

LORENZO GRECO

THE FORCE OF SYMPATHY IN THE ETHICS OF DAVID HUME

1. Upon reading through *A Treatise of Human Nature*, what is immediately manifest is that sympathy plays the leading role in Hume's enterprise of presenting a non-rationalist, sentimental-based comprehensive theory of human nature. The communal character of those belonging to the same nation¹, our «love of relations»², our «esteem for the rich and powerful»³, our feelings of compassion, pity, malice, and envy⁴; all these human phenomena are explained by Hume as the direct product of sympathy. If we human beings were not capable of sympathising with one another, our own mental condition would deteriorate⁵; without sympathy, we would not be able to voice our sense of beauty⁶. Most importantly, without sympathy we would not be capable of judging morally. Framed by Hume as a key principle, making the sentimental transmission among human beings intelligible, «sympathy is the chief source of moral distinctions»⁷, and guarantees a powerful philosophical device to account for a public and intersubjective ethics. It is on account of sympathy, in fact, that we are able to praise as virtues those qualities of character which are agreeable to ourselves or to others (and despise as vices those which are not)⁸, and also to approve of those artificial virtues of justice, fidelity to promises and allegiance to rulers, thanks to «*a sympathy with public interest*»⁹. There are strong reasons to believe that Hume never rejected sympathy as an essential pillar of his philosophical

¹ See T 2.1.11.2; SBN 316-317.

² T, 2.2.4.

³ T, 2.2.5.

⁴ T, T 2.2.7-8.

⁵ T, 2.2.5.15; SBN 363.

⁶ T, 3.3.6.1; SBN 618.

⁷ T, 3.3.6.1; SBN 618.

⁸ T, 3.3.1.30; SBN 591.

⁹ T, 3.2.2.24; SBN 499-500, italics in original, and 3.2.8.7; SBN 545-46.

system (even though scholars disagree on this issue), but upheld it in his later works as well¹⁰. What is more, Humean sympathy is still at the centre of the present-day moral debate, and is explicitly recognised in many contemporary versions of sentimentalism and of the ethics of care as the direct source for that notion of ‘empathy’ on which they are based¹¹. Nonetheless, this re-evaluation of Humean sympathy is in danger of producing unfortunate repercussions. There is a line of interpretation which sees Hume’s account of morality as having in itself the seeds of its own failure, precisely because it hinges upon the principle of sympathy. Far from guaranteeing any form of interconnection among people whatsoever, the very principle of sympathy would bind Hume to conceive individuals as inescapably independent and isolated from one another, thus disclosing the solipsistic essence of his phenomenalist perspective, and in turn the failure of his sentimentalist ethical project in all its evidence.

In what follows I shall discuss Hume’s principle of sympathy in the light of this criticism, and argue that it is widely off the mark. I shall begin by presenting a brief reconstruction of the theoretical passages which would purportedly prove the internal fallacy of Hume’s principle of sympathy. This fallacy, the argument goes, is due to Cartesian presuppositions internal to Hume’s empiricism, and becomes awkwardly apparent when sympathy is explained in inferential terms on the strength of an argument based on analogy. I intend to show that the argument from analogy is not the correct way to present the workings of sympathy, and that Hume’s text allows for an explanation of sympathy as a form of sentimental transmission between in-

¹⁰ See K. Abramson, *Sympathy and the Project of Hume’s Second Enquiry*, «Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie» LXXXIII (2000), pp. 45-80; A. C. Baier and A. Waldow, *A Conversation between Annette Baier and Anik Waldow about Hume’s Account of Sympathy*, «Hume Studies», XXXIV (2008), 1, pp. 61-87; N. Capaldi, *Hume’s Place in Moral Philosophy*, New York, Peter Lang, 1992, pp. 241-248; R. Debes, *Humanity, Sympathy, and the Puzzle of Hume’s Second Enquiry*, «British Journal for the History of Philosophy», XV (2007), pp. 27-57, and *Has Anything Changed? Hume’s Theory of Association and Sympathy After the Treatise*, «British Journal for the History of Philosophy», XV (2007), pp. 313-338; J. Taylor, *Hume on the Standard of Virtue*, «The Journal of Ethics», VI (2002), pp. 43-62, and *Hume’s Later Moral Philosophy*, in *The Cambridge Companion to Hume*, 2nd Edition, edited by D. F. Norton – J. Taylor, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009, pp. 311-340; R. Vitz, *Sympathy and Benevolence in Hume’s Moral Psychology*, «Journal of the History of Philosophy», XLII (2004), pp. 261-275.

¹¹ See M. Slote, *The Ethics of Care and Empathy*, London-New York, Routledge, 2007, and *Moral Sentimentalism*, Oxford-New York, Oxford University Press, 2010. See also J. C. Tronto, *Moral Boundaries. A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care*, London-New York, Routledge, 1993.

dividuals which operates in a direct and unmediated way. I maintain, that is, that Hume successfully accounted for the sentimental exchange among individual human beings by way of sympathy, and that this exchange provides the shared context within which a communal morality may be established and developed. As a close to this main contention, I shall finally conclude by stressing the fundamental role played by sympathy within Hume's philosophy in clarifying to ourselves the passions we have. This allows us to contribute to the definition of our own self from a sentimental perspective via the passions of pride and humility, and to provide the basis for Hume's sentiment-based ethical individualism.

2. The attack on Humean sympathy has its theoretical roots in Thomas Reid's *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense*¹², and, through that exegesis which goes under the name of 'Reid-Beattie Interpretation'¹³, has been preserved up to the 20th century. From the point of view of the 'Reid-Beattie Interpretation' the importance of Hume's philosophy is that of having brought Empiricism to its extreme consequences, leading it to inevitable sceptical conclusions. Clearly exposed by T. H. Green in his *General Introduction* to the works of Hume¹⁴, this line of thought has been embraced, more or less explicitly and self-consciously, by a variety of interpreters. The result is that the Humean Empirical stance has been considered in modern times as a form of Phenomenalism¹⁵ opening up, on the one hand,

¹² See T. Reid, *An Inquiry into the Human Mind, On the Principles of Common Sense* [1764], edited by D. R. Brookes, University Park, Pennsylvania, The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997.

¹³ See N. Kemp Smith, *The Philosophy of David Hume. A Critical Study of Its Origins and Central Doctrines*, London, Macmillan, 1949, pp. 3 ff. On the 'Reid-Beattie interpretation', see G. Bonino, *T. H. Green e il mito dell'empirismo britannico*, Firenze, Leo S. Olschki, 2003, chs. 1 and 6, and *La leggenda storiografica di Hume*, «Rivista di filosofia», LXXXVII (1996), pp. 241-265. See also S. Bucchi, *Hume, i Mill e la «Reid-Beattie Interpretation»*, «Rivista di filosofia», LXXXIX (1998), pp. 139-154, and L. Turco, *Hume e le leggende storiografiche*, «Discipline filosofiche», VI (1996), pp. 261-282. For an examination of the continuity that the 'Reid-Beattie Interpretation' has had until nowadays, in particular concerning Hume's theory of the passions, see N. Capaldi, *Hume's Theory of the Passions*, in *David Hume. Critical Assessments*, edited by S. Tweyman, vol. IV, London-New York, Routledge, 1995, pp. 249-270.

¹⁴ T. H. Green, *General Introduction* [1874-75], in *The Philosophical Works of David Hume*, [1886] 4 vols., anastatic reprint, Aalen, Scientia Verlag, 1964.

¹⁵ See e. g. D. M. Armstrong, *Perception and the Physical World*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961; J. Laird, *Hume's Philosophy of Human Nature*, London, Methuen, 1932; H. H. Price, *Hume's Theory of External World*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1940; F. Zabehh, *Hume. Precursor of Modern Empiricism*, The Hague, Martinus Nijhoff, 1973².

to forms of solipsism¹⁶, and, on the other, to extreme versions of ethical emotivism¹⁷. Under the 'Reid-Beattie Interpretation' Hume shares a fundamental feature with all the exponents of the Empiricist tradition: that of being, willy-nilly, a follower of Descartes. That Cartesian philosophy influenced Hume's is hardly disputable¹⁸; nonetheless, some have remarked that this Cartesian heritage definitely amounts to far more than a plain influence¹⁹. Like Locke's and Berkeley's, and also Malebranche's, Hume's philosophy would indeed be nothing other than a variant of a common «Cartesian System»²⁰, the acceptance of which would imply a whole chain of consequences and eventu-

¹⁶ See e. g. A. J. Ayer, *One's Knowledge of Other Minds*, in *Ayer, Philosophical Essays*, London, Macmillan, 1954, pp. 191-214, and *The Problem of Knowledge*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1956; B. Russell, *Our Knowledge of the External World*, Chicago-London, The Open Court Publishing Company, 1914. For a comparative analysis of Humean Empiricism and modern Logical Empiricism, see D. Pears, *Hume's Empiricism and Modern Empiricism*, in *David Hume. A Symposium*, edited by D. Pears, London, Macmillan, 1963, pp. 11-30. Notice that Hume has been read under the light of the 'Reid-Beattie Interpretation' also by the exponents of a tradition that stands at the opposite from Neopositivism, represented by those who take the work of Wilfrid Sellars as one of their points of reference. See e. g. R. Rorty, *Should Hume Be Answered or Bypassed?*, in *Human Nature and Natural Knowledge. Essays Presented to Marjorie Grene*, edited by A. Donagan – A. N. Perovich, Jr. – M. V. Wedin, Dordrecht, D. Reidel, 1986, pp. 341-352.

¹⁷ For the relation between Hume and modern emotivism, see A. J. Ayer, *Hume*, Oxford-New York, Oxford University Press, 1980, ch. 5; R. Cohon, *Hume's Morality. Feeling and Fabrication*, Oxford-New York, Oxford University Press, 2008, pp. 97-98; M. Johnson, *Moral Imagination. Implications of Cognitive Science for Ethics*, Chicago-London, The University of Chicago Press, 1993, pp. 134-141; E. Lecaldano, *Hume e la nascita dell'etica contemporanea*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 1991, ch. 6, esp. pp. 252-253; J. O. Urmson, *The Emotive Theory of Ethics*, London, Hutchinson University Library, 1968, ch. 2.

¹⁸ See E. C. Mossner, *The Life of David Hume*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1980², ch. 8.

¹⁹ On the Cartesian interpretation of Hume, see e. g. A. Kenny, *Action, Emotion and Will*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963, ch. 1 and *Cartesian Privacy*, in *Wittgenstein. The Philosophical Investigations*, edited by G. Pitcher, London, Macmillan, 1968, pp. 352-370; P. Mercer, *Sympathy and Ethics. A Study of the Relationship Between Sympathy and Morality with Special Reference to Hume's Treatise*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1972, ch. 2; J. Passmore, *Hume's Intentions*, London, Duckworth, 1980³, pp. 13-14; D. Pears, *Hume's Recantation of His Theory of Personal Identity*, «Hume Studies», XXX (2004), pp. 257-264; T. Penelhum, *David Hume. An Introduction to His Philosophical System*, West Lafayette, Indiana, Purdue University Press, 1992, p. 23.

²⁰ Reid writes, «The system which is now generally received, with regard to the mind and its operations, derives not only its spirit from Des Cartes, but its fundamental principles; and after all the improvements made by Malebranche, Locke, Berkeley, and Hume, may still be called the Cartesian System: we shall therefore make some remarks upon its spirit and tendency in general, and upon its doctrine concerning ideas in particular». Reid, *An Inquiry into the Human Mind*, ch. 7, p. 208.

ally lead to solipsistic conclusions, when applied to the sentimental sphere as Hume describes it. As with the other British Empiricists, for Hume as well – so the story goes – all perceptions (of the external world rather than of our internal states, of original impressions rather than ideas) are equally, *qua* perceptions, mental states. As such, they are the only things we can know for sure, and about which we cannot be wrong. We may well be unsure that our perceptions have any correspondence with the external world, or we may have a perception which is in fact illusory (for example a hallucination or a vision), but in both cases we cannot deceive ourselves about the fact that we are having a perception; that is to say, we cannot have non-conscious perceptions. In turn, the nature of human knowledge is that of being knowledge only of mental contents, and its limits consist only of those elements which are present to the mind – a conviction which constitutes the core of what is commonly known as the ‘way of ideas’²¹. But once the ‘way of ideas’ is in place, the inevitable consequence is a «primacy of the private», whereby our perceptions consist in mental states (virtually mental images) which are internal and in principle accessible only by the person who has them²².

3. This line of thinking, when applied to what Hume says about passions, undermines both his sentimentalism, and the idea that morality can be based on sentimental grounds. Hume does, as a matter of fact, identify passions and emotions with perceptions, and these, as such, correspond to particular experiences, directly observable only by the person who feels them²³; patently, then, the human mind we experience appears to be only our own, not other people’s. Like Descartes, he has the problem of explaining how it is that we can go beyond our own mental representations and recognise others, not as bare bodies, but as sentimentally characterised persons²⁴. We are not able to know the mental states of other persons, and since we have no access to the contents of other minds, it would seem that we can never be sure that

²¹ On the ‘way of ideas’, with particular reference to Descartes and Reid, see E. Levi Mortera, *Reid, Descartes e la «way of Ideas»*, in *Dal cartesianismo all’illuminismo radicale*, edited by C. Borghero – C. Buccolini, Firenze, Le Lettere, 2010, pp. 103-125.

²² A. Flew, *Hume’s Philosophy of Belief*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1961, pp. 37. See also Flew, *Another Idea of Necessary Connection*, «Philosophy», LVII (1982), pp. 487-494 and *David Hume. Philosopher of Moral Science*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1986, pp. 12-37.

²³ See T 1.1.1.

²⁴ See A. E. Pitson, both *Sympathy and Other Selves*, «Hume Studies», XXII (1996), pp. 255-271, and *Hume’s Philosophy of the Self*, London-New York, Routledge, 2002, ch. 8. For a discussion of Pitson, see A. Waldow, *David Hume and the Problem of Other Minds*, London-New York, Continuum, 2009, pp. 73-79.

we have before us other human beings that have thoughts and sentiments, instead of empty shells, zombies or robots²⁵.

In a context of this kind, however, Hume nonetheless appears to deem it possible to conclude indirectly that these thoughts and sentiments exist, even though access to other states of mind is precluded²⁶. As the argument runs, having the experience of an emotion means recognising or perceiving an internal mental state to which only the person experiencing it has access; a person's behaviour, verbal or otherwise, is therefore to be regarded as the external symptom of an internal event. If this were true, an observer could then infer the existence of an emotion from its external effects. Thus, statements describing psychological states in the first person are accounts of introspective observations, whilst statements describing psychological states in the third person are products of inferences – they are result of an inductive argument whereby, moving from a person's deportment, one arrives at presuppositions concerning his or her corresponding internal mental states. The only possibility we have of recognising the mental states of others would seem to depend, then, on an argument by analogy²⁷, through which we are

²⁵ For a classical formulation of this problem in these terms, see N. Malcolm, *Problems of Mind. Descartes to Wittgenstein*, London, Allen and Unwin, 1972, ch. 1, secs. 6 to 8; and *Knowledge of Other Minds*, «Journal of Philosophy», LV (1958), pp. 969-978. For a more general analysis of the problem of other minds, see A. Avramides, *Other Minds*, London-New York, Routledge, 2001. See also B. Brewer, *Emotion and Other Minds*, and D. Hutto, *The World is Not enough: Shared Emotions and Other Minds*, both in *Understanding Emotions. Mind and Morals*, edited by P. Goldie, Aldershot-Burlington, Ashgate, 2002, pp. 23-36, 37-53; H. Pickard, *Emotions and the Problem of Other Minds*, in *Philosophy and the Emotions*, edited by A. Hatzimoysis, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003 (Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement, 52), pp. 87-104. On Hume's belief in other minds, see A. Waldow, *Hume's Belief in Other Minds*, «British Journal for the History of Philosophy», XVII (2009), 1, pp. 119-132, and Waldow, *David Hume and the Problem of Other Minds*.

²⁶ See Mercer, *Sympathy and Ethics*, ch. 2.

²⁷ Reid writes: «But the anatomist of the mind cannot have the same advantage. It is his own mind only that he can examine, with any degree of accuracy and distinctness. This is the only subject he can look into. He may, from outward signs, collect the operations of other minds; but these signs are for the most part ambiguous, and must be interpreted by what he perceives within himself». Reid, *An Inquiry into the Human Mind*, ch. 1, p. 13. One of the best examples of the argument by analogy is given by John Stuart Mill in his *An Examination of Sir William Hamilton's Philosophy*. See J. S. Mill, *Collected Works*, edited by J. M. Robson, vol. IX, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979, pp. 190-191. Note that Mill's interpretation of Hume is not all that far from the 'Reid-Beattie Interpretation'. In fact, according to Mill, Hume may be considered «the profoundest negative thinker on record». J. S. Mill, *Bentham*, in *Collected Works*, edited by J. M. Robson, vol. X, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985, p. 80. On the argument by analogy in Hume, see Pitson, *Sympathy and Other Selves*, and *Hume's Philosophy of the Self*, ch. 8.

authorised to ascribe mental states to others only on the basis of the analogy between their visible behaviour and what we ourselves feel when we are aware of having certain mental states. Since we behave in certain ways when we have particular mental states, by observing the same behaviour in others, we suppose that they too have the same mental states. In this way, based on the experience we have of our internal mental states and consequent external behaviour, we move on to inferring that other people are also individuals characterised by the same passions as ourselves.

Sympathy is adduced by Hume as the explanatory principle for how emotive communication is possible²⁸: a process consisting in the transformation of a lively idea into an impression. Whenever we witness the expression of another person's passion, emotion, or sentiment, this will present itself to our mind as a lively idea. When this idea is compared to the idea we have of ourselves, a new passion, emotion or sentiment is generated in us – one that corresponds to that of the person before us. In this way, Hume ostensibly says, human beings influence each other reciprocally, and are thus able to establish contact at the sentimental level. This emotive contagion²⁹ occurs in an involuntary and automatic manner, and is «an object of the plainest experience, and depends not on any hypothesis of philosophy»³⁰.

Still, given the Cartesian presuppositions mentioned above, sympathy can hardly accomplish the task it is assigned. In fact, if the argument by analogy were to hold, the supposed interpenetration of sentiments with the person before us would be merely illusory; we would never really come into contact with these sentiments, but only with the idea we form of them – that is to say, with a personal psychological state of our own. The transformation of the idea that we have of impressions experienced by others into impressions of our own could in no way correspond to our experiencing their discomfort or pleasure: it would rather be a matter of our reacting emotionally in a certain way. The case can be argued that this overall reading has nothing to do with the communication that Hume speaks of. To illustrate the problems this construal gives rise to, we might observe how, in the instance of a person being faced

²⁸ See T 2.1.11.

²⁹ T, 3.3.3.5; SBN 605.

³⁰ T, 2.1.11.8; SBN 319-320. In this sense, as many have underlined, sympathy is not in turn a passion, but rather a principle that explains how the passions can be communicated. See Lecaldano, *Hume e la nascita dell'etica contemporanea*, pp. 97-98; Mercer, *Sympathy and Ethics*, ch. 2; Pitson, *Sympathy and Other Selves*; B. Wand, *A Note on Sympathy in Hume's Moral Theory*, in *David Hume. Critical Assessments*, vol. IV, pp. 477-481. On the contrary, D. G. C. MacNabb, *David Hume. His Theory of Knowledge and Morality*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1966, pp. 166, maintains the opposite.

with the expression of anxiety on somebody else's part, this transformation would abolish the distinction between that which is being anxious and that which is experiencing sympathy for the person who is anxious. If sympathy were nothing but a cognitive operation by which we move from our own experience in order to infer the passions of others, then indeed we would never come out of ourselves. What we experience would only be private emotional responses that do not reflect the passions of others, but are merely provoked by them. All that the principle of sympathy would be capable of explaining is that human beings react mechanically to the expression of the passions in other human beings. If this were so, it would be right to say that sympathy is a mere contagion, but certainly not that «imaginative projection into the other's situation»³¹ which allows us to feel the sentiments of others in the first person; to become conscious, that is, of their condition, and therefore of their presence as persons. On this view, the mechanism elaborated to account for the fact that human beings are able to go beyond themselves in the end turns back on itself, functioning instead as a further proof of the substantial solitude in which Hume's sentimental individual is forced to remain, barely able to recognise the very thing that provides proof of his or her selfhood³².

4. Is this account of the functioning of sympathy correct, and does Hume really fail in his attempt to show how it is that human beings are capable of emotional communication? In order to answer these questions, a closer look at the mechanisms of Humean sympathy is in order. What immediately ought to give pause is the point in the *Treatise* at which Hume introduces the concept: namely, the part he devotes to the discussion of the passions of pride and humility³³. Among the causes of pride and humility, Hume reminds us, the most disparate can be recognised, and we give great importance to all of them; but if they were not sustained by the opinions of others little weight would be given to them. The discussion of sympathy arises precisely at the point at which sympathy, pride, and humility are seen to be closely linked, and from the examination of this conjuncture a different interpretation of sympathy from that presented above emerges.

«No quality of human nature», Hume says, «is more remarkable, both in itself and in its consequences, than that propensity we have to sympathize

³¹ G. J. Postema, «Cemented with Diseased Qualities»: *Sympathy and Comparison in Hume's Moral Psychology*, «Hume Studies», XXXI (2005), pp. 249-298, quotation p. 259.

³² Besides Mercer and Flew, see J. Harrison, *Hume's Moral Epistemology*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1976, pp. 105-110; Johnson, *Moral Imagination*, pp. 135-136; J. Neu, *Emotion, Thought and Therapy*, Berkeley-Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1977, pp. 46-53.

³³ See T 2.1.11.

with others, and to receive by communication their inclinations and sentiments, however different from, or even opposite to our own»³⁴. To see a cheerful face gives one a sense of serenity, while an angry or gloomy one will dampen one's spirits; and he goes on, «Hatred, resentment, esteem, love, courage, mirth and melancholy; all these passions I feel more from communication than from my own natural temper and disposition»³⁵. It has already been noted that sympathy is the medium through which the idea of another's affective experience is first communicated to us by way of its external signs in the behaviour and in the conversation of the other. This idea is therefore immediately converted into an impression, thus acquiring such a degree of strength and liveliness that it becomes the passion itself, and produces an emotion equal to that of the original³⁶. Hume's explanation of how this is possible is analogous to the double relation of impressions and ideas underlying the formation of the impressions of pride and humility, and of love and hate. The idea of another's emotion mutates into an emotion of our own – i.e., an idea mutates into an impression when it is brought into relation with «the idea, or rather impression of ourselves [that] is always intimately present with us»³⁷. Self-consciousness is so lively as to charge everything that comes into contact with it with a similar vivacity. This passage of liveliness, that transforms the idea into the corresponding impression, is ensured by the three relations of resemblance, contiguity and cause and effect.

What one has in sympathy, therefore, is the conversion of an idea into an impression that is brought about by the relation that the relevant objects have with that self that is always intimately present to ourselves. Now, it is true that Hume says that «by an inference from cause and effect, and by the observation of external signs, we are inform'd of the real existence of the object, which is resembling or contiguous»³⁸; and again at a later point, «No passion of another discovers itself immediately to the mind. We are only sensible of its causes or effects. From *these* we infer the passion: And consequently *these* give rise to our sympathy»³⁹. Nonetheless, this doesn't amount to his saying that the mechanism of sympathy functions on the basis of the argument by analogy. The fact that Hume explains the dynamic of sympathy by reference to the «communication» of the passions between one individual and another suggests that this consists, not so much in an operation in which

³⁴ T, 2.1.11.2; SBN 316.

³⁵ T, 2.1.11.3; SBN 317.

³⁶ *Ibidem*.

³⁷ T 2.1.11.4; SBN 317.

³⁸ T, 2.1.11.4; SBN 317-318.

³⁹ T, 3.3.1.7; SBN 576, italics in original.

we know the mental states of others on the grounds of our knowledge of our own personal mental states, as in a kind of sentimental transmission, that works in the same way as the motion from one object to another. Hume is clear on this:

The minds of all men are similar in their feelings and operations, nor can any one be actuated by any affection, of which all others are not, in some degree, susceptible. As in strings equally wound up, the motion of one communicates itself to the rest; so all the affections readily pass from one person to another, and beget corresponding movements in every human creature. When I see the *effects* of passion in the voice and gesture of any person, my mind immediately passes from these effects to their causes, and forms such a lively idea of the passion, as is presently converted into the passion itself. In like manner, when I perceive the *causes* of any emotion, my mind is convey'd to the effects, and is actuated with a like emotion⁴⁰.

Just as the chords of an instrument that, without being touched, vibrate in sympathy, repeating the movement of those that have been plucked, in the same way human beings echo, through sympathy, the sentimental expressions of those they relate to⁴¹.

5. In its fuller formulation, therefore, Hume speaks not of an explicit, conscious procedure whereby we derive the notion of other people's mental states from their visible behaviour; rather, he describes a response mechanism that is natural and inevitable, an effect of the make-up of human nature. The mechanism, thus, is fully instinctual and structured in such a way that individuals reciprocally interpenetrate each other's sentiments as they come into contact. Granted that Hume does mention inference, the phenomenology of sympathy doesn't appear to be the phenomenology of an inference. Nor does sympathy correspond to a rationalisation in the form of a conscious grasp of connecting inference propositions; and so little has the phenomenon of sympathy to do for Hume with explicit conscious processes that it is even shared with other animals⁴². Those who embrace a 'Cartesian' interpretation

⁴⁰ T, 3.3.1.7; SBN 575-576, italics in original.

⁴¹ On the origin of the term 'sympathy' as vibration or resonance, that is, sympathy with, not sympathy for, see I. Hacking, *On Sympathy: With Other Creatures*, «Tijdschrift voor Filosofie», LXIII, (2001), pp. 685-717.

⁴² See T 2.2.12.5-6; SBN 398. On similarities in Hume between animal and human nature, see A. C. Baier, *Acting in Character*, in Baier, *Death and Character. Further Reflections on Hume*, Cambridge, Mass.-London, Harvard University Press, 2008, pp. 3-21, esp. p. 13; T. L. Beauchamp, *Hume on the Nonhuman Animal*, «Journal of Medicine and Philosophy», XXIV (1999), pp. 322-335. On the capacity to extend sympathy to non-human animals, see D. Boyle, *Hume on Animal Reason*, «Hume Studies», XXIX (2003), pp. 3-28; Pitson, *Hume's*

of Hume maintain that his explanation of sympathy is incorrect because we lack any direct access to that core of passions in other individuals, knowledge of which is therefore precluded. Only such access would allow us, on their view, to conceive of others as fellow human beings. However, in the Humean system, it is not the business of sympathy to explain how it is that we indirectly come know the content of other minds, through the observation of the visible behaviour of others. On the contrary, the role of sympathy is to account for that characteristic of human nature through which we are able to recognise each other directly as similar. In this light what Hume says about the substantial resemblance of human beings acquires meaning:

Now 'tis obvious, that nature has preserv'd a great resemblance among all human creatures, and that we never remark any passion or principle in others, of which, in some degree or other, we may not find a parallel in ourselves. The case is the same with the fabric of the mind, as with that of the body. However the parts may differ in shape or size, their structure and composition are in general the same. There is a very remarkable resemblance, which preserves itself amidst all their variety; and this resemblance must very much contribute to make us enter into the sentiments of others, and embrace them with facility and pleasure⁴³.

This background resemblance is a «fact» which is automatically felt by human beings⁴⁴, as if it were «infused over our minds»⁴⁵. It imposes itself without being the result of any conscious reasoning. Far from consisting in a transition from what is present in us to the attribution of mental states to others, Humean sympathy shows itself to be an explanatory instrument that owes its theoretical success to the efficacy with which it accounts for the fact that human beings are sensitive, at a purely sentimental level, to the emotions of others.

When Hume's terminology resembles the language of the 'way of ideas', this is mainly due to his Newtonian aspiration of presenting a theory of human nature founded on as few principles as possible, and in which both the phenomena of the understanding and those of the passions have to be explained by means of a structural analogy between the workings of belief and of sympathy⁴⁶. Nonetheless, not only this desire for theoretical simplicity has not to be confused with an endorsement on Hume's behalf of the 'way

Philosophy of the Self, ch. 7 and *The Nature of Human Animals*, «Hume Studies», XIX (1993), pp. 301-316.

⁴³ T 2.1.11.5; SBN 318.

⁴⁴ See R. Hardin, *David Hume. Moral and Political Theorist*, Oxford-New York, Oxford University Press, 2007, p. 38.

⁴⁵ Postema, "Cemented with Diseased Qualities", pp. 160-162.

⁴⁶ See T 2.1.11.8; SBN 319.

of ideas' itself, but it also appears to be a subsidiary element in the *Treatise*, which will eventually be abandoned in the *Enquiries*⁴⁷.

Sympathy may well become an object of analysis for philosophers, who seek an order among disparate, succeeding «views and reflections»⁴⁸; all the same, though, it is a plain fact that sympathy is immediately experienced by the subject of such views and reflections, and that no analogy with what that subject feels is necessary⁴⁹. As in causality

when by any clear experiment we have discover'd the causes or effects of any phaenomenon, we immediately extend our observation to every phaenomenon of the same kind, without waiting for that constant repetition, from which the first idea of this relation is deriv'd⁵⁰

so sympathy functions immediately from the evidence we have of other people's sentiments, prior to any justification we may give of its working. This does not mean that inferences as to the characters of persons cannot be made on the grounds of their manifest behaviour. This can certainly occur. If we wish to justify why it is that, when a certain behaviour presents itself in someone, we are ready to declare that this is the expression of a particular character trait, we will base our judgement on inference from the behaviour to the character. But the point here is that sympathy does not seem to function in this way, not in the first instance. Sympathy is not a form of argumentation, but a psychological principle that makes explicit a distinctive capacity of human beings to identify with the conditions of our fellow humans when they express certain emotions. This capacity takes the form of an exercise of the imagination that, in the common sentimental nature of the human species, is like a coiled spring that never fails to spring open⁵¹.

⁴⁷ On this point, see Lecaldano, *Hume e la nascita dell'etica contemporanea*, chs., 1.4 and 6.5.

⁴⁸ T 2.1.11.3; SBN 317.

⁴⁹ On the absence of analogy in Hume's sympathy, see Baier and Waldow, *A Conversation between Annette Baier and Anik Waldow about Hume's Account of Sympathy*, esp. pp. 70-71. See also Hardin, *David Hume. Moral and Political Theorist*, pp. 34 ff., where Humean sympathy is described as a direct and nonverbal communication of sentiments. Postema, "Cemented with Diseased Qualities", pp. 258-259 maintains that the model of associative mechanism of sympathy presented by Hume «is an analytical reconstruction, rather than a phenomenological description, of the process by which we sympathize with another»; nonetheless, from a phenomenological point of view these various passages result instantaneous, automatic and involuntary.

⁵⁰ T 1.3.15.6; SBN 173-174.

⁵¹ See, for example, what Hume has to say on the qualities of mind and body in EPM 7.2; SBN 250-251 and 8.14; SBN 267. According to M. J. Ferreira, *Hume and Imagination: Sympathy and the Other*, «International Philosophy Quarterly», XXXIV (1994), pp. 39-57, sympa-

If all this is true, then ascribing to Hume a problem concerning the existence of other minds is completely inappropriate. There simply is no ‘problem of other minds’ in Hume⁵². The belief in other minds is a natural one which is taken for granted from the very beginning, and its origin has to be traced back to the primitive experience of the sympathetic contagion. This belief doesn’t provide us with a further rational belief in other people’s minds; rather, it makes us experience other people’s minds as in tune with our own. In this sense, the experience of contagion and the belief in other minds is causal, not inferential, and we acknowledge this resemblance among human beings well before we are able to conceptualise it⁵³.

6. For Hume, therefore, sympathy is not a defective instrument, revealing the solipsism to which the individual is destined if one settles for a passional explanation; on the contrary, it is the key which allows us to establish contact with another. This is possible precisely because we are characterised by the passional nature that we share, and that renders us responsive to emotive stimuli; but this procedure is not reducible to ‘Cartesian’ terms of interpretation. «The minds of men are mirrors to one another»⁵⁴, Hume writes; therefore any explanation that sets out from the single individual considered in isolation, in order then to explain how we come to know the passions of others is both incorrect and profoundly non-Humean. This would indeed be a ‘Cartesian’ exegesis, and it seems strange that it should be attributed to a philosopher for whom Descartes’ work represented a negative term of reference⁵⁵. On the contrary, Humean sympathy allows

thetic communication as described by Hume is capable of explaining how our imagination, sentimentally connoted, allows us to form representations of others as specific individuals who, though similar to ourselves, are not reduced to a mere reflection of ourselves. On this point see also C. Swanton, *Compassion as a Virtue in Hume*, in *Feminist Interpretations of David Hume*, edited by A. J. Jacobson, Pennsylvania, The Pennsylvania University Press, 2000, pp. 156-173.

⁵² This thesis is clearly expressed by A. C. Baier, *How to Get to Know One’s Own Mind*, in Baier, *Reflections on How We Live*, Oxford-New York, Oxford University Press, 2010, pp. 128-147. See also Baier, *Hume’s Impressions and His Other Metaphors*, in Baier, *Death and Character*, pp. 113-146, esp. p. 134.

⁵³ See Postema, “*Cemented with Diseased Qualities*”, pp. 160-162. J. P. Wright, *Hume’s ‘A Treatise of Human Nature’. An Introduction*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009, pp. 212-215, maintains instead the opposite opinion whereby Hume, given the associative principles on which his philosophy is based, is unable to make sense of our belief in other people’s minds and of their independence from our own mind.

⁵⁴ T 2.2.5.21; SBN 365.

⁵⁵ In this connection, see Pitson against Mercer in *Sympathy and Other Selves*, and also W. D. Oliver, *A Sober Look at Solipsism*, in *Studies in the Theory of Knowledge, American*

for a concept of what it is to be human that does not presuppose something hidden that must be discovered, but is rather revealed in the activities in which individuals are involved, and in the multiples modes in which they react in the presence of others. So if one wished to name a figure reminiscent of Hume on this issue, Wittgenstein would seem to be a better choice than Descartes. As Peter F. Strawson notes, «We do not, for example, find in Wittgenstein any explicit repetition of Hume's quite explicit appeal to Nature. But [...] the resemblances, and even the echoes, are more striking than the differences». For both «We simply react to others as to other people. They may puzzle us at times; but that is part of so reacting. Here again we have something which we have no option but to take for granted in all our reasoning»⁵⁶.

«The science of MAN»⁵⁷ can therefore be elaborated by means of an empirical enquiry that has at its centre human beings as they commonly manifest themselves through «a cautious observation of human life», where the only admissible experiments are those that «appear in the common course of the world, by men's behaviour in company, in affairs, and in their pleasures»⁵⁸. It is only in a context of this kind that the Humean principle of sympathy acquires significance. Adopting the experimental method that characterises him, and observing a general, disinterested desire for aggrega-

Philosophical Quarterly, Monograph Series, 4, edited by N. Rescher, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1970, pp. 30-39. According to Oliver, Hume rejects the postulate of privacy that is at the root of Descartes' thought. In Hume the problem of solipsism is not given, as it is in Descartes, because in Hume the notion of a rational ego closed on itself is absent, replaced with that of a «natural man», guided by natural beliefs shared with all human beings. It is noteworthy also that Hume's rejection of solipsism and of the Cartesian conception of mind in part anticipates Gilbert Ryle's reflections on this problem in *The Concept of Mind*, London, Hutchinson, 1949.

⁵⁶ P. F. Strawson, *Skepticism and Naturalism. Some Varieties. The Woodbridge Lectures 1983*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1985, pp. 14, 21, italics in original. On the affinities between the philosophies of Hume and Wittgenstein see also O. Hanfling, *Hume and Wittgenstein*, in *Impressions of Empiricism*, edited by G. Vesey, London-Basingstoke, The Macmillan Press LTD, 1976, pp. 47-65; P. Jones, *Strains in Hume and Wittgenstein*, in *Hume: A Re-evaluation*, edited by D. W. Livingston – J. T. King, New York, Fordham University Press, 1976, pp. 191-209, and *Hume's Sentiments. Their Ciceronian and French Context*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 1982, pp. 176-188; B. Stroud, *Hume*, London-New York, Routledge, 1977, ch. 10. Finally, Annette C. Baier, in the *Preface* of her book *Postures of the Mind. Essays on Mind and Morals*, London, Methuen, 1985, pp. ix-xiii, declares that it is possible to discern «a secular Wittgenstenian ethic» in the Humean approach to morality, and that she wants to build her own philosophy on that line.

⁵⁷ T intro, para. 4; SBN xv.

⁵⁸ T, intro, para. 10; SBN xix.

tion in the majority of living creatures, this is how Hume expresses his position with regard to humans:

This is still more conspicuous in man, as being the creature of the universe, who has the most ardent desire of society, and is fitted for it by the most advantages. We can form no wish, which has not a reference to society. A perfect solitude is, perhaps, the greatest punishment we can suffer. Every pleasure languishes when enjoy'd a-part from company, and every pain becomes more cruel and intolerable. Whatever other passions we may be actuated by; pride, ambition, avarice, curiosity, revenge or lust; the soul or animating principle of them all is sympathy; nor would they have any force, were we to abstract entirely from the thoughts and sentiments of others⁵⁹.

So when one mentions the experimental method in relation to Hume, it must be clear that it doesn't dovetail with, even less can it be reduced to, the aims of contemporary experimental psychology. It is true that the sympathetic communication Hume talks about finds today experimental confirmation, so that Hume appears to have anticipated philosophically the 'mirror neurons' hypothesis⁶⁰. But even if the mirror neurons hypothesis lends support to the Humean notion of sympathy at neurological level, it is worth noting that the validity of this principle remains intact in any case – that is to say, it is quite independent of scientific verification in terms of the physiology of human brain. Humean sympathy is the result of a philosophical thesis which already finds all the necessary confirmation in the public context of the human activities which compose the «common life». It is sufficient to observe that sympathy pervades all the relations among «thinking beings». Neuroscientific evidence is surely welcomed, but is not requisite to determine the status of Humean sympathy: «The best method of reconciling us to this opinion is to take a general survey of the universe, and observe the force of sympathy thro' the whole animal creation, and the easy communication of sentiments from one thinking being to another»⁶¹.

7. There is a further aspect of Humean sympathy I would like to remark upon. Not only does sympathy make us enjoy our pleasures, or suffer our pains, more intensely; it also allows us to render passions intelligible to our-

⁵⁹ T, 2.2.5.15; SBN 363.

⁶⁰ On mirror neurons, see G. Rizzolatti and C. Sinigaglia, *So quel che fai. Il cervello che agisce e i neuroni specchio*, Milano, Raffaello Cortina Editore, 2006. On the relevance of mirror neurons for Humean sympathy, see Baier, *Acting in Character*, pp. 4-5; R. Hardin, *David Hume: Moral and Political Theorist*, ch. 2.

⁶¹ T 2.2.5.15; SBN 362-363.

selves. Our own passional sphere itself acquires definite contours through the process of sympathetic exchange. It is not a coincidence, as observed above, that Hume should present sympathy in the context of the discussion of pride and humility; it is in examining these particular passions that the constructive role of sympathy becomes evident. When Hume describes the functioning of pride and humility, he distinguishes between their object and their cause⁶². Their object is the idea of the self, while the causes can be of the most varied kinds. What is important is that the causes have some sort of correlation with ourselves, and that they give us joy or pain. If that which has some relation to us is pleasant, it will generate, when we come to consider it, the pleasant passion of pride; if on the other hand it is something painful, it will generate the unpleasant passion of humility. In order for this to happen, Hume further specifies that the causes have to possess precise characteristics: they must be close to the person who is their object, they must not be common, but rare, and they must be lasting; but above all, they must be public. It is essential that «the pleasant or painful object be very discernible and obvious, and that not only to ourselves, but to others also. This circumstance [...] has an effect upon joy, as well as pride. We fancy ourselves more happy, as well as more virtuous or beautiful, when we appear so to others»⁶³. What procures pride or humility in ourselves achieves this outcome, not so much in being pleasing to us, as by being appreciated or disapproved of by those who are close to us. The pleasure or pain that we feel is due, above all, to the fact that it receives confirmation in the eyes of those who observe us; or better put, we are sensitive to the judgement of those of whom we approve⁶⁴. Indeed pride requires the approval of the right people, those whom we ourselves hold to be worthy of pride because they possess those characteristics we consider worthy of admiration. By the same token, what will humiliate us is not an abstract judgement, but one proffered by those whose judgement we value⁶⁵. By comparing ourselves to others we acquire the capacity to re-

⁶² T, 2.1.5.

⁶³ T, 2.1.6.6; SBN 292.

⁶⁴ In this regard, see D. C. Ainslie, *Scepticism about Persons in Book II of Hume's Treatise*, «Journal of the History of Philosophy», XXXVII (1999), pp. 469-492, and A. O. Rorty, «Pride Produces the Idea of the Self»: *Hume on Moral Agency*, «Australasian Journal of Philosophy», LXVIII (1990), pp. 255-269.

⁶⁵ See T 2.1.11.12-13; SBN 321-322. On the relation between pride, humility and the considerations of others, see P. Chazan, *Pride, Virtue and Selfhood: A Reconstruction of Hume*, «Canadian Journal of Philosophy», XXII (1992), pp. 45-64; J. L. McIntyre, *Personal Identity and the Passions*, «Journal of the History of Philosophy», XXVII (1989), pp. 545-557; E. Lecaldano, *The Passions, Character and the Self in Hume*, «Hume Studies», XXVIII (2002), pp. 175-193.

late to persons and to things, and, in this way, we develop those sentiments that allow us to find our place in the reality within which we move, and to strengthen our consciousness as agents.

The reason for which Hume chooses to discuss sympathy alongside pride and humility thus becomes clear. The sympathetic mechanism is linked to the mechanism that regulates pride and humility in as much as it is an explanatory principle that validates the public nature of these particular passions, and more broadly, the sentimental nature of human beings in general. The idea of a human nature that appears already complete in the single, isolated individual is alien to the Humean paradigm, and on closer examination, is not contemplated even by those thinkers who see themselves as champions of the substantial individual self. The solitude of the Cartesian subject is, in reality, very crowded. The crowds include his hypothetical cheating demon, and also all those concrete individuals who, in arguing with Descartes, contribute with their objections to the elaboration of the complex dialogue set out in the *Metaphysical Meditations*⁶⁶. The Cartesian subject does not at all derive the conclusions he expresses on the cogito entirely from within himself; instead the operation Descartes presents is one that immediately calls on the voices of others. This problem has no bearing on Hume, who is very much aware that human beings are flesh and blood creatures, organised in such a way as to realise themselves fully only through a continual passional exchange with others⁶⁷, and who acquire consciousness of themselves as united and recognisable selves thanks to pride and humility⁶⁸. As Postema nicely puts it, «experiences of pride and humility give the self its determinate shape»⁶⁹. It is this kind of consciousness which underlies the Humean notion of virtuous agent, who is none other but someone endowed with a ‘moralised’ pride, i.e., someone endowed with a stable sense of himself or herself as a single individual who is recognised, and positively valued from the common point of view of morality, by those

⁶⁶ See A. C. Baier, *The Commons of the Mind. The Paul Carus Lectures 19*, Chicago and La Salle, Illinois, Open Court, 1997, and *Cartesian Persons*, in Baier, *Postures of the Mind*, pp. 74-92; see also A. O. Rorty, *The Structure of Descartes’ Meditations*, in *Essays on Descartes’ Meditations*, edited by A. O. Rorty, Berkeley-Los Angeles-London, University of California Press, 1986, pp. 1-20.

⁶⁷ For a comparison of Descartes’ and Hume’s conceptions of the passions in relation to the self, see A. O. Rorty, *From Passions to Emotions and Sentiments*, «Philosophy», LVII (1982), pp. 159-172.

⁶⁸ On the importance of pride and humility for the emergence of our self-consciousness in Hume, see L. Greco, *L’io morale. David Hume e l’etica contemporanea*, Napoli, Liguori, 2008, ch. 5.

⁶⁹ Postema, “Cemented with Diseased Qualities”, p. 268.

around him or her⁷⁰. As there could not be any experience of pride and humility without sympathy, so the consciousness of our self which results from these passions would never come to be defined in the absence of others. This is the dynamic whereby a progression⁷¹ is enabled, leading from emotive contagion to that «extensive sympathy»⁷² which is the cornerstone of Hume's ethics. What Hume has achieved by these means, is a philosophical perspective which at the same time places individuals at its centre, without denying their crucial connection to each other⁷³.

⁷⁰ On the notion a moralised pride, see A. C. Baier, *Master Passions*, in *Explaining Emotions*, edited by A. O. Rorty, Berkeley-Los Angeles-London, University of California Press, 1980, pp. 403-423; J. A. Herdt, *Religion and Faction in Hume's Moral Philosophy*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997, chap. 2; A. O. Rorty, *The Vanishing Subject: The Many Faces of Subjectivity*, «History of Philosophy Quarterly», XXIII (2006), pp. 191-209.

⁷¹ See A. C. Baier, *Sympathy and Self-Trust*, in Baier, *Reflections on How We Live*, pp. 189-215; Postema, «*Cemented with Diseased Qualities*», pp. 260-262.

⁷² See T 3.3.1.23; SBN 586.

⁷³ An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Rome Humean Readings in June 2004, and it is now part of ch. 8 of my book *L'io morale*. I would like to thank the audience of the conference, and especially Mattia Bilardello, Caterina Botti, Roger Crisp, Piergiorgio Donatelli, Peter Kail, Eugenio Lecaldano, Emanuele Levi Mortera, Jane McIntyre, Gianfranco Pellegrino, Sara Protasi, Peter Railton, Barry Stroud and Alessio Vaccari for their very useful comments.