

Abstract: Hume has at least four distinct meanings of “sympathy” that he uses opportunistically. First, “sympathy” functions in the communicability of affect; next it encompasses what is often described as “emotional contagion,” the communicability of affect without the inclusion of the idea of the other individual as its source; thirdly, it encompasses the power of suggestion; and, finally, it comes to include an element of benevolence, approaching the meaning of “compassion” that we hear in it today. How this series of transformations unfolds is the topic of this story as the meaning of “sympathy” evolves from a communicability of affect to the (re)active sentiment of compassion with which we regard it today. The crucial difference between sympathy in the strict sense and emotional contagion is delimited in terms of a double representation. The opportunity for Hume was to develop the parallel between a “delicacy of taste” and a “delicacy of sympathy,” the latter capturing what we moderns mean by “empathy.” This opportunity is lost, however, and the “delicate” aspects of sympathy end up being gathered together with “delicacy of taste” and buried over in the discussion of aesthetics rather than as a free standing topic in (moral) psychology.

The justification for this inquiry into the transformation of the uses of “sympathy” in Hume is the explication of how sympathy becomes the basis of morality, even though its starts out as the mere communicability of affect. This is necessary to restore balance to the reading of Hume that has shifted away from his work on the moral sentiments to him as a precursor of Kant. To be sure, Hume was also that and there is no inherent contradiction, though there is a tension, between a historical thread that situations morality in the moral sentiments and one that locates obligation in an agent-based sense of obligation. Always the astute phenomenologist, our philosopher, David Hume, is of interest as a witness to the divergence of sympathy into components that will blend with the aesthetic judgment of taste, taking on an irreversible dimension of evaluation, and those that will someday resurface in the form of human empathy as the mere communicability of affect subjected to further cognitive processing. By the time Hume writes his 1741 essay “Of the delicacy of taste and passion,” he assimilates all the advantages for human interrelations of “sympathy” such as friendship, intimacy,

interpersonal warmth to “delicacy of taste.”¹ The result is that the only remaining mode of access to empathy is through aesthetic taste. This has significant consequences as Theodor Lipps translates Hume’s *Treatise of Human Nature* into German, even as Lipps was completing his own *Aesthetik* (1903), eventually publishing the translation of Hume in two volumes in 1904/1906.² While “sympathy” comes across into German as “sympathie,” the seed was planted of the close connection between sympathy and (aesthetic) taste that developed into an entire aesthetic (Lipps 1903) in which *Einfühlung* (empathy) play the central role. Meanwhile, the advantages that today would be attributed to “empathy” including an increase in a person’s capacity for love and friendship and enjoyment of the “characters of men,” according to Hume, are attributed to a “delicacy of taste” by Hume.

Before turning to these developments in further detail, a working definition of “empathy” will be useful. At the level of phenomenal awareness and everyday human being in the world with other humans, the minimal essential constituents of empathy include: (i) a receptivity (“openness”) to the affects of others whether in face-to-face encounter or as artifacts of human imagination (“empathic receptivity”); (ii) an understanding of the other in which the other individual is interpreted as a possibility—a possibility of choosing, making commitments, and implementing them (“empathic understanding”) in

¹ D. Hume, “Of the delicacy of taste and passion” (1741) in *Of the Standard of Taste and Other Essays*, Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill: 1965: 25-28. See also D. Hume, “Of the standard of taste” (1757), in *Of the Standard of Taste and Other Essays*, Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill: 1965: 3-24.

² David Hume. (1739). *Ein Traktat über die menschliche Natur* in 2 Bänden, translated by Theodor Lipps. Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1904/06. If one performs a quick search of the on-line catalog of the Universität Wien [<http://aleph.univie.ac.at/F?867223583>], Lipps’ translations come up first. [Verified on Nov 14, 2009.]

which the aforementioned possibility is implemented; (iii) an interpretation of the other from first-, second-, and third-person perspectives (“empathic interpretation”); and (iv) an articulation in language 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 target of empathy (“empathic listening”). This working definition in no way contradicts the possibility of other, orthogonal definitions, for example, from the perspective of functional causality. There another’s affects are the cause of mine in the context of a self-other distinction in which a causal construct such as a “shared manifold” is deployed below the threshold of introspective awareness in our biology (“neurology”) to explain the functions of perspective taking and emotional control.³ It is also consistent with a neuron-computational representation that uses mirror neurons to implement the transfer of affectivity from one individual to another. It is consistent with a hermeneutic definition that deploys a double representation of the self’s representation of the other’s intentional fulfillment and the further processing of these representations.⁴

What both the empathic individual and the aesthetic one share in common is a capacity for fine distinctions of feeling (sensations and affects). Of course, the name for this in aesthetics (the theory of beauty) is “delicacy of taste.” “Taste” is the capacity for judging the beauty of something by means of the feelings aroused by the object. A brief note on

³ P. L. Jackson, A. N. Meltzoff, and J. Decety, “How do we perceive the pain of others? A window into the neural processes involved in empathy.” *Neuroimage* 24 (2005): 771-779. See also J. Decety & P.L. Jackson, “The functional architecture of human empathy.” *Behavioral and Cognitive Neuroscience Reviews*, Vol 3, No. 2, June 2004: 71-100. V. Gallese, “The shared manifold hypothesis: embodied simulation and its role in empathy and social cognition,” in *Empathy and Mental Illness*, eds. T. Farrow and P. Woodruff, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007: 452f.

⁴ AuthorsName, AuthorsArticle, Anthology, bibliographic data [Deleted to preserve anonymity.]
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terminology is required since, for Hume, “delicacy” is an eighteenth century term for the ability to make “fine-grained distinctions.”

By “sympathy” Hume does not initially mean the particular sentiments of pity or compassion or benevolence but rather the function of communicating affect in general. Sympathy reverses the operation of the understanding, which converts impressions of sensation into ideas. In the case of sympathy, the operation is in the other direction – from idea to impression. Sympathy arouses ideas in the recipient that are transformed into impressions – though this time impressions of reflection -- through the influence of the 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 (T 2.1.11.8; SBN 319-20).⁵

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 the other’s sentiment, 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 operation

⁵ David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739), ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973). Hereafter SBN refers to the Selby-Bigge addition and T refers to the Chapter, section, and paragraph in the Clarendon edition text.

of the understanding, 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. In this view, sympathy is not to be mistaken with some particular affect such as pity or compassion, but is rigorously defined by Hume as “the conversion of an idea into an impression by the force of imagination” (T 2.3.6.8; SBN 427). The other’s anger gets expressed and is apprehended sympathetically as an idea, which idea 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 idea (or impression) of anger. I thus experience what may be variously described as a trace affect, a counter-part feeling, or a vicarious experience—of anger.

In short, I now know what the other is experiencing because I experience it too, not as the numerically identical impression, but as one that is qualitatively similar. This operation of sympathy, at least in this example, is also crucially distinct from emotional contagion, as in the mass behavior of crowds, since the passion and sentiments are “conceived to belong to another person.” This is crucial. This introduces the other. Significantly, the concept of the other accompanies the impression that is aroused in me as a result of the other’s expression.

However, note the analogical form of this analysis. Thus, unfortunately, if this is to be an argument to answer skeptical doubts about other minds, say, as opposed to a specific local suspicion where analogical reasoning may indeed occasionally be useful, then such

an argument by analogy is subject to all the doubts that plague such an approach from a logical perspective.

However, Hume is not without counter-arguments to objections about analogical reasoning, nor does he necessarily require such reasoning. In other passages, the uptake of the other's emotion is direct, not analogical (see below T 2.2.12.6; SBN 398). A response that works nicely is that ideas are nothing more than impressions that differ by being less lively and vivid. So the analogy vanishes in a cloud of immediacy. Given that the only difference is one of "force and vivacity," it is easy to get from the idea of anger to its impressionistic experience. The result is that a person is really perceiving the happiness in the other's smile, the pain in the grimace, the fear in the wide eyes, or the anger in the other's clenched teeth.

As indicated, Hume does even better avoiding analogical arguments when, in a later passage, he asserts that "the minds of men are mirrors to one another, not only because they reflect each others emotions, but also because those rays of passions, sentiments and opinions may be often reverberated and decay away by insensible degrees" (T 2.2.5.21; SBN 365). Here I do experience an immediate resonance ("reverberation") with the other, perceiving pleasure in the smile, pain in the grimace, or anger in the clenched teeth. In this case, a counterpart feeling - a vicarious feeling - is aroused in myself and, in turn, becomes the experiential basis for further cognitive activity about what is going on with the other person.

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. I am overtaken by affects as if they were my own without an awareness that I am literally at the effect of the emotions of the others around me. Otherwise we have an example of what we would also call a “vicarious experience,” where I recognize 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 (T 2.1.11.2; SBN 316-17).

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. . . (T 3.3.2.2; SBN 592).

Here we do have examples of emotional contagion and the 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 experiences--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 is feeling 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” (T 2.1.11.8; SBN 319-20), the latter being what is missing in the instance of emotional contagion.

Hume has now established sympathy as the glue that affectively binds others to oneself and, by implication, binds a community of ethical individuals together. However, Hume finds now that he is at risk of having undercut morality by giving to sympathy such a central role in creating community. 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. So an earthquake in China creates less sympathetic distress in me than an earthquake in Los Angeles (in my own country), even if I am perfectly safe in either case. A modern speaker would likely say “empathic distress,” about which more will be said shortly. 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 persons contiguous to us, than with persons 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* (T 3.3.1.14; SBN 580-1).

Is this then a counter-example to the possibility of founding a morality of sympathy? Is this a contradiction? Hume provides two answers, which is perhaps a clue that he is a tad uncertain. Both answers actually reduce the scope of sympathy, though they buttress morality.

First, Hume rejects the counter-example as incomplete. The variability of an individual's sympathy and the invariability of the moral esteem are reconciled by an ideal observer. It is not just any old, average Joe who judges and evaluates by means of a sympathetic openness to the earthquake in China. It is a steady, general, common point of view that observes impersonally and judges:

In order, therefore, to prevent those continual *contradictions*, and arrive at a more *stable* judgment of things, we fix one some *steady* and *general* points of view; and always, in our thoughts, place ourselves in them, whatever may be our present situation (T 3.3.1.15; SBN 581-2). . . .

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. . . . '[T]is 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" (T 3.3.1.30; SBN 590-1).

Hume sets up an ideal observer who is also a sympathetic one. Of course, sympathy is otherwise unrelated to the disinterestedness of being a distant observer. The ideal observer and the sympathetic one are complementary at best, and possibly even contrary under one possible interpretation: Being sympathetic reduces distance between

individuals; being an ideal 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 ideal spectator, synonymously referred to as a “disinterested spectator,” and a sympathetic observer of whatever is occurring. In either case, there is a tension here between the sympathetic and ideal observer – Hume considers this a single individual – inclining in opposite directions. Thus, Hume may have felt that his argument required additional support.

Historically, what Hume does is to develop his understanding (and definition) of “sympathy” in the direction of “benevolence.” “Sympathy” converges with benevolence as the latter supplements it as the foundation of morality in an *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (1751). However, before turning to this development, let us look at three possible ways of resolving the tension between the ideal observer and sympathy as the basis for moral approbation and disapproval.

The first is due to Stephen Darwell’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 (Darwell 1995: 314-5).⁶ Indeed Hume expresses what would become a very

⁶ Stephen Darwell. (1995). *The British Moralists and the Internal ‘Ought’: 1640-1740*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

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” (THN: 483). 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” (THN 518). [Quoted in Darwel 302]. I agree with Darwell’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 Darwell’s argumentative force, subtlety, and mastery of the details, both sympathy and the ideal 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 paper 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. Darwell 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 of the moral qualities of an individual in action and an ideal 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 convergence. 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 sympathy and the ideal 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” (T 2.1.11.8; SBN 319-20). 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 metaphorical identification. 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.⁷ In the false belief test, the ability of one individual to take the point of view of the other is engaged. Two individuals, Sally and Ann, are in the same room. Ann watches Sally put a cookie in the cookie jar, then Sally leaves the room. Ann then moves the cookie from the jar to the cupboard. Sally comes back into the room. Where will she look for her cookie? Before the age of about four years old, children say she will look in the cupboard. In other words, they falsely attribute to Sally the information they obtained, but which Sally must have missed. After the age of about five, the hypothesized theory of mind undergoes further development – perhaps even a paradigm shift – and the child is able to take the perspective of different roles in the story, realizing what information is

⁷ Ted Cohen. (2008). *Thinking of Others: On the Talent for Metaphor*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

available from which perspective. In different forms, the test is also used to test for certain forms of autism spectrum disorders, which are hypothesized to be a function of an individual's inability to experience the world from another's perspective.⁸ Both of these examples point in the direction of the third approach, which exploits the convergence of the transposition of sympathy with the ideal spectator.

The third approach is a reconstruction of the disinterested spectator into the sympathetic spectator. In other words, the key term "disinterested" means lacking a "conflict of interest," not unsympathetic in the sense of inhumanly cold-hearted. The ideal 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 sense 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 judgment of approbation. 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 quality of character of the individual in question. As sympathy is enlarged beyond the narrow scope of one's family and friends, it give way to benevolence, an interest in the well-being of all

⁸ Simon Baron-Cohen. (1995). *Mindblindness: An Essay on Autism and Theory of Mind*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997.

mankind, as the basis of morality, while “sympathy” as a term itself falls back to the emotional contagion.

Without perhaps entirely appreciating the consequences for his use of “sympathy,” Hume starts evolving the idea in the direction of “benevolence,” the latter being specific content 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 (T 3.3.1.21; SBN 585).

Virtue in rags is still virtue, as Hume famously notes, and sympathy interests us in the good of all mankind (“society”) (T 3.3.1.19; SBN 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 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” will have 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 above, includes the concept of the other that aligns with the modern concept of “empathy,” towards a

narrower, but not exclusive, sense of emotional contagion. It should be noted that “sympathy” is not called out in this passage. 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 publication, in particular the *Enquiry into the Principles of Morals* that 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 (T 3.3.3.5; SBN 604-5).

When put in context, this points to a remarkable development in Hume’s thinking – namely, Hume’s displacing of sympathy from the center to the periphery of his account of human 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 enduring friendships come under “delicacy of taste,” while most of the disadvantages of increased sensitivity (in the sense of being easily upset, irritable, choleric) come under

“delicacy of passion.” No separate analysis of “delicacy of sympathy” is made an explicit theme. 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 a better friend are attributed to delicacy of taste. Hume’s contribution to the conversation about empathy is a substantial one, is overlooked in the literature, and deserves to be situated in relation to a contemporary definition of empathy.

There is evidence that Hume found it useful to intersect “taste” in the aesthetic sense with moral qualities. In the *Treatise* he writes: “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 (T 3.3.1.15; SBN 581-2; emphasis added). Again 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 (T 3.3.1.20; SBN 584-5) 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

sufficient force to influence our taste.⁹ 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*.¹⁰

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. The merit of benevolence and its utility in promoting the good of mankind through attributes useful and agreeable to oneself and others looms large in founding morality (e.g., Hume 1751: 241).

In the course of elaborating these distinctions, Hume made extensive use of introspection and it 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.” He 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, regulated ways, that are equal to any phenomenologist, and have not been surpassed even

⁹ Cited in Stephen Darwall, (1995), *The British Moralists and the Internal ‘Ought’: 1640-1740*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1995: 305.

¹⁰ D. Hume, *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (1751). In *Hume’s Moral and Political Philosophy*, ed. H.D. Aiken, New York: Hafner Publishing, 1968: 173f., 269. Emphasis added.

today. That is especially so in the perception of art and taste. The point? These lessons are easily transferable to empathy in the sense we use the word today (noted above).

As indicated, much of the work done by what we today call “empathy” 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 above, in reading Hume there is no function of sympathy in relation to the violent passions parallel to that of taste in the calm passions. Still, Hume leaves a logical place for a kind of “delicacy of sympathy [i.e., empathy]” 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 (T 3.3.1.8; SBN 576-7), and 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) (T 3.3.1.10; SBN 577-8). This sets the stage for what can best be 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.

As a result of this exploration through Hume, we need to qualify the initial statement that “sympathy” in Hume means what today we call “empathy.” In those quotations where Hume conjoins the sympathetic communications of sentiments with the idea of an other individual, “sympathy” means “empathy.” In particular, “delicate sympathy” would capture those features of fine-grained distinction that are characteristic of empathy, but the possibility remains undeveloped by Hume. In the development of Hume’s philosophical activity, “delicacy of sympathy” is swallowed up conceptually by “delicacy of taste.” In subsequent passages (and here is the qualification), “sympathy” means “the power of suggestion” or “emotional contagion” (see above “contagious”; T 3.3.3.5; SBN 604-5). These different, over-lapping, not entirely consistent uses of “sympathy” exist side-by-side in the *Treatise* (1739) as demonstrated by the textual evidence cited in this essay. Furthermore, “sympathy” is not a static concept in Hume; but undergoes a dynamic development. By the time of the *Enquiry* (1751), the push down of “sympathy” behind compassion and taste is complete. The reactive aspects of “sympathy” get split off and migrate in the direction of compassion as it takes on the content of qualities useful to mankind as benevolence, leaving taste to dominate the field of fine-grained distinctions in the communicability of feelings between persons (“friends”) as well as in the appreciation of beauty. This former point is essential. Taste gives us an enjoyment of the qualities of the characters of persons in conversation, humor, and friendship that is a super-set of what empathy does with its fine-grained distinctions in accessing the experiences of other persons. The prospect of “delicacy of sympathy” in the social realm of human interrelations is left without further development by Hume.

Instead, Hume presents taste as the capacity to discriminate “particular feelings,” which are produced by beauty and deformity.¹¹ This special capacity to feel is dependent on the ability of our sensory organs to perceive the fine details of a composition. Attention to the detailed features of the phenomenon is a condition of delicacy of taste. Our taste is not tested in distinguishing (e.g.) a jagged, irregular configuration from a smooth, curvaceous one as clumsy from graceful. In this case, virtual insensitivity will do.¹² Arguably taste is required to make such a distinction, but it is not a good test of taste, for example, enabling us to judge that your taste is better than mine. It is just too coarse-grained. What is needed to activate our taste is an example where there are such a multiplicity of details that the capacity of our organs to perceive fine and exact ingredients in the composition is challenged.

A further question is whether another can notice all the fine details to which I introspectively attend and yet still be insensitive to the feeling aroused by them in everyone else. After ruling out inexperience, prejudice, or organic disturbance, we would be justified in saying with regard to his delicacy of taste:

. . . If the same qualities, in a continued composition and in a smaller degree, affect not the organs with a sensible delight or uneasiness, we exclude the person from all pretensions to this delicacy (Hume 1757: 11).

¹¹ David Hume, “Of the Standard of Taste” (1757), in *Of the Standard of Taste and Other Essays* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965): 11.

¹² Ted Cohen makes a nice point in arguing against a distinction between aesthetic and nonaesthetic concepts based on taste. His conclusion is a Kantian one – taste judges, not by means of concepts, but by feelings. “Aesthetic/Nonaesthetic and the Concept of Taste,” *Theoria* 39 (1973): 113-52.

A possible account of the difference between him and me consists in distinguishing impression of sensation and reflection. We both notice the same things – we have the same sensation – but he has some impairment in his capacity to feel. As a consequence the field of my impressions of reflection in introspective attention is richer or deeper than his.

Hume gives a telling example where “taste” is meant literally as referring to sensation on the tongue, not primarily aesthetically. A connoisseur is judging a cask of amontillado sherry and remarks that it is very good but has a taste of iron and leather. This is regarded as curious, if not absurd, until the cask is drained, and a rusty key on a leather thong is discovered. The connoisseur had perceived a fine-grained, micro trace of a quality that was missed by others. Although Hume does not use the term “micro impression,” it captures well what Hume is hinting at and aligns nicely with the scientific work performed by Paul Ekman on micro expressions of emotions.¹³

Is empathy really required to see that another is angry when he denounces and insults everyone and throws a tantrum? As indicated above with taste, in the final analysis, yes, empathy is indeed required to identify a gross instance of anger; but empathy is not properly put to the test by such an instance. Another instance with finer details is needed before empathy can be activated in any interesting way and put to the test. For example, if I sense the frustration and sadness of this person throwing a temper tantrum where

¹³ P. Ekman, *Telling Lies: Clues to Deceit in the Marketplace, Politics, and Marriage* (1985). New York: W.W. Norton, 1992.

everyone else only notices his great anger, then a distinction only possible through a greater “delicacy” of my empathic function is made evident. In terms friendly to Hume, while all of us get the same idea and impressions of sensation—hear the swear words, terms of abuse, see the stamping of feet—only one of us (in this case) is aware of the person’s sadness and frustration. I receive something to which you are indifferent and unaware. My “delicacy of empathy” is more receptive than yours; and whereas you perceive the anger, I perceive anger, sadness, and frustration.

Two different scenarios are possible. But the result is the same. I may perceive a micro impression of sadness in the other’s overt behavior (and you do not). Or a micro impression of sadness emerges in me as a calm passion of reflection in my further processing of the impressions that we both receive. Obviously the latter will be more problematic, since it implies an emergent property. Hume (T 1.1.2.1; SBN 7-8; T 2.1.11.8; SBN 319-20) makes the distinction between impressions of sensation and reflection, containing the nucleus of an account of “emergent” qualities. A sensation of pleasure or pain is embedded in an impression of reflection (desire, aversion or pride and humility – direct or indirect passions), but the latter is not reducible to the former without remainder. Hume’s distinctions are able to handle either scenario.

Likewise, if I am an expert user of empathy, then it is likely that I will directly perceive sadness in the other. However, if I am not an expert, then it is likely that I will have to introspectively monitor my vicarious experience to capture a trace of sadness available to my introspective awareness for further cognitive processing and not otherwise

attributable to myself. In this scenario, I have a vicarious experience of sadness, self-contempt, and frustration that I can access through introspective attention and, by means of further processing, articulate an interpretation, “That is a sad, frustrated person with self-esteem issues” whereas you just assert he is very angry.

Philosophers ignore the advances of empirical science at their own peril – even those interested in intellectual history. It is a matter of empirical research the extent to which further training in introspective attentional awareness can enhance this focusing on details—this delicacy of empathy. It is likely that training and practice can improve the result, though it is equally obvious that there is a threshold beyond which training will not make a difference. Finally, there is no easy answer to someone’s deception when the human is sincerely fooling himself. There is also no easy unmasking of deception when the other is trained to employ the Stanislavsky Method of acting to cause a smile based on genuine recollections of happy times in the past. Interpretation remains an essential part of “delicacy of empathy” and the indeterminacy of translation is inevitable when the cause of the sentiment is a part of the interpretive context.