

The Age of Sympathy

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That the eighteenth century was the age of sympathy is well appreciated today. Literary theorists have insisted on this for some time, political theorists are now more than ever emphasizing it, and versions of it are now commonplace even among experimental economists and neurophysiologists.ⁱ Taken together, we ought to welcome such efforts, which have done much to lead us to rethink convenient but sadly oversimplified associations of the Enlightenment with the “age of reason,” and have also done much to remind us of the eighteenth-century foundations of much of contemporary ethics. But for all this a key issue remains unexplained. Even amidst our general agreement today *that* the eighteenth century was the age of sympathy, less well understood is *why* this was so. Exactly what then explains the remarkable ubiquity of the concept of sympathy in the eighteenth century?

This – I will be the first to admit – is a staggeringly difficult question, which perhaps explains why so little work has been done to answer it. Part of the difficulty concerns the plasticity of the concept. Thus Marc André Bernier, in one of the best recent surveys of eighteenth-century sympathy, calls our attention to “*l’incroyable vitalité et la surprenante hétérogénéité qui caractérisent la notion de sympathie au cours de la période.*”ⁱⁱ Yet the concept was hardly up for grabs, as three meanings are particularly common in eighteenth-century philosophy. These include sympathy as “mechanical communication of feelings and passions,” as a “process of imagination, or of reason, by which we substitute ourselves for others,” and as our “delight in the happiness and sorry in the misery of other people.”ⁱⁱⁱ Each of these of course points in a different direction and has a different heritage – sympathy as communication harkening back to classical understandings of sympathy as *contagio*; sympathy as

substituting self for others hearkening to traditions of common sense, or *sensus communis*; and sympathy as passionate concern for others hearkening back to ideas of other-directedness like compassion, pity, and charity. Clearly eighteenth-century sympathy was thus plural in both its meanings and origins. It was moreover plural in its contexts, for sympathy was hardly an idea exclusive to philosophers but also key to physicists who used it to explain principles of attraction, physiologists who used it to describe interactions of corporeal parts and functions, novelists and playwrights who used it to describe the interactions of characters and readers and actors and audiences, and political theorists who used it to describe the nature and extent of our obligations to distant others.

We are left then with a truly dizzying array of substantive definitions as well as historical and methodological contexts. Untangling these alone would be more than the work of a day. Even so, there remains our other task of explaining just why sympathy, in all its forms, became so ubiquitous in the eighteenth century – and it is to this task that the present effort is dedicated. And thus the thesis I’ll try to defend. Sympathy’s explosion, I think, is best traced to its unique status as a sophisticated philosophical response to a pressing practical challenge. This practical challenge concerned the disorientation consequent to the seismic shift in the forms of social organization experienced over the course of the eighteenth century. Most simply, the eighteenth century (especially but not only in Britain and France), witnessed a sweeping and decisive shift from traditional and more intimate forms of community to new forms of social organization in which societies of strangers came to supplant communities of intimates. But what holds a society of strangers together? Some of

course posited that self-interest alone was enough to maintain a social structure, but it seems fair to say that this was a minority opinion then and now. Others continued to defend traditional Christian ideas of charity, but here too it seems fair to say that the secularizing and skeptical tendencies in eighteenth-century epistemology and ethics made such a remedy increasingly less viable. Where then to turn? It is here, I think, that sympathy emerged and then flourished, specifically as a new and creative philosophical response to the practical political problem of human connectedness in an increasingly disorienting world. Sympathy, that is, emerged as an other-directed sentiment capable of sustaining the minimal social bonds needed to realize the new social order, and indeed one capable of so doing without requiring acceptance of the theistic foundationalism of Christian conceptions of neighbor-love. In this sense we might say (and with only a minimal amount of hyperbole) that for the philosophers of the eighteenth century, sympathy served to replace love.

II

Such in any case is my thesis – now to the demonstration. I'll begin with Spinoza, who more than any other single thinker would inaugurate the eighteenth-century tradition of thinking about sympathy. To be sure, historical starting points are almost always to some degree arbitrary. But beginning with Spinoza can I think be justified on the grounds that he quite self-consciously broke with earlier ways of theorizing about sympathy, and because his new conception of sympathy introduces three discrete elements of the concept that would prove central to later eighteenth-century theorists.

Spinoza's idea of sympathy is itself a direct product of and key contribution to his broader ethical outlook. As is well known, this ethical outlook is founded in large part on two specific propositions: first, that human beings are fundamentally material substances – in Spinoza's own words, that “mind and body are one and the same thing” – and second, that the primary motivating concern of human beings is the preservation of this material substance – the notion that “each thing, in so far as it is in itself, endeavors to persist in its own being.”^{iv} It is of course through this lens, materialistic and egocentric, that Spinoza reinterprets all ethical phenomena. Most important for our present purposes is how this lens leads him to rethink love. Love, he explains, is “merely ‘pleasure accompanied by the idea of an external cause’” and hatred “merely ‘pain accompanied by the idea of an external cause’.”^v To say only the very least, this is a radical shift away from a long-standing tradition of thinking about love insofar as it suggests that love is better understood from the perspective of the self rather than from the perspective of the divine or transcendent. And it is this perspective that frames Spinoza's theory of sympathy. For not only do we love or hate those things that immediately affect us but we also “love or hate some things without any cause known to us, but merely from sympathy and antipathy.”^{vi} Spinoza is clearly fighting battles on several fronts here; in continuing he explicitly distances his sympathy from earlier conceptions that associated it with occult qualities.^{vii} But he also makes also another fundamental move here. Sympathy, in Spinoza's theory, connects us to distant phenomena that might not seem to be immediately related to the self, but which in fact shape its pleasures and pains.

Spinoza develops this claim as Part III of the *Ethics* progresses. Gradually he reveals that sympathy is best regarded as a type of association: “as soon as we think of an object that we have seen in conjunction with others, we immediately recall the others as well and thus from regarding the one we immediately pass on to regarding another.”^{viii} This is especially true of our ideas of other people; indeed “from the fact that we imagine a thing like ourselves, towards which we have felt no emotion, to be affected by an emotion, we are thereby affected by a similar emotion,” and indeed “if we imagine someone like ourselves to be affected by an emotion, this thought will express an affection of our own body similar to that emotion. So from the fact that we imagine a thing like ourselves to be affected by an emotion, we are affected by a similar emotion along with it.”^{ix} And herein lies both the import of sympathy as an epistemic concept of association and as a normative ethical concept. Our experience of the emotions felt by others not only conveys their feelings to us, but also leads us to feel certain pains and pleasures which themselves prompt specific behaviors. For Spinoza, sympathy is thus crucially action-motivating; thus he claims “that which affects with pain a thing that we pity affects us too with similar pain (preceding Pr.), and so we shall endeavor to devise whatever annuls the existence of the former or destroys it (Pr.13,III): that is (Sch.Pr.9,III), we shall seek to destroy it; i.e. we shall be determined to destroy it. So we shall endeavor to free from its distress the thing we pity.”^x

Herein lies the key point. Sympathy leads us to relieve the distress of others; in this sense it serves other-directed purposes. At the same time, the motive for so doing is self-interest; we seek to relieve the pain of others because of the pain that

we feel as a consequence of their distress. In this way, Spinoza articulates a form of other-directed ethical activity consistent with his system. This is not to say that he doesn't see its limitations; indeed, in an incredibly prescient line he explicitly says that "from the same property of human nature from which it follows that men are compassionate, it likewise follows that they are prone to envy and ambition."^{xi} But for now the crucial point is that Spinoza introduces the eighteenth-century tradition of theorizing about sympathy via articulation of several discrete elements, including especially the claim that sympathy concerns the identification of one individual with another via an associative process founded on resemblance, the claim that sympathy is action-motivating and leads its possessor to seek to relieve the distress of others; and the claim that the grounds for such action is not an altruistic concern for others but principally a concern for the self and its pleasures and pains.

III

In what follows I'd like to take each of these themes up individually in order to show how each discrete strand of Spinoza's theory of sympathy came to be much more thoroughly developed by later eighteenth-century theorists. To do so, I'd like to begin with what seems to me to be the most ubiquitous way in which sympathy was discussed in the eighteenth century: namely as an action-motivating sentiment capable of serving to establish social bonds between individuals. Interestingly, this side of sympathy tends to receive the least attention from contemporary scholars. I can think of several reasons why this might be so, but the most likely is the fact that contemporary scholarship on sympathy largely emerged as a reaction to the battles over *Das Adam Smith Problem* that occupied an earlier generation of scholars. As an

influential generation of revisionists demonstrated, the notorious *Problem* (which concerns the ostensible tension between the self-interested moral psychology of Smith's *Wealth of Nations* and the other-directed moral psychology described in *Theory of Moral Sentiments*) is predicated on a false dichotomy between self-interest and sympathy.^{xii} Much good of course came out of these revisionist efforts. At the same time, they had the effect of leading scholars to distance sympathy from related other-directed sentiments like compassion and pity and charity, and to emphasize instead its functions as a mechanism of epistemic transfer or passion conveyance. A result of this has been an under-emphasis on the Spinozistic view of sympathy as an action-motivating sentiment capable of encouraging reciprocal care – a key element of the eighteenth-century definition.

Butler sounded one of the first keynotes for much of the eighteenth-century debate on this point. In his influential discussion of compassion in his *Sermons*, he explained that human beings, as “imperfect creatures,” necessarily always “depend on each other.”^{xiii} This state of perpetual interdependence is itself furthered by the specific passions natural to human beings that lead them to be reticent to become the agents of another’s harm. Thus compassion, according to Butler, may not lead its possessor always to promote the positive happiness of others, yet it can serve to “prevent him from doing evil” and even possibly “incline him to relieve the distress” of others.^{xiv} In this sense, compassion provides a necessary check on self-interest, in the absence of which human beings “would certainly be much more wanting in the office of charity they owe to each other, and likewise much more cruel and injurious, than they are at present.”^{xv} Other eighteenth-century thinkers would make related

claims. Foremost among them is Rousseau, whose second *Discours* presents *pitié* as one of the two passions natural to men, and itself valuable not because it leads us to do positive good but because it compels us to be reticent to do harm by “moderating in every individual the activity of our *amour de soi même*”: a check on self-love that Rousseau of course claims has been wholly and tragically overcome by civilization.^{xvi}

Butler and Rousseau thus stand at the head of eighteenth-century traditions of thinking about the normative implications of other-directed passions such as pity and compassion as checks on self-interest. In time other later thinkers would come to regard sympathy itself through this lens. Citing Butler’s account of compassion, the influential Aberdeen philosopher David Fordyce observed that sympathy stands as a “provision” and “security” devised by God for the public well-being, one which “draws us out of ourselves to bear a part in the misfortunes of others, powerfully solicits us in their favor, melts us at a sight of their distress, and makes us in some degree unhappy until they are relieved of it.” Sympathetic compassion is, for this reason, “particularly well adapted to the condition of human life,” as it provides “an admirable restraint upon the more selfish passions, or those violent impulses that carry us to the hurt of others.”^{xvii} Thus the evidence that “man is admirably formed for particular social attachments and duties” lies precisely in that “instantaneous sympathy” by which “the impulses of pleasure or pain, joy or sorrow, made on one mind” are “communicated in some degree to all.”^{xviii}

This aspect of sympathy would receive further important expressions from, among others, Edmund Burke, Lord Kames, Immanuel Kant, and Sophie de Grouchy.

Thus Burke, in his account of sympathy in his *Philosophical Enquiry*, notes:

as our Creator has designed that we should be united by the bond of sympathy, he has strengthened that bond by a proportional delight; and there most where our sympathy is most wanted, in the distresses of others...The delight we have in such things, hinders us from shunning scenes of misery; and the pain we feel, prompts us to relieve ourselves in relieving those who suffer; and all this antecedent to any reasoning, by an instinct that works us to its own purposes, without our concurrence.^{xix}

A similar position is developed by Kames, who calls sympathy the “cement of human society” and even suggests “connects persons in society by ties stronger than those of blood.”^{xx} In his view sympathy stands as the passion “to which human society is indebted for its greatest blessings, that of providing relief for the distressed.”^{xxi} And indeed society could hardly be imagined without it:

as no state is exempt from misfortunes, mutual sympathy must greatly promote the security and happiness of mankind. That the prosperity and preservation of each individual should be the care of many, tends more to happiness in general, than that each man, as the single inhabitant of a desert island, should be left to stand or fall by himself, without prospect of regard or assistance from others.^{xxii}

This perspective can even be found in the pre-critical Kant for whom “sympathy and complaisance are grounds for beautiful actions that would perhaps all be suffocated by the preponderance of cruder self-interest” – though even in his pre-critical stage Kant took care to note that sympathy is “nevertheless weak and always blind,” and “not enough to drive indolent human nature to actions for the common weal.”^{xxiii} But no eighteenth-century thinker perhaps emphasized this side of sympathy quite so strongly as Sophie de Grouchy, who calls special attention to those “new bonds of

sympathy that unite us with other men” and constitute “an indissoluble tie between ourselves and our fellow men.”^{xxiv} Herein indeed lies the chief import of sympathy:

sympathy is the first cause of the feeling of humanity, the effects of which are so precious. It compensates for a portion of the evils issuing from personal interests in large societies, and it struggles against the coercive force that we encounter everywhere we go and that centuries of Enlightenment can not destroy...Amid the shock of so many passions that the weaken or marginalize the unfortunate, from the bottom of its heart humanity secretly pleads the cause of sympathy and saves it from the injustice of fate by arousing the sentiment of natural equality.^{xxv}

In all of these discussions two elements are particularly noteworthy. The first is the claim that the value of sympathy lies in its capacity to check the pernicious effects of self-interest. The second is the claim that sympathy leads us to assist others. This is worth emphasizing because it not only testifies to the ubiquity of the eighteenth-century conception of sympathy as action-motivating, but also because it suggests one possible answer to our larger question concerning why sympathy came to have such broad and deep appeal for eighteenth-century thinkers. In brief: the insistence on sympathy’s capacity to check self-interest and to prompt other-regarding ethical action may owe at least in part to a general fear that self-interest was on the rise and benevolence on the wane. Tracing the causes of this fear would go well beyond the scope of this paper, but it seems at least possible that the root of this concern might lie in some familiar eighteenth-century phenomena. The urbanization that brought more strangers together as neighbors than ever before, the commercialization that brought traders into ever increasing contact with distant others, the exploration and imperialism that pushed Europeans across the globe: all of these phenomena, each in their own way, served to liberate self-interest and challenge traditional concepts of neighbor-love. It was these concerns that almost certainly in part prompted the

eighteenth-century's striking embrace of sympathy as a partial remedy or palliative for the negative externalities associated with these simultaneously progressive and dislocating phenomena.

IV

So far I've mostly argued that the eighteenth-century concept of sympathy had a normative purpose. Yet to say that sympathy was principally conceived as a response to a practical problem begs a more fundamental question, namely: why was *sympathy* per se the answer to this problem? Put differently, even if sympathy is indeed *best regarded* as an answer to the problem of human association, exactly why did the eighteenth-century theorists think it – and not some other concept or category – the *best answer* to this problem?

The reasons for this, I think, are twofold. The first concerns the fact that the principal extant alternative to sympathy was increasingly coming to be regarded as less viable as a solution. Love, that is, conceived as the charity that bound neighbors together, required epistemic commitments that eighteenth-century thinkers became increasingly less willing to make. The reasons for such are easily enough seen. The Gospel commandment to love thy neighbor was of course one of two commands, the first being to love God with all one's heart and all one's strength. Only after this first command was fulfilled was it possible to pursue the second. This decisively shaped the nature and function of *caritas*, as love for one's self and for one's neighbor came to be mediated and informed by the love of the divine; indeed the very reason why it was good to love self and neighbor lay in the belief that both are created in God's image. Yet to say only the least again, eighteenth-century epistemology not only

challenged such theistic foundationalism but also deprived it of its once-privileged status as a proper foundation for ethics.

So in some deep sense, sympathy came to replace love because the theistic foundations of *caritas* were increasingly regarded as epistemically unavailable; in this sense, sympathy sought to take us straight to neighbor-love without becoming waylaid by the necessity of prior love of God.^{xxvi} But there is also a second epistemic reason for sympathy's ascendancy. Even as eighteenth-century thinkers grew ever more skeptical towards the transcendent, they also came ever more to embrace the immanent. That is to say, challenges to theism arose simultaneously with renewed interest in the nature of human corporeality and physiology. And on this front, the particularly important point concerned not simply corporeality, but a particular aspect of corporeality: sensation.

The study of sensation stood at the forefront of several of the fields of inquiry focused on sympathy in the eighteenth century, including especially the medical and physiological researches that flourished in Edinburgh in its middle decades, and the epistemological studies being prosecuted in Paris during the same period. As has been noted with regard to the former, Scottish medical researchers tended to regard sympathy as "an extension of sensibility," which enabled them to generate fruitful associations of the "action of sensation, the coordination of organs in the body, and the 'social principle' that allows 'fellow-feeling to emerge in a society."^{xxvii} So too in France, where the *Encyclopédistes* and their allies recognized in sympathy a type of social bond that comported well with their emphasis on the primacy of sensation in epistemic functioning. In this vein, the *Encyclopédie* itself included two substantial

entries for *sympathie*, with the first (by d'Alembert) dedicated to sympathy as a mechanical phenomenon concerning "the predilection that certain bodies have to unite or join as a result of a certain resemblance," and the second (by Jaucourt) dedicated to the "communication that the parts of the body have with each other, and which holds them in a mutual dependence," and which "transports to one part the pains and maladies which afflict another."^{xxviii} In both cases, sympathy served to replace the need for recourse to theistic foundationalism with recourse to a more immediate set of empirical criteria available to all sensing beings.

One of the best-developed versions of this line of thinking was set forth by Sophie de Grouchy. For de Grouchy, sympathy is "the disposition we have to feel as others do." In large part this took the form of feeling their pains via the extension of our sensibility through the imagination; hence her explicit claim that "reproduction of the general impression of pain on our organs depends on sensibility and above all on the imagination."^{xxix} This would be a familiar claim by the time it was published in 1798, yet de Grouchy gave it an important spin that served to connect the normative elements of sympathy to its sensationalist origins:

Of what great importance it is, therefore, to train the sensibility of children so that it may develop to its fullest capacity in them. Their sensibility needs to reach that point where it can no longer be dulled by things that in the course of life tend to lead it astray, to carry us far from nature and from ourselves, and to concentrate our sensibility in all the passions of egoism and vanity.^{xxx}

De Grouchy, like other eighteenth-century sympathy theorists would have resisted our familiar distinction today between the empirical and the normative. Owing in part to their conception of sensation, for eighteenth-century theorists, "sympathy is empirical truth of the first water."^{xxxi} At the same time, the cultivation of sympathy

was seen as a necessary duty by those who sought to encourage the bonds of fellow feeling in a world in which they often seemed besieged. In this respect de Grouchy reveals herself to be indebted to Rousseau, who gave in his *Emile* perhaps the best and fullest account of how natural sensation might be cultivated in order to promote the spread of “the joyfulness of loving humanity and serving it.”^{xxxii}

Sympathy thus not only offered a normative response to a pressing problem, but did so in a manner congenial to and commensurate with certain movements in eighteenth-century natural philosophy and epistemology. In an age obsessed with the investigation of the connections that bound together seemingly discrete entities, sympathy struck an obvious chord. Thus Berkeley’s account of “that sympathy in our nature whereby we feel the pains and joys of our fellow-creatures”:

As the attractive power in bodies is the most universal principle which produceth innumerable effects, and is the key to explain the various phenomena of nature; so the corresponding social appetite in human souls is the great spring and source of moral actions. This is that inclines each individual to an intercourse with his species and models everyone to that behavior which best suits with common well being.^{xxxiii}

So too another great Aberdeen philosopher, George Turnbull:

A careful examiner will find, that all our affections and passions are not only well-suited to our external circumstances; but that they themselves, and all the laws or methods of exercising them, with their different consequences, have a very exact correspondence with, and analogy to the sensible, world, and its laws. Is there not an obvious similarity between the principle of gravitation toward a common center, and universal benevolence, in their operation?...Homogeneous bodies more easily coalesce than others: and so is it with minds. For is not friendship a particular sympathy of minds analogous to that particular tendency we may observe in certain bodies to run together and mix or adhere? Compassion, or a disposition to relieve the distressed, is it not similar to that tendency we observe in nutritious particles of several kinds, to run to the supply of wants in bodies which they are respectively proper to supply.^{xxxiv}

Sympathy, conceived as the moral connection that binds one individual to another, was thus deeply indebted for its rise to the ubiquitous discourse on attraction that dominated eighteenth-century philosophy in all its branches, from the discussions of gravitation and magnetism that dominated physics, to the discussions of process coordination that dominated medicine, to the discussions of the association of ideas that dominated epistemology. In this sense, sympathy was the extension into the moral realm of a principle already central to several other branches of philosophy.^{xxxv}

V

Thus far we have seen a) the eighteenth-century concept of sympathy was developed as normative philosophical response to a pressing practical problem; and b) that this response took the particular form that it did because of the skeptical and materialist tendencies that were on the rise in both contemporary epistemology and natural philosophy. Yet for all this, a third question remain unanswered: namely, granting that sympathy was an answer to a specific question, and indeed a fitting answer to this question, to what degree ought it be regarded as a *good* answer? In particular, was sympathy in fact capable of providing the check on self-interest and concomitant encouragement of other-directed feeling that it promised?

This question brings us to what might be regarded as a tension between the end of sympathy and the means of sympathy. In the first section of the talk, we saw that the primary end of sympathy was to check the potentially pernicious effects of self-interest. In the second section we saw that the means towards this end was not simply a positing of the sort of selfless other-directedness we today associate with

altruism. On the contrary, sympathy's appeal lay in the fact that far from requiring transcendence of a concern for the self, its mechanism for sensitizing us to the pains and pleasures of others was precisely the pains and pleasures experienced by the self. This necessarily leads us to wonder whether in fact a system predicated on such a mechanism is likely to (so to speak) get us where it wants to go.

This tension between ends and means seems to me particularly pronounced in those theorists most concerned to defend sympathy as a counter to familiar forms of psychological and ethical egoism. This project was of course a central component of eighteenth-century ethics, especially in Britain, with partisans of natural human sociability and the existence of a genuine capacity for benevolent concern for others ranged against those who reduced all ethical action to manifestations of self-interest and self-love. In the former camp were figures such as Shaftesbury and Hutcheson, who saw themselves as the vanguard of an offensive against the ethical egoism of the latter camp. Hobbes and Mandeville in particular had done much to pique the defenders of other-directedness to action, insisting that even the most engaging of the other-directed passions has self-interest at its core; thus Hobbes equated pity with "compassion" and "fellow-feeling," and notoriously argued that "grief, for the calamity of another...ariseth from the imagination that the like calamity may befall himself."^{xxxvi} Mandeville, in a similar vein, reduced charity to a means of mitigating anxiety: "Thus thousands give money to beggars from the same motive as they pay their corn-cutter, to walk easy."^{xxxvii} Writ large in both Hobbes and Mandeville is thus the psychological egoism that we saw in Spinoza. And it was of course

precisely this that the defenders of other-directedness sought to counter in developing their idea of sympathy. But exactly how successful were they?

In what follows I want to suggest that the defenders of sympathy conceded a quite remarkable amount of ground to their antagonists, and that these concessions nearly proved fatal to their project. Their principal concession to the psychological egoists was that the proper frame for evaluating and defending sympathy is in fact the self and its pleasures and pains. Indeed it was this fact more than any other that bound the defenders of other-directedness to partisans of the selfish system. This is particularly evident in their accounts of the relationship of sympathy to happiness. The indispensability of sympathy to true happiness is one of the keynotes of these accounts; thus Shaftesbury claims from the start that “to have the natural affections (such as are founded in love, complacency, good-will, and in a sympathy with the kind or species) is to have the chief means and power of self-enjoyment,” and indeed “to want them is certain misery and ill.”^{xxxviii} Here and in what follows it is difficult not to be struck by Shaftesbury’s claim that sympathy ought to be placed among man’s “mental enjoyments,” which prove to be “the only means which can procure him a certain and solid happiness.”^{xxxix} Now in saying this, it is of course hardly his intention to encourage egocentrism; the entire *Inquiry* is at its core a critique of such. But the particular route it takes to this end – a defense of sympathy as happiness-promoting – poses a potential challenge, for even if it should be true that “exerting whatever we have of social affection, and human sympathy, is of the highest delight” and that with regard to “the pleasures of sympathy” there “is hardly such a thing as satisfaction or contentment, of which they make not an essential

part,” by insisting that sympathy is indispensable to the happiness of the individual, Shaftesbury takes an important step away from the traditional understanding of love’s value, which privileged the well-being of the beloved over that of the lover, towards an other-directedness that privileges the subjective well-being of the self.^{xi}

Shaftesbury moreover was hardly alone on this front. Hutcheson likewise rejected the claim that sympathy is to be accounted for by a mere “conjunction of interest” where “the happiness of others becomes the means of private pleasure to the observer; and for this reason, or with a view to this private pleasure, he desires the happiness of another.”^{xli} Hutcheson thought this far too reductionist. Yet when he came to speak in his own name, he articulated a position that comes close to this, insisting “our sympathy or social feelings with others, by which we derive joys or sorrows from their prosperity or adversity,” in fact constitute an important “source of happiness or misery”:

While there’s any life or vigour in the natural affections of the social kind, scarce any thing can more affect our happiness and misery than the fortunes of others. What powerful relief under our own misfortunes arises from seeing the prosperity of such as are dear to us! And how is all our enjoyment of life destroyed and beat to pieces by seeing their misery!”^{xlii}

It is not a far step from here to the claim, urged by the egoists, that our beneficence is the fruit of our solicitude for our individual pleasures. This would be particularly urged by Butler, who in arguing against Hobbes’s definition of pity, insists that the self is the proper sphere of reference: “When we rejoice in the prosperity of others, and compassionate their distresses, we, as it were, substitute them for ourselves, their interest for our own; and have the same kind of pleasure in their prosperity, and sorrow in their distress, as we have from reflection on our own.”^{xliii} And so too

Fordyce: “a man of an enlarged benevolent mind, who thinks, feels, and acts for others, is not subject to half the disquietudes of the contracted selfish soul; finds a thousand alleviations to soften his disappointments, which the other wants; and has a fair chance for double his enjoyments.”^{xliv} As in the previous cases, Fordyce takes an explicitly eudaimonistic perspective, but one that raises the question of whether and how it can be distanced from the reductionism of his antagonists. The original line of demarcation separating the two camps was clearly defined. Where Hobbes and Spinoza insisted that good and bad were to be judged by the standard afforded by the passions, their opponents, such as the Cambridge Platonist Henry More, argued that “no man’s private inclinations are the measures of good and evil,” for “the inclinations themselves are to be circumscribed by some principle which is superior to them.”^{xlv} Yet it is not clear that this can be achieved if eudaimonism is substituted for theism. Put differently, we might wonder on such grounds whether the broader tradition of eighteenth-century sympathy might not be susceptible to the challenge that Thomas Reid raised with particular reference to the sympathy theory of Adam Smith: namely that it was “only a refinement of the selfish system.”^{xlvi}

VI

By way of conclusion: this talk has covered a great deal of ground – too much perhaps for one afternoon, but not nearly enough, it must be said, to do justice to the full complexity of eighteenth-century sympathy. After all, next to nothing has been said about one of its most important contexts, namely that of the literary and visual and performing arts. Indeed doing full justice would require detailed investigation

of how this story told this afternoon maps onto the ways sympathy was conceived and operationalized in, say, the novels of Fielding, the engravings of Hogarth, and the dramatic works and commentary of Rousseau. Relatedly, almost nothing has been said to this point about how this story maps on to the two greatest eighteenth-century theories of sympathy, those of David Hume and Adam Smith. Part of this, I admit, is by design – owing to the division of labor by the editor of the volume in which an expanded version of this talk will later appear, Hume and Smith will be separately treated in another piece, with my charge being, so to speak, “all the rest.” But even I’m not satisfied leaving matters this way, and thus will conclude with one very brief remark concerning a possible implication of what I’ve argued today for our understanding of Hume and Smith. Today Hume’s and Smith’s conceptions of sympathy tend to be regarded primarily as elements of a phenomenological project to account for the mechanisms of judgment rather than as elements of a normative account of the sources of moral motivation.^{xlvii} Clearly there are grounds for so doing; that Hume and Smith thought sympathy central to judgment is beyond dispute. Yet exclusive focus on the phenomenological side of their theory of sympathy can blind us to the breadth and depth of this theory. It’s my hope that the contextual history of this concept that I’ve sought to offer here might give further reasons for us to see Smith and Hume as participants in a long tradition of seeing sympathy as a principle (indeed a central principle) of agent motivation.^{xlviii}

ⁱ For a helpful introduction to the way in which scholars of literature and the theater have conceived of sympathy in the eighteenth century, see esp. David Marshall, *The Surprising Effects of Sympathy: Marivaux, Diderot, Rousseau, and Mary Shelley* (Chicago, 1988). The key recent treatment of eighteenth-century sympathy from the perspective of political theory is Michael Frazer, *The Enlightenment of Sympathy: Justice and the Moral Sentiments in the Eighteenth Century and Today* (Oxford, 2010). In experimental economics, see esp. the work of Vernon Smith, e.g. *Rationality in Economics: Constructivist and Ecological Forms* (Cambridge, 2007), 15-16.

ⁱⁱ Bernier, “Les métamorphoses de la sympathie au siècle des Lumières,” in *Les lettres sur la sympathie (1798) de Sophie de Grouchy: philosophie morale et reforme sociale*, ed. Bernier and Deidre Dawson (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2010), 4. For similar statements of the heterogeneity of the eighteenth-century concept, see e.g. Jonathan Lamb, *The Evolution of Sympathy in the Long Eighteenth Century* (London, 2009), 18; and Evelyn Forget, “Evocations of Sympathy: Sympathetic Imagery in Eighteenth-Century Social Theory and Philosophy,” *History of Political Economy* 35 (2003): 284, 288.

ⁱⁱⁱ These helpful definitions are given in Luigi Turco, “Sympathy and Moral Sense, 1725-1740,” *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 7 (1999): 79.

^{iv} Spinoza, *Ethics*, Sch.Pr.2,III; and *Ethics* Pr.6,III; cf. Pr.7,III and Sch.Pr.44,III. Quotations from the *Ethics* are from the Shirley translation (Hackett, 1992).

^v *Ethics*, Sch.Pr.13,III.

^{vi} *Ethics*, Sch.Pr.15,III.

^{vii} Cf. e.g. among others Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Richard Tuck (Cambridge, 1996), 468.

^{viii} *Ethics* Pr.52,III.

^{ix} *Ethics* Pr.27,III.

^x *Ethics* Pr.27,III.

^{xi} *Ethics*, Pr.29,III.

^{xii} For an excellent history of this debate, see esp. Leonidas Montes, “Das Adam Smith Problem: Its Origins, the Stage of the Current Debate, and One Implication for Our Understanding of Sympathy,” *Journal of the History of Economic Thought* 35 (2003): 63-90. Montes’ article also does much reestablish the centrality of Smith’s own

insistence on the action-motivating aspects of sympathy. I treat the specific implications of this debate for Smith scholarship in my “Adam Smith: From Love to Sympathy,” *Revue internationale de philosophie* (forthcoming).

^{xiii} Butler, *Fifteen Sermons*, in *The Works of Joseph Butler* (William Tegg, 1867; reprint Adamant Media, 2006), 49.

^{xiv} Butler, *Fifteen Sermons*, 58.

^{xv} Butler, *Fifteen Sermons*, 52-53.

^{xvi} Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality*, in *Discourses and Other Early Political Writings*, ed. Victor Gourevitch (Cambridge, 1997), 154.

^{xvii} Fordyce, *Elements of Moral Philosophy*, ed. Thomas Kennedy (Liberty Fund, 2003), 44-45.

^{xviii} Fordyce, *Elements*, 91.

^{xix} Burke, *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, ed. Adam Phillips (Oxford, 2008), 42-43.

^{xx} Kames, *Essays on the Principles of Morality and Natural Religion*, ed. Mary Catherin Moran (Liberty Fund, 2005), 19-20.

^{xxi} Kames, *Elements of Criticism*, ed. Peter Jones (Liberty Fund, 2005), 308.

^{xxii} Kames, *Essays*, 17.

^{xxiii} Kant, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*, in *Anthropology History, and Education*, ed. Günter Zöller and Robert Louden (Cambridge, 2007), 30-32. See also Frazer’s discussion of how “Kant’s objection to treating sympathetic inclinations as the determining ground of one’s moral choices is not a moral objection to sympathetic inclinations as such” (*Enlightenment of Sympathy*, 118).

^{xxiv} Sophie de Grouchy, *Letters on Sympathy: A Critical Edition*, ed. Karin Brown (American Philosophical Society, 2008), 132, 149.

^{xxv} de Grouchy, *Letters on Sympathy*, 113. For a (slightly) more poetic rendering of the same thought, see Samuel Jackson Pratt’s *Sympathy: A Poem*:

In cities thus, though trade’s tumultuous train
Spurn at the homely maxims of the plain,
Not all the pride of rank, the trick of art,
Can chase the generous passion from the heart:

Nay more, a larger circle it must take,
Where men embodying, larger int'rests make,
And each, perforce, round each more closely twine,
Where countless thousands form the social line (Bk 2, ll. 35-42).

^{xxvi} Some scholars have emphasized the “Christian underpinnings” of sympathy and other forms of “sentimental humanitarianism”; see e.g. Norman Fiering, “Irresistible Compassion: An Aspect of Eighteenth-Century Sympathy and Humanitarianism,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 37 (1976): 214. And indeed one can find multiple eighteenth-century sermons that make this claim; see e.g. John Doughty, *Christian Sympathy* (London, 1752), and Peter Thatcher, *Christian Sympathy* (Boston, 1794). But with regard to the philosophical literature it seems fair to say that sympathy was largely conceived as a non-theistic alternative to Christian concepts. For a helpful development of this claim, see esp. Frazer, *Enlightenment of Sympathy*, 11, 16, 30, 39.

^{xxvii} Forget, “Evocations of Sympathy,” 291-92.

^{xxviii} See *Encyclopédie*, vol. 15, pp. 735-36, as available online courtesy of the ARTFL Project: http://artflx.uchicago.edu/images/encyclopedie/V15/ENC_15-735.jpeg and http://artflx.uchicago.edu/images/encyclopedie/V15/ENC_15-736.jpeg. Also see the account given in Bernier, “Les métamorphoses de la sympathie,” 14.

^{xxix} de Grouchy, *Letters on Sympathy*, 108-109.

^{xxx} de Grouchy, *Letters on Sympathy*, 111-2.

^{xxxi} Lamb, *Evolution of Sympathy*, 6.

^{xxxii} de Grouchy, *Letters on Sympathy*, 112. I explore this side of Rousseau at length in “Rousseau’s Virtue Epistemology,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 50 (forthcoming 2012).

^{xxxiii} Berkeley, *Guardian* #49, as quoted in Fiering, “Irresistible Compassion,” 203-204.

^{xxxiv} Turnbull, *The Principles of Moral and Christian Philosophy*, ed. Alexander Broadie (Liberty Fund, 2005), 654.

^{xxxv} On this point, see especially the useful development of this claim in Bernier, “Les métamorphoses de la sympathie,” 2.

^{xxxvi} Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 43.

xxxvii Mandeville, "An Essay on Charity, and Charity-Schools," in *Fable of the Bees*, ed. F. B. Kaye (Liberty Fund, 1988), vol. 1, 259.

xxxviii Shaftesbury, "An Inquiry Concerning Virtue and Merit," in *Characteristicks*, ed. Douglas J. Den Uyl (Liberty Fund, 2001), vol. 2, p. 57.

xxxix Shaftesbury, "Inquiry Concerning Virtue," 58.

xl Shaftesbury, "Inquiry Concerning Virtue," 62.

xli Hutcheson, *An Essay on the Nature and Conduct of the Passions and Affections*, ed. Aaron Garrett (Liberty Fund, 2002), 23.

xliv Hutcheson, *Short Introduction to Moral Philosophy*, ed. Turco (Liberty Fund, 2007), 60.

xlv Butler, *Fifteen Sermons*, 45.

xlvi Fordyce, *Elements*, 137, see also 138-39.

xlvii More, *An Account of Virtue* (London, 1690), 81; cf. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 39; Spinoza, *Ethics*, Sch.Pr.9,III.

xlviii Reid to Kames, 30 October 1778, in *On Moral Sentiments*, ed. John Reeder (Thommes, 1997), 66.

xlix This is a prominent theme in D. D. Raphael, *The Impartial Spectator: Adam Smith's Moral Philosophy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007); and Fonna Forman-Barzilai, *Adam Smith and the Circles of Sympathy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

l This is a prominent theme in D. D. Raphael, *The Impartial Spectator: Adam Smith's Moral Philosophy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007); and Fonna Forman-Barzilai, *Adam Smith and the Circles of Sympathy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).
lxi For the beginnings of this debate, see, in addition to Montes, "Das Adam Smith Problem," 82-85 and Montes, *Adam Smith in Context* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 45-55, Eric Schliesser's review of Montes and Raphael in *Ethics* 118 (2008): 569-75; and the response in Ian S. Ross, *The Life of Adam Smith*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 478n.