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Compassion

A Reflection on Scottish Enlightenment, German Idealism and Buddhism

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The Scottish Enlightenments of the 18th century emphasized an ethics of sympathy or compassion, with such well-known figures as the Earl of Shaftesbury, Francis Hutcheson and Adam Smith leading the way. Although Adam Smith became popular for his political economy, his main opus, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Part VII (1759) deserves as much attention. He formulated the thesis of *moral sentiments* in opposition to the prevalent view of *a natural moral sense*[1] He classified all sentiments on the postulation that they are not necessarily veridical and *sui generis* faculties of moral perception, but that they are related to empirical observation of general emotions, and that they are based on the principle of shared esteem[2].

1. An ethics of moral sentiments is based, according to Smith, on the common ground of all principles of morals on the human tendency to feel sympathy.

   > Sympathy = empathy OR compassion OR Mitgefühl OR Mitleid OR Mitfreude

   According to this classical ethical descriptive definition:

   > "whatever may be the cause of sympathy, or however it may be excited, nothing pleases us more than to observe in other men a fellow-feeling with all the emotions of our own breast"[3]
   > "Pity and compassion are words appropriated to signify our fellow-feeling with the sorrow of others. Sympathy, though it's meaning was perhaps originally the same may now however without much impropriety, be made use of to denote our fellow-feeling with any passion whatever"[4].

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[1] Moral sense from the Cambridge platonists to Adam Smith, Partridge, Dawn Elizabeth, Thesis 2014.
[2] Ignace Haaz, *Solidarité*, L'Harmattan, 2012, p. 162. Eduard von Hartmann "Moralprinzip des Mitgefühls", (Ed.) Jean-Claude Wolf, Meiner Verl. Hartmann, „Ethik und Eudemonismus", *Ethische Studien* VII, 162.
[3] Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, CUP, 1759/2007, Part I, Sect. I, Ch. II, p. 17.
[4] Smith, *TMS*, ibid.

2. David Hume (1738) objected to Smith, Hutcheson and Shaftesbury's first definition of sympathy being equivalent to compassion, that we love others only in a limited way[5]. The descriptive ethical level needs to be complemented by a normative ethical level that determines if I *ought* to experience a certain degree of sympathy. Human tendency has in fact two sides: first sympathy as an overall proactive tendency - we have a tendency to share feelings - but this tendency can be balanced by a tendency to compare oneself to others.

   > "from the dawn of life, […] egoism has been dependent upon altruism as altruism has been dependent upon egoism, and in the course of evolution the reciprocal services of the two have been increasing"[6].

   Feeling pain or happiness is as important for this latter tendency as for the former one, but in doing so, human beings give greater attention to egoistical tendencies. When it comes to comparison, in particular when society grows and some social *conventions* are needed to complement sympathy by some non-natural virtues such as justice for Hume.

   In a nut shell: different moral sentiments are grounded on different feelings, e. g. pride, which can be in polarizing tension with sympathy in as much as it is based on our comparison with others. Pride is non-egoistical in so far as it is related to human norms, not peculiar to the sentiment of ourselves, pride is based on sympathy in the descriptive sense of Smith, but also adding the choice that we ought to put in the balance our ethical egoistic passions. On the contrary, the feeling of love or compassion, which is much less comparison dependent, is essentially based on a reason independent of egotistical tendencies. People can be loved for qualities, such as when we see great generosity, altruism or a great character, that are sufficient to explain the sense of virtue, without any comparison.

3. There has been further development in the 19th century in the aesthetical and axiological deconstruction of the sentimentalist view of compassion, started by Schopenhauer and carried on later by Hartmann and Nietzsche. First against an excessive identification with others, the metaphysics of the artist supposes that it could be possible to act "superficially" "out of profundity"[7] (Friedrich Nietzsche, Oscar Wilde). Second the moral principle of compassion, in German Mitgefühl, could be narrowed and focused on shared joy Mitfreude. The psychological deconstruction of sympathy as based on egoistical unconscious drives for self-conservation has also been examined by many philosophers: Spinoza, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, von Hartmann, Stirner, to name but a few.

4. This axiological deconstruction of compassion is further seen as only displaying a metaphysical claim on the primacy of the Will on reason and representation. Sympathy and compassion are not only a key paradigm in the history of Western philosophy, but also in the Eastern part of the world, where compassion brings with it a vibrant message of wisdom and transcendence. Compassion (karuna) is central to Buddhist philosophy which sees compassion in relation to a path of liberation and wisdom. This perspective was present in

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[5] see: David Hume, *Treaty on Human Nature*, Book III Of Morals.
[6] Spencer, H. *The Data of Ethics*, New York: F. P. Collier & Son, 1902, § 82, 249.
[7] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*, Vorwort.

Ancient Greek philosophy, but Buddhism focuses on compassion as emptiness [sunyata]. Buddhism states that since:

"…everything is empty then ultimately so is the idea of self and of others, although conventionally they seem real enough"[8].

The Buddhist doctrine and understanding of 'non-self' becomes a new important paradigm:

"…not only is there no difference between self and others, but there is an exchange between the two to the point where they become indistinguishable and egoism is completely transcended"[9].

Buddhism reminds us of the cognitive urgency of *learned ignorance* (epoche), that by suspending our judgment we gain strength in our exercise of empathy by respect for life that has been in the center of most great religions. As A. Schweitzer reminds us, it is not a matter of being or not being a sentimentalist that we ground our lives on the key value of compassion[10].

Further readings on compassion

Cisneros, Ariane Hentsch / Premawardhana, Shanta (eds.), *Sharing Values. A Hermeneutics for Global Ethics*, Globethics.net Global No. 4, 2011.

Hutton, Kenneth (2009): *Ethics in Schopenhauer and Buddhism*, PhD thesis, Glasgow Univ.

Hartmann, Eduard von „Das Moral Prinzip des Mitgefühls" in: Phaenomenologie des sittlichen Bewusstseins: Prolegomena zu jeder künftigen Ethik, Berlin: C. Duncker Verl. 1878, 871pp.

Impey, Gayle Empathy, Motive and Morality: An Enquiry into the Role of Empathy in Ethics,Thesis Uni. Manchester (UK), 282pp.

Opøien, Stian Møller, Adam Smith's concept of sympathy and contemporary research on empathy, Master thesis, Univ. of Oslo, 2014, 35pp.

Partridge, Dawn Elizabeth, Moral sense from the Cambridge platonists to Adam Smith, PhD Thesis, Australian National University, 2014.

Miller, Monica Jean, Sympathetic Constellations: Toward a Modernist Sympathy, UC Berkeley, PhD Dissertation, 2012.

Brown, Winter, On Compassion: Sustaining the E Pluribus Unum, PhD dissertation, Duke Univ. 2012

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[8] Hutton, Kenneth (2009): *Ethics in Schopenhauer and Buddhism*, PhD thesis, Glasgow Univ. p. 81.
[9] Cf. Hutton, p. 81.
[10] Ariane Hentsch Cisneros / Shanta Premawardhana (eds.), *Sharing Values. A Hermeneutics for Global Ethics*, Globethics.net Global No. 4, 2011, p. 174.
http://www.globethics.net/documents/4289936/13403236/GlobalSeries_4_SharingValues_text.pdf