

# Realizing the Emotional Crossing from “Selfishness” to “Goodness”: Realistic Reflections on Hume’s Theory of Sympathy

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## Abstract

The essence of “sympathy” in Hume’s perspective is an emotional transmission mechanism. The exertion of its utility is affected by the relations of resemblance, contiguity and causation. In depth, this emotional transmission mechanism is composed of four links: “self-love” as the origin, “standing by” as the position, “self-reflection” as the impetus, and “goodness” as the emotional direction. Smooth and successful transmission of these four links will help to achieve the emotional crossing from “selfishness” to “goodness”. Under the enlightenment of Hume’s theory, a man needs to look on independently and objectively on the basis of natural conscience, in order to be a qualified sympathizer. At the social level, it is required to build a sympathy environment with impartiality and objectivity, which needs to strengthen sympathy education and to improve the moral reward and punishment mechanism, so as to provide sufficient internal and external conditions for the crossing from “selfishness” to “goodness”.

## Keywords

Goodness; Humanity; Hume; Selfishness; Sympathy.

## 1. Introduction

Hume firstly used the word “sympathy”, which means “with passion”, in *A Treatise of Human Nature* to describe our capacity “to receive by communication inclinations and sentiments, however different from, or even contrary, to our own” (HUME, 1896, 166). “Sympathy”, accompanied by emotion, but not an emotion in itself, is actually an emotional transmission mechanism, which cannot be confused with “compassion” or “kindness”. It reproduces a certain emotion of others through imagination. In other words, “sympathy” is a kind of ability to transform others’ emotional experience into self-emotional experience, which is reflected in the emotional resonance between different people.

“Sympathy” results from emotion. Anyone’s happiness or pain will cause more or less emotional reactions in people’s minds. As Hume argues, “the minds of men are mirrors to one another, not only because they reflect each other’s emotions, but also because those rays of passions, sentiments and opinions may be often reverberated, and may decay away by insensible degree” (HUME, 1896, 191). He believes that “sympathy” is a natural tendency in human nature and an innate ability, which will not be transferred because of people’s subjective will. Men will perceive the psychological activities of others through self-imagination, habit connection and so on. According to Hume, “sympathy” provides the possibility for the emotional crossing from “selfishness” to “goodness”. It is explained how this happens based on Hume’s expositions in the following parts.

## 2. Preparation for the crossing from “selfishness” to “goodness”

“Sympathy” is an objective fact, which means no matter how selfish or vicious someone is, there will be different degrees of “sympathy” factors in his or her humanity. “Sympathy” is based on

imagination. According to Hume, an opinion or belief, may be most accurately defined, “a lively idea related to or associated with a present impression” (HUME, 1896, 223). Our ideas or more feeble perceptions are copies of our impressions. Hume uses “association” to clearly explain how different impressions and ideas are presented in the mind. In his research, “sympathy”, as an emotional transmission mechanism, is affected by three relations-resemblance, contiguity and causation. The degree of these three relations will affect the sympathizers’ ability to perceive the emotions of others, which is the preparation before the emotional crossing.

Firstly, it is affected by the relation of resemblance. Hume believes that nature not only gives men similar physical structure, but also amazing similarity of emotions. The former can easily cause people’s empirical resonance as human organs dominate the perception of the external world. Individuals can obtain external impressions, which are important empirical materials for them to form “emotion”, through their own organs. In addition, Hume thinks that the occurrence of “sympathy” is also related to the observation of resemblance with others. The depth and angle of observation will affect the emotion we experience from others. Thanks to the resemblance of people’s physiological structure and cognitive level, the mutual transmission of emotions between minds can be achieved without interruption.

Secondly, it is influenced by the relation of contiguity, which is embodied in the time and space distance and the intimacy between people. In terms of space-time distance, Hume believes that the distance between people is positively correlated with the effect of “sympathy”. Supposing one couple is breaking up, if they are separated from each other and thus cannot intuitively feel his or her lover’s crying face, the psychology of being moved will be less strong, and the probability of reconciliation will be lower. Additionally, in terms of the degree of intimacy between people, if the relationship between the two people is closer and more harmonious, their feelings will be easier to be transmitted to each other’s mind, which explains to a certain extent why relatives and friends can always experience each other’s feelings more deeply.

Thirdly, it is related to the relation of causation. “Sympathy” is produced under the mutual promotion of certain causes and effects, which is a more direct relationship. If a specific event always occurs successively with another, we can boldly predict that there is a certain causal relationship between them, and regard one phenomenon as the cause and the other as the effect. When people know the cause of an emotion, they will immediately turn to its result. Through the causal relationship between impressions, they can retrieve the original memory concepts and show the corresponding “sympathy” emotion.

Among the above three relations, Hume thinks the relation of causation is the strongest factor affecting the occurrence of “sympathy”. But there is no doubt that the larger the superposition value of the three relations is, the better the occurrence mechanism of “sympathy” will operate, and the greater the possibility of the crossing from “selfishness” to “goodness” will be.

### 3. Process of the crossing from “selfishness” to “goodness”

Then how does “sympathy”, as an emotional transmission mechanism, specifically make “selfishness” turn to “goodness”? Through the study of Hume’s thoughts, it is found that his “sympathy” is essentially composed of four links: “self-love” as the origin, “standing by” as the position, “self-reflection” as the impetus, and “goodness” as the emotional direction.

Self-love: origin of “sympathy”

Hume argues in *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* that “self-love” is a principle in human nature of such extensive energy, and the interest of each individual is, in general, so closely connected with that of the community (HUME, 2010). He emphasizes the strength of self-love, and agrees with that self-love (selfishness), is an inevitable emotion in human nature. The specific stripping of “self-love” is contained in the two concepts, “impression and idea” and “sentiment of pain or pleasure”.

“Sentiment of pain or pleasure” is the original emotion in human nature. In Hume’s perspective, “there is implanted in the human mind a perception of pain and pleasure, as the chief spring and moving principle of all its actions” (HUME, 1896, 67). “Sentiment of pain or pleasure” is not obtained from external experience. It is the origin of all other emotions. The generation of other emotions depends on the connection of the mind to sentiment of pain or pleasure. When sympathizers retain the initial memory impression, they first feel the pain or pleasure of the mind given by the situation, which is the strongest and most obvious feeling. Through this more direct way, the mind can distinguish the situations that are beneficial or harmful to us, and then combine the specific situational factors to derive subsequent emotions, such as self-esteem, humility, disgust, etc. However, this “sentiment of pain or pleasure” cannot directly generate “self-love”, which also needs the activation of “impression and idea”.

At the very beginning of *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Hume points out all the perceptions of the human mind resolve themselves into two distinct kinds, “impression” and “idea”. “Impressions are those perceptions which enter with most force and violence, while ideas are the faint images of these in thinking and reasoning” (HUME, 1896, 7). Hume believes that “impression” precedes “idea”, and the two are unified in people’s “perception”. “Impressions” is strong and active while “idea” is the result of reflection of impressions in the mind, and it is a “less vivid copy of impression”. As Hume claims,

When any affection is infused by sympathy, it is at first known only by its effects, and by those external signs in the countenance and conversation, which convey 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 (HUME, 1896, 167).

In Hume’s theory of “sympathy”, “impression and idea” are the key factors to activate “sentiment of pain or pleasure”. Therefore, only when the “sentiment of pain or pleasure” and “impression and idea” intertwine, and stimulate the “sentiment of pain or pleasure” to produce the emotion of seeking advantages and avoiding disadvantages, “sympathy” happens.

Standing by: position of “sympathy”

When a sympathizer faces a complex situation of “sympathy”, he or she needs to screen the scene information and make a choice of the position of “sympathy”. It is the key factor to produce the appropriate “sympathy” emotion and behavior.

First of all, observe from the sideline with objectivity on “impression”. Generally speaking, the justice of the bystander requires the perception of the sympathizer to maintain an attitude of objectivity. Sympathizers should first adopt impersonality of “impression”. When the sympathizer meets the sympathized person, the latter is often in many situational elements, which constitute the whole sympathy environment and effectively promote the orderly activities in the whole environment. At this time, the sympathizer should be outside the whole sympathetic environment and become a non-situational factor. If the sympathizer becomes a part into the whole sympathetic environment, the perceived experience will be defective or wrong, and it is not be conducive to subsequent sympathy emotion or behavior. Additionally, the fallacy of “perceiving one’s own perception” comes up, and there will be a tendency similar to a “mob”. In other words, when the sympathizer perceives the situation of the sympathized person, more objective the perceived impression is, more authentic and reliable the experience materials provided for “sympathy” are.

Secondly, avoid blindly following feelings. Hume emphasizes that the sympathizer must maintain an emotional independence from the perceived sympathized person and obtain the perception from the perspective of an independent third person, not induced by any behavioral and emotional factors. This is mainly reflected in the stage of transforming the pure impression. When the sympathizer obtains the pure impression, he or she needs to transform it into an

“idea”. In the process of transformation, the mind forms the idea through constant convergence of habit and experience. At this time, if the sympathizers integrate their emotions into the process of experience transformation, it will lead to a deviation in understanding the experience, a difference from the habits generated by the previous constant convergence, and the misguidance of the sympathizers’ mind when retrieving their own corresponding memory concepts, so as to make the sympathizers have wrong “sympathy” emotion or behavior.

To sum up, during the occurrence of “sympathy”, the sympathized person often affects the sympathizers’ judgment on impression, which is not conducive to the sympathizers to make correct emotional or behavioral choices. This is the difficulty in the occurrence of “sympathy”. Therefore, it is required that sympathizers control the negative effects of impression and emotion at the stage of perception. Only when the perceived impression and emotion are objective and independent, and the experience materials for “sympathy” are authentic and reliable, the crossing from “selfishness” to “goodness” will be smooth and successful.

Self-reflection: impetus of “sympathy”

When the sympathizers get enough situational information after “standing by”, they will compare the information with their original memory concepts to produce an “impression of reflection”, and carry out a substantive “sympathy” process in their minds. The mixed or externalized emotion in the impression of reflection will be the final “sympathy” emotion.

In Hume’s knowledge system, “mind” is an important but slightly vague concept. It usually appears in his epistemological contexts, and the feedback of “sympathy” follows the function of the “mind”. Although Hume did not give a clear definition of “mind”, it plays an important role in the occurrence mechanism of “sympathy”. Firstly, it has the role of “integration”. When sympathizers perceive the empirical world, the first thing they perceive is not orderly experience materials, but often mixed complex experience. When faced with chaotic empirical materials, sympathizers can only rely on the combing of their minds to screen and sort out a large number of perceptual materials useful for “sympathy”, merge and classify them to form an effective empirical perception in order. Secondly, the role of induction and transformation. After the formation of effective and orderly experience perception, sympathizers will transform impressions into ideas, and the mind obtains some habits through constant observation and analysis. At this time, the mind will abstract many impressions into corresponding ideas, the vividness and intensity of impressions will gradually weaken, and more abstract and reliable memory ideas will come into being. In addition, the formation of habits helps to share the burden of mental work. Sometimes, in the face of similar impressions, habits will transform them into corresponding ideas without the awareness of the mind. Thirdly, the role of imagination. In the process of imagination, the mind needs to extract the corresponding memory concepts according to the perceived impressions, and transform them into the “impressions of reflection”. That is based on the function of imagination, which includes the connection among sympathizers’ internal ideas. As Hume explains,

The mind has always a propensity to pass from a passion to any other related to it; and this propensity is forwarded when the object of the one passion is related to that of the other. The two impulses (imagination and passions) concur with each other, and render the whole transition smoother and easier (HUME, 1896, 178).

Without the imagination of the mind, the evolution of emotion will lack a booster. Fourthly, the role of comparison. Sympathizers compare the emotional ideas they finally obtain with those of the sympathized. The mind of the sympathizer will identify with or oppose the sympathized person according to the results of comparison. When the two emotions are the same, the mind strengthens its inherent idea, identifies with the behavior of the sympathized person, and judges the goodness or evil of the sympathizer’s behavior according to the attribute of the emotion. If this emotion makes people happy and beneficial, the behavior of the sympathized

person is good. On the contrary, if it makes people painful and harmful, then the behavior is considered evil. If the emotions of the sympathizer and the sympathized are inconsistent, the sympathizer will determine the suspect according to the strength of the belief, and then may revise or adhere to his or her own ideas.

In addition, feedback mechanism is also an important factor for self-reflection. Feedback is a kind of behavior for perfection, and sympathizers need subsequent rationalization test after the role of mind. In Hume's view, in order to produce a perfect relation between two objects, it requires "not only that the imagination be conveyed from one to the other by resemblance, contiguity or causation, but also that it should return back from the second to the first with the same ease and facility" (HUME, 1896, 186). In other words, it requires not only to improve the emotion, but also to improve the interaction between sympathizers and the sympathized. First, as for the emotional feedback, when a sympathizer obtains some emotion through "sympathy", it needs to be expressed through external emotion, so as to be accepted by the sympathized person. If the sympathizer agrees with the latter's emotion, he or she will show the same emotional behavior as the person, such as crying, laughing and so on. At this time, the sympathized person will perceive the sympathizer's feedback emotion. If the feedback activity is recognition of his or her own behavior, the sympathized person will show inner happiness. On the contrary, if the sympathizer does not agree with the sympathized person, the latter may feel depressed. Second, as for the behavioral feedback, most refers to the assistance activities carried out by sympathizers in response to the current plight of the sympathized after deeply feeling the situation of them. When the sympathized person feels pain in trouble, the sympathizer needs to give corresponding help to alleviate the pain of the sympathized person. When the sympathized person is in a state of sharing happy emotion, the sympathizer needs to show recognition behavior to enhance the other's satisfaction. However, Hume also takes a cautious attitude towards the feedback of emotion or behavior. Hume thinks that this feedback activity should be reasonable and appropriate. The sympathized should not rely too much on the sympathizers because of their excessive help to them, which will cause the sympathized cannot get rid of the painful dilemma without the assistance of the sympathizers.

Goodness: emotional direction of "sympathy"

After a series of operations of the transmission mechanism, it is logical to output the corresponding "sympathy" emotion or behavior. Then what emotion or behavior is affirmed? According to Hume, the emotion or behavior matched with the empathy of others, is what we expect, and this is "goodness". There are two ways of presentation of "goodness", "egoistic goodness" and "altruistic goodness".

First, Hume does not deny egoism. He believes that the reasonable "egoistic goodness" is worth advocating. If "goodness" is completely and purely a kind of selfless behavior or emotion without self-interest, then this kind of "goodness" cannot be used as men's code of conduct. In Hume's view, selfishness is human nature, so it is understandable that people first care about their own happiness and interests, compared with the happiness or interests of others. For instance, when someone falls into the water and asks for help, although sympathizers are very anxious about it, considering their limited rescue ability, they choose not to take risks rescuing. This is unblamable. However, if people's goodness only shows concern for their own happy life, they may also be hated by others. According to Hume, "self-interest is the original motive to the establishment of justice, but a sympathy with public interest is the source of the moral approbation, which attends that virtue" (HUME, 1896, 259). Therefore, the higher level of "goodness" advocated by Hume needs to properly express kindness to others, namely "altruistic goodness".

According to Hume's ideological system, "egoistic goodness" makes sympathizers pay attention to themselves within a reasonable range, and "altruistic goodness" is to restrain the expansion of private desires to a certain extent, which is a powerful breakthrough and higher direction of

“egoistic goodness”. Based on the “altruistic goodness”, people can take the happiness of others as the starting point of maintaining social justice. It is the embodiment of “justice” to feel the feelings of others with the help of “sympathy”, partially sharing the pain of others, helping others in time, which stimulates qualities such as tolerance, humility and compassion. It is precisely because people sympathize more with others and less with ourselves that we restrain our selfishness, carry forward our fraternity and kindness, and form a perfect humanity. The theory of “justice” in Hume’s thought is combined with the “altruistic goodness” here to effectively curb people’s negative feelings of selfishness, so as to promote the whole society to a higher stage of development.

Throughout the crossing from “selfishness” to “goodness”, it presents a process of wave-like advance and spiraling upward, steps of which are linked, boosted and restricted. But as an emotional transmission mechanism, “sympathy” has the weak side. Then in the complex real social environment, how to ensure the effective operation of “sympathy”? The following puts forward the enlightenment of the theory to practice, based on the above-mentioned rational analysis of the occurrence of “sympathy”.

#### **4. Practical thinking of the crossing from “selfishness” to “goodness”**

Hume’s emotional crossing of “sympathy” is a knowledge system within ethics, which has certain practical enlightenment value for ethical development in contemporary society. From a personal point of view, how to control “self-love” to a certain extent? How to prevent personal emotional involvement and stand by objectively? From a social point of view, since the human emotion, as an internal factor, has great instability and uncertainty, then how to provide a perfect external environment for “sympathy”?

Internal requirement: to be a qualified sympathizer

The whole society often accuses of the indifference and decay of humanity. It is directly due to the weakening and dilution of people’s “sympathy” ability. In the complicated society, we urgently need to improve our character cultivation, regain the ability of “sympathy” and avoid emotional indifference. What’s more, in the “sympathy” environment, we should maintain our independence and be an objective and fair “bystander”.

First, nature leads to conscience. None of us can exist independently of the society and “sympathy” is an important link to maintain our communication. When we feel the pain of others, we will help them with empathy. When we feel the happiness of others, we will silently share their joy. Ultimately, it is man’s “conscience”. “Conscience” is a product of an internal monitor of an individual’s sympathy and capacity for sympathy. If a man has no “conscience”, he has no internal ability to recognize and feel pain and happiness, because the conditions for the initiation of “sympathy” are lost. For the acquisition of “conscience”, Hume believes that self-discipline is first needed. Self-control is the virtue of self-sufficiency, and the essence of self-control lies in the accurate grasp of the appropriateness of behavior, which means “impartiality”. “Self-discipline” is realized through introspection and cautious independence. When people carry out individual activities without supervision, they should rely on their own spiritual beliefs, standardize their behavior in strict accordance with moral requirements, guide and control themselves based on reasonable moral consciousness, so as to further ensure the acquisition and existence of “conscience”.

Second, be a fair “bystander”. On the basis of individual conscience, the choice of position also plays an important role in “sympathy”. In those cases where there may be emotional agreement between the bystander and the person involved, the former must first try his or her best to understand the situation of the person concerned and put himself (herself) in a position to consider every insignificant situation that may cause pain to the unfortunate. It is necessary to ensure that the subject is in a fair and objective position, and to make emotions or behaviors

that are beneficial to the sympathized person as much as possible. However, usually pleasure enhances happiness much less than that pain reduces it, which lays a hidden danger for the objective “bystander” of “sympathy”. Therefore, people should make appropriate behaviors or emotions under the self-supervision of inner justice. If a person can put aside his or her personal position, examine and evaluate his or her own emotion or behavior from the standpoint of others as a bystander, it is more likely to have a more comprehensive investigation of “sympathy”, so as to make the right emotional or behavioral choice in correction. In a word, in order to be a qualified bystander, we should not only properly supervise our own “sympathy” emotion and behavior, but also pay attention to the cultivation of other abilities like the transformation of personal perspective.

External requirement: to build an objective environment of “sympathy”

In order to achieve the crossing from “selfishness” to “goodness”, in addition to improving personal cultivation through self-discipline and introspection, it is also necessary to further improve the external social environment, and to formulate practical and reliable social measures. It is required to strengthen “sympathy” education and to develop moral reward and punishment mechanisms, so as to create a good “sympathy” atmosphere through external restraint mechanisms.

First, “sympathy education” is regarded as a powerful measure, whose purpose is to explore, cultivate and improve some internal qualities conducive to promoting the emergence of “sympathy”. To develop sympathy education, we need to give play to the educational functions of self, family and school. First of all, we should advocate education of self-sympathy to help realize the importance and necessity of obtaining the ability of “sympathy”. Secondly, we should make good use of family education. In society, children have the most contact with their surrounding relatives. The main purpose of family education is to enable children to form good moral emotions such as filial piety to their parents, caring for brothers and sisters, and loving relatives and friends, so as to lay a good foundation for the occurrence of sympathetic behavior in the future. Moreover, school education, as a systematic and long-term education and training model, can more directly help students acquire “sympathy” skills. In school sympathy education, it can be realized through “interactive practice”. For instance, teachers guide students to put themselves in others’ shoes. Teachers can think about the teaching problems from the perspective of students and know more about them. Accordingly, students also understand teachers from their perspective, so as to acquire their daily “sympathy” ability. In addition, Hume has repeatedly stressed the practicability of authentic and reliable practical activities for the acquisition of “sympathy” ability. For example, practical activities like voluntary labor and social donation, will make the educated think from others’ perspectives, then they will show more “sympathy” emotions and behaviors.

Second, it is required to improve the moral reward and punishment mechanism. It will be a systematic and complicated system. To establish such a mechanism, we must first formulate the standards of moral rewards and punishments. Hume believes that people’s goodness and evil are strengthened in the acquired social environment. People are eager to be recognized and praised, thus strive to improve themselves. If people are not praised when they should be praised by others and not punished when they should be, they will doubt their sympathy behavior. If some accidental behaviors are praised or punished, it will further blur people’s awareness of their own behavior or emotion. Therefore, the standards of reward and punishment need to be refined and implemented. After that we should take a variety of reward and punishment measures in combination with the actual situation. Generally speaking, there are two main ways of reward and punishment: spiritual way and material way. Spiritual rewards and punishments are mainly to evaluate the individual’s sympathetic behavior or emotion, and to make reactions such as “like”, “dislike”, “closeness” and “alienation”, which has a certain impact on the psychology of the person involved. Material ways mainly present as

certain material rewards to the subjects of appropriate sympathy behavior or emotion, so as to realize guidance and encouragement to achieve positive reinforcement, and to enhance individual “sympathy” consciousness.

## 5. Conclusion

Hume’s theory of sympathy triggers the moral subject’s reflection on human ethics and interpersonal relations. On the one hand, citizens are independent subjects in the country and should be in the status of social subjects, which is not only a moral requirement, but an objective requirement for the better survival of the whole mankind and the better development of human society. On the other hand, only the gradual expansion of interpersonal relations can form the association of the whole society. “Sympathy”, both a means and an end, is a kind of behavior or emotion both “egoistic” and “altruistic”. Sympathizers and the sympathized are interdependent and exist in the same organic world. In the whole social sphere, based on the investigation of Hume’s theory of “sympathy”, calling for the effective expression of “sympathy” emotion and behavior is a good recipe to promote citizens’ emotion back to nature and to build a society full of humanity.

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