many of these gymnastics still inform our contemporary research and debates today. How so?

Without perhaps entirely appreciating the consequences for his use of “sympathy”, Hume starts transforming the idea in the direction of “benevolence,” the latter being specific optimal responsiveness that interests us in the good of mankind: “‘Tis true, when the cause is compleat, and a good disposition is attended with good fortune, which renders it really beneficial to society, it gives a stronger pleasure to the spectator, and is attended with a more lively sympathy” (Hume, 1739/1973, p. 585).

Virtue in rags is still virtue, as Hume famously notes, and sympathy interests us in the good of all mankind (“society”) (Hume, 1739/1973, p. 584), including communities distant from us in location or time. In answering the objection that “good intentions are not good enough for morality”, Hume argues back in so many words that good intentions are indeed good enough, granted that good intentions plus good consequences (results) are even better. However, “sympathy” has now taken on the content

<sup>2</sup> Even if a reader did not see the connection with Aristotle, I learned much from it thanks to Ted Cohen (1973, 2008). Metaphor is a talent, which, if you do not have an innate ability, is hard if not impossible to develop. In effect, Aristotle considered that you must be born with it.

of benevolence, i.e. an interest in the well being of mankind. By the time Hume's *Enquiry into the Principles of Morals* is published in 1751, "sympathy" had been downgraded to the power of suggestion and nothing more; and the basis of morality is shifted to such sentiments as benevolence that display qualities useful and agreeable to oneself and others.

In the following passage in *Treatise*, we witness Hume's migration of the meaning of "sympathy" from a communicability of affect, which, as noted, includes the concept of the other that aligns with the modern idea of "empathic understanding," towards a narrower, but not exclusive, sense of emotional contagion. Within the context of the *Treatise*, it is consistent of Hume to build a full-blown sense of sympathy out of the contagiousness of the passions by adding the idea of the other to the communicability of affect. It is just that in subsequent publications, in particular the *Enquiry* (1751), contagiousness of the passions is all that will remain of sympathy:

'Tis remarkable, that nothing touches a man of humanity more than any instance of extraordinary delicacy in love or friendship, where a person is attentive to the smallest concerns of his friend [...] The passions are so *contagious*, that they pass with the greatest facility from one person to another, and produce correspondent movements in all human breast. Where friendship appears in very signal instances, my hart catches the same passion, and is warmed by those warm sentiments, that display themselves me (Hume, 1739/1973, pp. 604-605).

When put in context, this points to a remarkable development in Hume's thinking: his displacing of sympathy from the center to the periphery of his account of moral judgments (approbation and disapproval) is complimented by the contrary movement of taste from the periphery to the center. The social advantages of sympathy in forming human relationships — friendship, enjoyment of the "characters of men," fellow-feeling, and sensitivity to how one's actions have an impact on others — are shifted elsewhere, amazingly enough, in the direction of the aesthetic sense of taste.

By 1741, the abilities that make men more sociable in the sense of being able to make endur-

ing friendships come under "delicacy of taste", while most of the disadvantages of increased sensitivity (associated with being easily upset, irritable, choleric) come under "delicacy of passion". No separate analysis of "delicacy of sympathy" is made an explicit theme by Hume. As we shall see, there is one parenthetical reference to a "delicate sympathy", in 1739. But by 1741 no separate reference occurs. The obvious question, using today's language is "what are these "delicacies" if not an enhanced capacity for sympathy in the sense of "empathy", access to the sentiments of the other individual? It is an excess of empathy that results in irritability and over-sensitivity. The advantages of empathy, such as being an attentive friend, having a sense of humor, and being entertaining company at a party are attributed to delicacy of taste.

Hume juxtaposes "taste" in the aesthetic sense with moral qualities. In the *Treatise*, he wrote: "The approbation of moral qualities [...] proceeds entirely from a *moral taste*, and from certain sentiments of pleasure or disgust, which arise upon the contemplation and view of particular qualities or characters" (Hume, 1739/1973, pp. 581-582). Again, consider Hume's discussion of "virtue in rags" and how sympathy is a source of our esteem for virtue. The contemporary reader is amazed suddenly to be reading about the esteem shown beautiful houses and the handsome physical qualities of a strong man (Hume, 1739/1973, pp. 584-585) in what seemed to be sustained argument about moral worth. Where did this material about beauty come from? In some second thoughts documented in a manuscript amendment to the *Treatise's* original edition, Hume asserts that sympathy is too weak to control the passions but has enough power to influence our taste (Hume as cited in Darwall, 1995, p. 305). This switch is also explainable by the strong analogy Hume finds between our sentiments of approval in the cases of virtuous action and beautiful artifacts. But not all of it, since Hume explicitly writes:

Thus the distinct boundaries and offices of reason and of *taste* are easily ascertained. The former conveys the knowledge of truth and falsehood; the latter give the sentiment of beauty and deformity, *vice* and *virtue* (Hume, 1751/1968, p. 112).

Thus, Hume is engaging in what we might describe a journey back from morality to its infrastructure in taste. By 1751, “sympathy” has been reduced in Hume’s work to “natural sympathy,” which overlaps substantially with what we would today call the power of suggestion: “others enter into the same humor and catch the sentiment, by a contagion or natural sympathy” (Hume, 1751/1968, p. 74). The merit of benevolence and its utility in promoting the good of mankind through attributes agreeable and useful to oneself and others looms large in founding morality (e.g., Hume, 1751/1968, p. 241).

Hume explicitly mentions that the method of his experiments is to focus on the “cautious observation of human life [...] [and] men’s behavior in company, in affairs, and in their pleasures” (Hume, 1739/1973, p. 19). To be sure, he does just that and more. He engages in detail with the ideas and impressions to be found in his own awareness and consciousness. He is introspective. In the course of elaborating the distinctions in human nature and morals, Hume made extensive use of introspection that is a source of both strength and weakness in his philosophizing. Of course, a major limitation was his implicit belief that introspection could see “all the way down” in the context of his Cartesian consciousness. Hume had no idea of mirror neurons, or any neurons for that matter. One might argue that is to Hume’s credit or that, at least, it prevented him from being distracted. Still, in spite of this limitation, Hume makes advances in the deployment of introspection in controlled and regulated ways, which are equal to any phenomenologist and have not been surpassed even nowadays. That is especially so in the perception of art and taste. What is the point? These lessons are easily transferable to the multidimensional process of empathy as we use the word today (previously noted).

The argument is that much of the work done by what we today call “empathic receptivity” is captured by Hume as “delicacy of taste”. This rebounds in our direction today and, if we follow up the hint, breaks new ground in the analysis of empathy. It goes behind the scenes to explain the close connection between the appreciation of beauty and the enhancement of empathy. This is so even if, as indicated, in a close reading of Hume, there is no function of sympathy in relation to the violent passions parallel to that of taste in the calm passions. Furthermore, Hume leaves a logical place for a kind of “delicacy of sympathy [i.e., empathic re-

ceptivity]” corresponding to “delicacy of taste”, which enables us to discriminate feelings in others that less reflective observers would overlook.

As indicated, Hume mentions “a delicate sympathy” one time (Hume, 1739/1973, pp. 576-577), and then asserts: “Thus it appears, that sympathy is a very powerful principle in human nature, that it has a great influence on our sense of beauty, and that it produces our sentiment of morals in all the artificial virtues” (Hume, 1739/1973, pp. 577-578). This sets the stage for what can be best described as a dynamic interplay between sympathy in social, including moral, relations, and taste in the experience of beauty. In the course of the interplay, sympathy starts out with the lead in 1739 and in the process of twirling back and forth gets spun off, leaving taste as the leader and, mixing the metaphor, at the foundation.

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**Corresponding address:**

Lou Agosta  
 5801 N, Sheridan Rd 8C – Chicago/IL – 60660  
 E-mail: LAgosta@Argosy.edu

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