Hume's Moral Philosophy and Contemporary Psychology

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9 Empathy, Interdependency, and Morality

Building From Hume's Account

Lorraine L. Besser

Empathy, or the capacity to experience the affective states as those around you, has long captured the attention of philosophers and psychologists. And it isn't hard to see why: mysteries abound regarding the nature of this capacity. What psychological processes make this possible, and when and why are they activated? Does this capacity allow us to develop knowledge of other people's minds? If so, what are the limits of this kind of knowledge? More generally, what are the effects of experiencing the emotions, passions, or inclinations of another? Does it pull us closer to that person, and make us want to help her, or does it work the other way—such that, for example, we work to avoid experiencing suffering empathetically by distancing ourselves off from the suffering of others?

While the mysteries surrounding this capacity cross many different areas and disciplines, much of the interest surrounding the phenomenon of empathy has concerned empathy's connection with morality. Martin Hoffman's seminal work on empathy, for example, considers how it is that empathy spurs and prompts moral development, even and especially in the very young (2000). C.D. Batson's influential line of research explores the connections between empathy and altruism; Batson (1991, 2010) argues that our emotional reactions to the feelings of another generates altruistic motives to relieve the suffering and distress of the other, a view he traces to both Aquinas and Adam Smith. The connection between empathy and morality seems so strongly rooted that many contemporary sentimentalists, notably Michael Slote (2001), maintain that empathy is a prerequisite for making moral judgments.

Despite this widespread association between empathy and morality—or perhaps more accurately, in response to this widespread association—the salience of empathy to morality has come under fire: Jesse Prinz (2011a, 2011b) argues that empathy is counterproductive to morality and that sentimentalists ought to focus instead on the importance of non-empathic emotions; Paul Bloom (2016) argues that empathy is too biased and narrow to serve as a basis for social policy and more generally challenges the common assumption that bad people are defined by their lack

of empathy; and Peter Goldie (2011) worries that some forms of empathy interfere with an agent's agency and practical reason.

These debates raise genuine questions and concerns regarding the role that empathy has to play within a moral theory. In this chapter, I center specifically on the concerns raised by Prinz regarding the place of empathy within moral theory. I'll argue that revisiting Hume's understanding of sympathy will help us to better understand the relationship between empathy and morality.[1] I'll argue, contra Prinz, that the most salient role of sympathy within Hume's theory is to explain our interdependency and to build upon this interdependency to develop and promote intersubjectivity. Hume's careful and nuanced account of how sympathy contributes to morality reveals a central and often underappreciated role for empathy.

After taking some time to identify what I take to be the essential notion of empathy at stake in these debates, I'll begin my argument by considering in detail Prinz's criticisms of empathy's place in morality. Much of Prinz's argument relies upon a view of the connection between empathy and moral judgments that is often attributed to Hume, and this view serves as the target of Prinz's arguments. But, as I'll argue, the interpretation of Hume that Prinz works with is problematic on several key respects. I'll go on to defend an interpretation of Hume that shows the role sympathy plays in associating individuals with one another and in establishing the ways in which individuals are dependent upon one another. This reading of the role of Humean sympathy reveals an important contribution empathy makes to morality: it creates an intersubjective base which not only makes morality relevant and necessary, but shapes the very nature of morality itself.

1. What Is Empathy?

In contemporary discourse, the term "empathy" is used to describe an umbrella of different phenomena, all surrounding the transmission of mental states between agents. Batson (2010) helpfully identifies eight ways in which the term "empathy" is used by contemporary philosophers and psychologists, where these usages are demarcated by the mode in which mental states are transmitted (e.g., through the projection of oneself into the position or another, or simply imagining what another is feeling) and which mental states themselves are transmitted (e.g., thoughts and feelings, or simply emotions, or only the emotions specific to distress). The kind of empathy I focus on here can be understood generally as what Batson describes as "coming to feel as another person feels" (Batson 2010: 6).

To begin our analysis, we can start with this rough conception of empathy according to which empathy involves the capacity to feel what another is feeling, whether this be through an act of perspective taking, through some more immediate process of contagion, or through some other process. As the exercise of this ability often generates particular

reactions, "empathy" is sometimes used to describe both the ascertaining of another's emotions and the natural response to those emotions, such as when we realize someone else is in pain and feel compassion for them. Batson, for example, takes empathy to be "an other-oriented emotional response elicited by and congruent with the perceived welfare of someone in need" (Batson 2010: 2). In view of including feelings of compassion in his characterization of empathy, Batson's approach frames empathy in such a way that it can be naturally extended to morality. Because we are interested in explaining the possible connection between empathy and morality, however, we will focus on understanding empathy as distinct from its motivational effects.

This kind of empathy serves a foundational role within Hume's moral theory, although Hume (as well as Smith), used the word "sympathy" to describe the process.[2] Hume describes sympathy as a communicative process or mechanism that culminates in the feelings of another becoming "the very passion itself, and produc[ing] an equal emotion" in the agent considering the passions, sentiments, and inclinations of another (T 2.1.11.3; SBN 317).[3] Like many contemporary researchers, Hume thought that sympathy could be voluntary, as when we actively begin the process by imagining the emotions of another (T 2.1.11.6; SBN 318; T 3.3.2.5; SBN 594–5), but he thought that most often empathy is involuntary: "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" (T 3.3.2.2; SBN 592).[4]

As many have noted, Hume's basic observations regarding the nature of sympathy have been borne out in scientific research.[5] Hoffman, for instance, finds evidence of contagion (a form of empathy in which the communication of sentiments is immediate and involuntary) in newborns, a phenomenon he argues gives rise to a particular kind of empathic distress, magnified by the newborn's inability to distinguish being in actual distress versus empathetic distress.[6] Neuroscientific research, led largely by Rizzolatti (e.g., Rizzolatti et al. 1996), highlights the role of mirror neurons, which comprise a mirroring system that seems to enable the mimicry at work in contagion. Neuroscientific research also provides support for intentional empathy, brought about by thinking about other's perspectives (e.g., Buckner and Carroll 2007).[7]

It seems that there is contemporary corroboration of Hume's basic conception of sympathy as a psychological phenomenon, making it fair to assume the phenomenon Hume identifies as "sympathy" is similar to if not the same phenomenon contemporary discourse terms "empathy." Recognizing this point of connection between Hume's discussion and contemporary discussion makes it the case that developments on one side can (and ought to) influence the other. This is indeed the strategy Prinz employs in his efforts to challenge the moral salience of empathy; Prinz argues that developments in our understanding of empathy (and its

limits) challenge what Hume took to be the essential relationship between sympathy and morality. In what follows, after critically examining this argument, I will argue that it is rather contemporary theorists that have much to learn from Hume's understanding of morality, and that we can find within Hume's theory resources to understand more deeply why it is that empathy is crucial to morality and specifically to our conception of ourselves as moral agents.

2. Empathy and Moral Judgment

Given the power of empathy to enable people to feel the feelings of another, it is a natural step to think about the ways in which empathy might contribute to our understanding of morality. An agent's capacity to empathize with others around her can play a significant motivational role in her efforts to help those around her, and there is a standard and compelling connection to be made between empathy and moral motivation. But there is also a deeper and more fundamental way in which empathy can contribute to morality, and this is to see empathy as informing our moral judgments.

There is an intuitive appeal to such an approach. An empathy-infused approach to morality is able to give an analysis of moral judgments that makes it clear both why morality matters (because moral judgments constitute an affirmation of the importance of another's emotions) and why moral judgments typically move us (because they are connected to our own experiences of pleasure and pain).

According to Prinz (2011a, 2011b), Hume offers such an account of moral judgments. Prinz argues that for Hume, *sympathy is a precondition for the sentiments of approbation and disapprobation that become constitutive of our moral judgments* (2011a: 216). He identifies this as Hume's "constitution thesis" (2011a: 217). The basic idea is straightforward: sympathizing with those who feel pained by acts leads us to judge those acts to be vicious, and sympathizing with those who feel pleased by acts leads us to judge those acts to be virtuous. On this interpretation, our sympathetic emotions constitute our moral judgments. The judgment that a helping act is virtuous is constituted by the feelings of pleasure we sympathetically feel when contemplating the pleasure someone feels upon being helped.

Despite the intuitive advantages that come with such a view of moral judgments, Prinz thinks Hume's view and specifically the constitution thesis, goes fundamentally astray. The problem, he argues, is that for several reasons moral judgments frequently do not track the empathic emotions said to be constitutive of them.

First, there is no "kind of congruence between the emotions of one who approves and those on either side of the action being approved" (Prinz 2011a: 217–18); that is, the emotions of the involved parties often simply don't fit in the manner required by the constitution thesis.

To illustrate, he considers the difference between the gratitude one feels upon being helped, and the admiration we feel for the helper:

> Gratitude and admiration are clearly different emotions. They have difference causes, phenomenology, and action tendencies. When grateful, there is a feeling of indebtedness and a tendency to reciprocate or express thanks. Admiration, on the other hand, has an upward directionality—we look up to those we admire—and tends toward expressions of respect rather than reciprocation.
>
> (Prinz 2011a: 217)

Given the differences in the passions experienced by the relevant parties, it does indeed seem problematic to claim that our judgment that helping is virtuous is, in fact, constituted by those emotions.

Second, it seems that the constitution thesis also falls short in its capacity to explain the moral judgments we make with respect to victimless crimes (Prinz 2011a: 218, 2011b: 214). According to Prinz, clearly we make judgments that certain acts are wrong even when there are no victims. But if there is no empathic exchange, then the constitution thesis holds that there can be no moral judgments. This seems implausible. In these cases, there is no victim with whom to empathize, yet we still make moral judgments. Related scenarios arise when we consider spontaneous moral judgments that seem to arise without empathy, such as the immediate disapproval I feel upon being the victim of a crime (Prinz 2011a: 219). These instances of disparity between moral judgments and the empathic sentiments Prinz takes to be required by the constitution thesis lead him to conclude that the constitution thesis is descriptively false, and that sympathetic motives are not necessary for moral judgment.

These considerations certainly challenge the viability of the constitution thesis, and I think Prinz is right to be skeptical of it. But I also have some concerns about whether or not Hume embraces the constitution thesis. To develop these concerns, let us examine why Prinz attributes the constitution thesis to Hume.

Prinz (2011b: 214) takes Hume to endorse the following claims:

1. Virtuous actions are those that intentionally bring about pleasure, while vicious actions intentionally bring about pain.
2. We feel sympathy upon contemplating pleasure or pain in another.
3. Our sympathetic responses to the recipients of virtuous and vicious acts generate feelings of approval/disapproval.
4. These feelings of approval/disapproval constitute our moral judgments.

These claims, Prinz argues, suggest that sympathy is a precondition for the approval/disapproval of which our moral judgments are constituted.

The general picture Prinz finds in Hume is as follows: when an act causes pleasure, we—qua observer—sympathize with that pleasure, and so come to feel the same pleasure that the act produces. This sympathetic pleasure leads us to approve of the act and so to judge that the act is morally good. For example, Jack sees Joe helping an elderly woman, Julia, carry her grocery bags. Julia feels pleasure in virtue of being helped. Jack sympathizes with Julia's pleasure and comes to feel pleasure himself, and on the basis of this sympathetic pleasure comes to morally approve of Joe's act of helping.

Is Hume's view really this straightforward? While it seems unproblematic to attribute claims 1–3 to Hume, I worry about whether claims 1–3 lead to claim 4, which is the constitution thesis. That is, while Hume may believe that virtuous actions generate pleasure while vicious actions generate pain, and that we sympathize with those feelings of pleasure and pain, is it true that our sentimental responses feeding into our moral judgments are the product of sympathy and specifically the ones generated through our sympathetic responses to the recipients of virtuous/vicious acts?

Prinz does not spend a lot of time defending his interpretation—his interest is not Hume scholarship, but is rather to explore a view that has at least an "initial ring of plausibility" (2011b: 214). But if we are really interested in understanding the role that sympathy can and does play within morality, it is worth looking into the details of Hume's account.

In Prinz (2011b), he supports the preceding interpretation by appeal to the following passage from Hume's *Treatise*: "as everything, which gives uneasiness in human actions, upon the general survey, is called Vice, and whatever produces satisfaction, in the same manner, is denominated Virtue" (T 3.2.2.24; SBN 498–500). Hume's specific point of reference here is the virtue of justice and the vice of injustice. He argues that even when injustice does not affect us, through sympathy we still feel uneasiness: "We partake of [the victim's] uneasiness by sympathy" (T 3.2.2.24; SBN 498–500). We feel uneasiness because we sympathize with the victims of injustice; we feel their pain. However, Hume's further explanation of why it is that we move from feeling their pain to feeling the distinctive sentiments of moral approbation appeals to the larger effects of incidents of injustice to the public interest: "a sympathy with public interest is the source of the moral approbation, which attends the virtue" (T 3.2.2.24; SBN 498–500). To the extent that sympathetic feelings drive our moral judgment, it is sympathy with the public interest, rather than with the victim of any particular act.

This difference has important implications not only for the constitution thesis, but also for Prinz's challenges to it: victimless crimes, for example, seem less problematic if what is at stake is the "public interest" rather than any specific victim. Yet it is also important to recognize that this claim that "a sympathy with public interest is the source of the moral approbation" (T 3.2.2.24; SBN 498) is specific to justice and at most the

artificial virtues of fidelity, chastity, and political allegiance. These virtues are distinctive and problematic ones for Hume's overall theory of the virtues in that, unlike what Hume calls the "natural virtues," the artificial virtues are not something towards which we are naturally motivated. This makes it problematic as a virtue, because what makes other things virtues, such as prudence and generosity, is that we approve of the motive underlying the virtue. As we are lacking a natural motive to, for example, justice, Hume argues that justice is an artificial virtue, whose status as a virtue depends upon an artifice. This is why it is sympathy with the public interest that is the source of moral approval: because there is no natural motive to approve of; if there were, the natural motive would be the source of moral approbation.

This analysis highlights the importance of motives to the production of moral approval and disapproval; a point that seems to stand in tension with the constitution thesis as Prinz describes it. In Prinz (2011a), he does cite Hume's more general description of the natural virtues: "When any quality, or character, has a tendency to the good of mankind, we are pleased with it, and approve of it, because it presents the lively idea of pleasure, which idea affects us by sympathy, and is itself a kind of pleasure" (T 3.3.1.14; SBN 580–1). I agree that this quote does illuminate nicely Hume's overall understanding of sympathy's role in our feelings of moral approval, but we need to be cautious about whether it supports the theses he attributes to Hume.

First and foremost, as the preceding quote makes clear, the object of moral approbation, on Hume's account is "qualities or character"— motives—rather than an agent's actions. We are pleased with the quality or character and it is this quality that presents the idea of pleasure with which we sympathize. Thus, "when we praise any actions, we regard only the motive that produced them and consider the actions as signs or indications of certain principles in the mind and temper" (T 3.2.1.2; SBN 477). Hume's emphasis on the *agent's motives* makes it misleading to focus on virtuous actions and their effects, as Prinz's interpretation does. While thesis (1), "virtuous actions are those that intentionally bring about pleasure, while vicious actions intentionally bring about pain" is true, it does not do the work Prinz takes it to. Prinz takes this to indicate that the morally salient feature of virtuous and vicious acts, which constitute our moral judgments, is their capacity to produce pleasure/pain in the recipients of those acts. While it may be true that virtuous and vicious acts produce pleasure and pain in the recipients of those acts, what feeds into our moral approval are the sympathetic feelings that arise from motives. As Hume notes, we can easily imagine some actions that intentionally generate pleasure, such as the greedy miser's hoarding of money, that also generates disapproval when we consider the motives that prompted them, such as the greedy miser's narrow self-interest. This is one reason why Hume maintains that "we are never to consider any

single action in our enquiries concerning the origin of morals, but only the quality or character from which the action proceeded" (T 3.3.1.5; SBN 575).

I think Hume's focus on an agent's motives, rather than actions, dictates a different role for sympathy than Prinz's argument maintains, and at the very least challenges the attribution of the constitution thesis to Hume. While Hume's understanding of the sympathy involved in moral approbation is often read in the manner Prinz suggests, we have seen that this interpretation struggles to make sense of the unique status of the artificial virtues, and of Hume's claim that it is sympathy with an agent's motive that generates our moral approval. Taking these claims seriously generates the following, alternative interpretation of the sympathetic exchanges involved in our moral judgments, in which the morally salient sympathetic communication is between the observer and the agent. Upon observing an agent's actions, we move quickly to consider what motives prompted the act: "my mind immediately passes from these effects to their causes" (T 3.3.1.7; SBN 575–6). It is only once we form an idea of the motives that cause the action that sympathy enters into the picture. We consider the motives, for "these alone are *durable* enough to affect our sentiments concerning the person" (T 3.3.1.5; SBN 575). Moreover, consideration of the general tendency of motives "gives rise to our sympathy" (T 3.3.1.7; SBN 575–6), our sympathy with the agent's motives thus "produces our sentiment of morals" (T 3.3.1.10; SBN 577–8).

This understanding of the sympathetic process at work in our moral approval and disapproval is importantly different, and I think truer to Hume's views, from Prinz's understanding. Return to the case of Jack observing Joe helping Julia. On Prinz's interpretation, the morally salient sympathetic communication occurs between Jack (observer) and Julia (recipient). On my interpretation, the morally salient sympathetic communication occurs between Jack (observer) and Joe (agent). Julia no doubt feels pleasure in virtue of being the recipient of Joe's actions but what generates Jack's moral approval is his (the observer's) sympathetic reactions to Joe's motives. What happens is that Jack reflects upon Joe's helping motive and on the usual tendencies or effects of that motive. Julia's pleasure factors into this process, but sympathetic engagement with the specific recipient is neither necessary nor sufficient: motives that do not generate actions can still generate moral sentiments (T 3.2.1.3; SBN 477–8), for ultimately "reflecting on the tendency of characters and mental qualities is sufficient to give us the sentiments of approbation and blame" (T 3.3.1.9; SBN 577).

I'll say more shortly regarding how on my interpretation sympathy with an agent's motives operates to generate moral sentiments, but even at this stage we are in a position to see it is misleading to describe Hume's view of moral judgment in terms of the constitution thesis, according to which moral judgments are constituted by sympathetic exchanges with

the recipients of virtuous and vicious acts. Moral judgments are not *constituted* by these sympathetic emotions. They derive from the process of sympathizing with an agent's motives, but they are not constituted by emotions derived from sympathy with the victim. This isn't to say that there are not instances in which we sympathize with the recipients and, feasibly, in these occasions this sympathy contributes to our sympathetic reactions to an agent's motives, but it nonetheless seems a mistake to take the former as the one's constitutive of our moral approbation.[8] Sympathy serves, as always on Hume's theory, as an important form of communication between individuals, but it does not feed directly into moral judgment in the manner described by the constitution thesis. Rather, as I have argued, moral judgment derives from reflection on the usual tendencies of the motive under question. If a particular motive tends to cause harm and pain, we will disapprove of it, but not necessarily because we have sympathized with the pain of actual or future victims.

I hope to have shown a plausible alternative interpretation of how sympathy contributes to moral judgments, for which there is much textual support. Let us now consider how this interpretation of Hume allows us to avoid the objections that Prinz makes with respect to the constitution thesis and, so ultimately—as we will consider more concretely in the following section—preserves a role for empathy within a moral theory.

These objections, recall, concern the disparity between moral judgments and empathic emotions; either because it is not clear that there is a relevant empathic emotion at stake, or because the empathic emotions do not resemble the emotions associated with the moral judgment. Prinz's example, remember, is the difference between the gratitude a recipient of helping feels and the admiration that seems part of an observer's moral judgment (Prinz 2011a: 217). Recognizing that Hume's account does not depend upon sympathetic engagement with victims challenges the viability of the former objection. In fact, I think that Hume highlights motives as being the object of our moral sentiments, and that Hume believes moral sentiments derive from reflection on the usual tendency of those motives, actually provides him with a helpful analysis of cases that lack an actual sympathetic exchange with victims. We disapprove of so-called victimless crimes because of reflection on what motivates an agent to perform them. To use one of Prinz's examples, we have an immediate sense of pain and disapproval when considering whatever character or quality motivates one to use a cat as an instrument of masturbation. We do not need to find some victim who is experiencing pain in order to make our moral judgment; rather, the idea we form of the person's character generates the salient pain that factors into our moral disapproval. Similarly, in cases such as stealing, murder, and rape, which Prinz takes to give rise directly to disapprobation without a prior act of empathy, what seems to happen is that we make moral judgments based on past reflection of the usual tendencies of the motives associated with those acts. Hume's

analysis of moral judgments thus ends up giving us a helpful analysis of their distinctive character.[9]

The latter objection, regarding the resemblance between the emotions involved in the moral exchange and the emotions involved in the moral judgment, can also be challenged. Nothing in Hume's account of moral judgment requires resemblance, especially the tight resemblance suggested by Prinz's discussion of the lack of resemblance between kindness and gratitude. The moral sentiments derive from reflection on the general tendency of the motive in question. This means that while we can expect that sentiments of approval have similar affective valences as the usual tendencies of that motive generates (and vice versa with respect to disapproval), there is no reason to expect *resemblance*.

I've argued that Hume is not committed to the constitution thesis as Prinz describes it, and that sympathy with the recipients of virtuous and vicious acts does not generate the feelings of pleasure and pain requisite to our moral approval and disapproval, and for these reasons his view is not vulnerable to the objections Prinz levies against him. Along the way, however, we *have* seen that sympathy is important to Hume's understanding of moral approval and disapproval; it is important insofar as it serves as the principle of communication through which one can learn and reflect upon the motives of another. In the remainder of this chapter, I'll explore this role and defend it as a necessary and important one for Hume's moral theory, and perhaps morality more generally.

3. Intersubjectivity

As we have seen, Hume defines sympathy as a principle of communication that enables us to receive the inclinations and sentiments of others (T 2.1.11.2; SBN 316–7). Hume describes the mechanism and process through which sympathy operates as follows:

> When any affection is infus'd by sympathy, it is at first known only by its effects, and by those external signs in the countenance and conversation, which conveys an idea of it. This idea is presently converted into an impression, and acquires such a degree of force and vivacity, as to become the very passion itself, and produce an equal emotion, as any original affection.
>
> (T 2.1.11.3; SBN 317)

Following Postema (2005), we can analyze Hume's understanding of sympathy as split between two stages: the first stage consists in the formation of an idea of what passion or emotion another is feeling. The second stage consists in the conversion of this idea of another's feelings to an impression of that feeling, an impression that is so strong and vivacious that it "produce[s] an equal emotion" (T 2.1.11.3; SBN 317).

While, as we have seen, our sympathetic capacities influence our feelings of moral approval and disapproval, Hume seems most interested in discussing the ways in which sympathy brings us together. He introduces the principle of sympathy in the context of his analysis of pride, and discussion of the importance of corroborating our feelings of pride with others. Immediately after introducing sympathy, he goes on to explore how it is that—seemingly in virtue of giving us the capacity for sympathy—"nature has preserv'd a great resemblance among all human creatures" (T 2.1.11.5; SBN 318).

Our capacity to sympathize, I will now argue, serves for Hume to create an intersubjective base upon which morality is predicated. Sympathy delivers two dimensions of intersubjectivity: first, it connects us to one another in a deep and fundamental way simply in virtue of being a principle of communication; second, it serves as a regulating force which not only affects our preferences, but also shapes how it is that we interact with one another. These forces combine to present an understanding of the self as essentially merged with and connected to others, such that the lingering differences between the self and others become less morally relevant.

The first dimension is relatively straightforward. Because of sympathy, Hume argues, "the minds of men are mirrors to one another" (T 2.2.5.21; SBN 365). We mirror each other in two ways: first, our minds reflect the emotions of another. This occurs, as we've seen, through our interactions with others. We have the ability to gauge what emotions another is experiencing simply through observation of their facial expressions or tone of voice (T 2.1.11.3; SBN 317). While sympathy sometimes involves active exercise of the imagination, sympathy does not have to involve a conscious effort to sympathize but rather happens immediately and involuntarily due to the resemblance between us and others: "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" (T 3.3.2.2; SBN 592). Second, the mirroring continues past the initial interaction and creates a kind of reverberation of sentiments:

> Thus, the pleasure, which a rich man receives from his possessions, being thrown upon the beholder, causes a pleasure and esteem, which sentiments again, being perceiv'd and sympathiz'd with, increase the pleasure of the possessor; and being one more reflected, become a new foundation for pleasure and esteem in the beholder.
>
> (T 2.2.5.21; SBN 365)

This reverberation both solidifies and enhances one's emotions, making it the case both that we often feel passions more from sympathetic communication than from our own disposition (T 2.1.11.2; SBN 316–17) and

that it is difficult for us to experience emotions in the absence of others with whom to sympathize:

> 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 wou'd they have any force, were we to abstract entirely from the thoughts and sentiments of others.
>
> (T 2.2.5.15; SBN 362–3)

We see here that through the communication of sentiments, sympathy creates a robust sense of intersubjectivity. Following May, we can understand intersubjectivity as concerning "how one is mentally connected with and distinguished from others" (2017: 169). If Hume is right, we are mentally connected with one another not only in the sense that we have first personal awareness and experience of the emotions of another, but also through a robust dependency relationship, insofar as the sympathetic communication of emotions is essential to their very development.

These considerations point us toward the second dimension of intersubjectivity that Hume's understanding of sympathy generates. This centers on the regulating force sympathy plays upon an individual's experiences of emotions, a force that impacts an individual's preferences and interactions with others. From the very outset of his discussion of sympathy, Hume highlights the effect sympathy has in creating uniformity amongst sympathizers. While, naturally, we expect that people will experience differing sentiments, upon engaging in sympathetic communication we find ourselves driven toward agreement—a phenomenon that is

> conspicuous in children, who implicitly embrace every opinion propos'd to them; but also in men of the greatest judgment and understanding, who find it very difficult to follow their own reason or inclination, in opposition to that of their friends and daily companions.
>
> (T 2.1.11.2; SBN 316–17)

The explanation for this phenomenon is easy to parse: while two individuals might start from a position of experiencing conflicting or contradictory emotions, once these emotions are communicated so that both are experiencing them, individuals will naturally be led towards agreement.[10]

We might describe what seems to happen here in terms of emotional regulation. Our sympathetic engagement with others serves as a regulating force on how it is that we experience our emotions. We see this kind of regulation explicitly in Hume's discussion of pride. Here, he argues that pride depends both upon original causes (such as virtue, beauty and riches) and upon the "opinions of others, which has an equal influence on the affections" (T 2.1.11.1; SBN 316). This influence, he argues, is

explained through sympathy: First, "We may observe, that no person is ever prais'd by another for any quality, which wou'd not, if real, produce of itself a pride in the person possest of it" (T 2.1.11.9; SBN 320–1). This means that the causes of pride generate admiration in both the bearer of pride and those considering it. Second, "if a person consider'd himself in the same light, in which he appears to his admirer, he wou'd first receive a separate pleasure, and afterwards a pride or self-satisfaction, according the hypothesis above-explained" (T 2.1.11.9; SBN 320–1). This pride or self-satisfaction comes from the experiencing, through sympathy, the pleasure associated with the admiration of another. Thus, as Taylor explains, "sympathizing with another's admiration of some quality in which I take pride is a process that converts an initial idea of other's admiration into a felt pleasure, which in turn seconds and thus sustains my own pride" (2015: 47).

While the details of Hume's view of pride are complex,[11] from this initial sketch we see the fundamental role that sympathy plays in regulating our feelings of pride. We cannot genuinely feel pride unless others also admire the qualities we pride ourselves in.

In this way, sympathetic engagement generates a uniformity amongst individuals. It creates what we might understand to be a fundamentally social self, constructed through sympathetic engagement with others. Our first personal judgments are open and sensitive to the opinions of others: "no sooner any person approaches me, than he diffuses on me all his opinions, and draws along my judgment in a greater or lesser agree" (T 3.3.2.2; SBN 592). While Hume acknowledges that the influence of others varies, such that "on many occasions, my sympathy with him goes not so far as *entirely* to change my sentiments and way of thinking" (T 3.3.2.2; SBN 592; emphasis mine), the influence is there nonetheless: "it seldom is so weak as not to disturb the easy course of my thought, and give an authority to that opinion, which is recommended to me by his assent and approbation" (T 3.3.2.2; SBN 592).

Given Hume's understanding of sympathy, the self is deeply informed by the sentiments and opinions of others such that one's mental experience depends upon sympathetic engagement. The kind of intersubjectivity emerging here penetrates deeply: we are not just psychologically connected to others; we are psychologically dependent upon others. While there is much more that can and ought to be said with respect to Hume's commitment to intersubjectivity, in the remaining sections of this chapter, let us consider how this aspect of sympathy—its generation of robust intersubjectivity—can help us to understand morality and what it means to be a moral agent. What we will see—and are beginning to see already—is that for Hume sympathy is in fact a precondition of morality. But the way in which it serves as a precondition is different than Prinz depicts, and is a way that avoids the problems Prinz has concerning empathy's potential contribution to morality. My hope is that recognizing the

role Humean sympathy plays in generating intersubjectivity will allow us to see that empathy can play a meaningful role in moral theory.

4. Intersubjectivity, Morality, and Agency

Where individuals are connected through empathy, the standard distinctions we make between ourselves and others become less tenable. What gives me pleasure is also likely to give you pleasure, and, since your pleasure strengthens and reverberates my initial pleasure, I come to depend upon this. This dependency creates a connection between agents that transforms how it is that we ought to understand the self, self-interest, and morality.

We have already seen some indication of how this intersubjectivity influences Hume's conception of morality. We have seen, for example, how intersubjectivity explains Hume's particular take on moral approval and disapproval, and consequent understanding and explanation of the nuances of his conception of moral agents. Moral agents, on his account, gravitate towards a general point of view in order to establish agreement amongst their peers. They learn to depart from their "peculiar point of view" and instead fixate on "some *steady* and *general* points of view" (T 3.3.1.15; SBN 581–2).[12] They are so deeply driven by a concern for how it is that they stand amongst others that their very capacity to enjoy their character depends upon the reputation they earn within society (EPM 9.25; SBN 284).[13] They act so as to prioritize their standing with others, and given these shared, common interests, they make decisions through an expression of common interest, rather than through a process of negotiation (T 3.2.2.22; SBN 497–8).

Morality for intersubjective agents thus functions very differently than it does for non-empathic agents. Because the self is no longer understood as exclusive and independent of others, many standard debates and points of tension within moral theory become moot. As May argues, recognition of intersubjectivity challenges the standard distinctions we make between egoism and altruism, such that debates over the two become a non-issue (2017: 2011). Consider, for instance, the narrowly conceived self-interested agent invoked in discussions of egoism, who cares only for herself and at best indirectly cares for others. This picture of agency stands in tension with the one illustrated earlier, according to which our opinion of our self is fundamentally informed by others such that our very preferences are already influenced by the preferences of others.

Recognizing the intersubjectivity to which empathy gives rise thus allows us to make progress in our understanding of morality and of moral agency. It helps us to see that the perspective exercised in moral agency consists not in a narrowly conceived self-interested perspective but instead consists in a deeply social perspective informed by the emotions of others and drawn to establish agreement. It helps us to see that

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morality is important insofar as it promotes the positive dimensions of intersubjectivity, such as the interests we share in living in a peaceful, well-functioning society, and mitigates the negative, such as our potential to integrate problematic social norms (Taylor 2015).

4. Conclusion

This, I suggest, is the role empathy plays within morality: it creates an intersubjective base that informs moral agency and shapes our moral interests. Recognizing this contribution of empathy shows a fundamental role for empathy within morality that, as I have argued, goes relatively unchallenged by the kinds of concerns Prinz raises with respect to empathy's role in moral judgment. Prinz's worries centered on the nature of particular kinds of empathic communications and whether those were the ones that ought to inform our moral judgments. Seeing empathy's role in morality to be that of establishing an intersubjective base upon which morality is predicated, we see that Prinz's reservations about empathy are unwarranted. What matters is not the nuances of our particular empathic communications, but rather the fact that we empathize with others—a point no reasonable person calls into question. Prinz denies that empathy lies at the foundation of morality, but because empathy leads to intersubjectivity, he does not realize how much he is giving up by denying this.

   That we empathize with others creates an intersubjectivity between individuals that influences morality. We might even argue that, in this regard, not only is empathy relevant to morality but that empathy makes morality relevant. It is because of our fundamental psychological connection to others, that the kinds of social connections morality establishes and promotes are deeply important and relevant to us.

Notes

1. The discrepancies between Hume's usage of "sympathy" and contemporary usage of the word "sympathy"—that takes sympathy to be akin to benevolence or compassion (Darwall 1998; Hoffman 2000)—make a seamless dialogue between the two challenging. In what follows here, I'll use "sympathy" to describe Hume's own view and "empathy" to describe contemporary views of the mechanism or process through which one comes to feel as another person feels. As I'll argue, I do think Humean sympathy is a species of empathy so considered.
2. Hume's understanding of sympathy changes between the *Treatise* and the *Enquiry Concerning Principles of Morals*; my discussion is limited to the *Treatise* account of sympathy.
3. Vitz (2004) notes that in the *Treatise* Hume uses the word "sympathy" to refer to the mechanism by which we engage in sympathy, the process in which another's sentiment is connected to our own, and the communicated sentiment itself—what Vitz describes as the "sentiment of sympathy" (2004: 264). My discussion here will focus primarily on the mechanism and process of sympathy—how we feel the feelings of another.

4. For a helpful analysis of the process of sympathy and the forms it can take, see Postema (2005)
5. See Coplan and Goldie (2011) for an overview.
6. Hoffman argues that "the infant's sense of continuity may break down any time the infant 'shares' distress with another, as in feeling empathic distress, because the kinesthetic bodily sensations on which the self's continuity is based are mixed with the bodily sensations arising from the infant's feeling empathically distressed (due to mimicry, conditioning, and association). The result is a temporary breakdown of the infant's self boundaries, and a feeling of confusion about where his or her distress comes from" (2000: 69). Decety and Meltzoff's research likewise highlight this phenomenon in newborns, although they argue that this "innate capacity to imitate" has a more positive direction, leading to "innate intersubjectivity" (2011: 61). I'll say more about this role of empathy in my positive interpretation of Hume.
7. This research figures heavily into Goldman's (2006) discussion of the simulation approach.
8. In places Hume does seem to struggle with the distinction between sympathy with the victim and sympathy with the agent. For example, in his discussion of pride he writes that the approval we feel when faced with an unduly proud person stems from "a sympathy with others, and from a reflection that such a character is highly displeasing and odious to everyone" (T 3.3.2.17; SBN 601–2). Here it seems that the effects of one's character certainly influence our reflection on the tendencies of this character, suggesting that the former sympathetic act informs the latter.
9. This may even entail that Hume's account is closer to Prinz's positive account of moral judgments. Prinz describes his own view as:

> A (negative) moral judgment arises when an action elicits an emotional response in virtue of the fact that the judger has a sentiment of disapprobation towards actions of that kind. (Positive moral judgments may sometimes involve sentiments of approbation, which may dispose us to positive feelings, such as gratitude, pride in good conduct, or admiration.)
>
> (Prinz 2011b: 215)

This view, as we are beginning to see, may turn out to be much closer to Hume's view than is the constitution thesis.
10. I take this kind of sympathetic agreement, reached upon engaging in a specific sympathetic communication, to be different from the agreement derived from reflection on the common point of view that Hume discusses in T 3.3.1; SBN 574–82. The latter concerns agreement on our moral sentiments in the face of variations in our empathic capacities that inform those sentiments. The problem here, as Hume explains it, is that we sympathize more with those closer to us than we do with strangers or those in remote lands. This variation seems to stand in tension with moral sentiments that are not variable—there is a "variation of the sympathetic sentiment" without a "variation of the [moral] esteem" (T 3.3.1.15; SBN 581–2). Hume solves the tension by suggesting that "to prevent those continual *contradictions*, and arrive at a more *stable* judgment of things, we fix on some *steady* and *general* points of view; and always, in our thoughts place ourselves in them, whatever may be our present situation" (T 3.3.1.15; SBN 581–2). Fixing on the general point of view allows us to regulate or correct our empathic responses so that our moral sentiments are consistent as a practical matter (see Kauppinen (2014: 108–9) for helpful discussion of this point), whereas

the empathic agreement developed through mirroring seems to be prompted more fundamentally by a natural tendency towards assimilation.
11. For discussion, see Besser-Jones (2006, 2010) and Taylor (2012, 2015).
12. For discussion, see Sayre-McCord (1994) and Korsgaard (1999).
13. For discussion, see Besser-Jones (2010).

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