

An Analysis of the Abuse of Morality from the Perspective of the Evolution of Hume's Concept of Sympathy

Fanqi Zeng

The visual art design speciality, Dankook University, Yongin City 16890,
Republic of Korea
1212941@s.hlju.edu.cn

Abstract: Hume's principle of sympathy is a foundational element of his ethical system, playing a critical role in moral judgment. In contemporary society, sympathy continues to exert a significant influence on social and ethical life. However, the issues arising from the misuse of sympathy warrant serious attention. Over time, the boundaries between Hume's concept of sympathy and related notions such as pity and empathy have blurred, leading to confusion and even the gradual replacement of these terms. This paper seeks to clarify the distinction between Hume's original concept of sympathy and these modern interpretations, thereby tracing the evolutionary process of sympathy. By examining instances of moral thinking, moral stance, and moral judgment abuses—each resulting from the erosion of reason and self-love in concepts like pity and empathy—it becomes clear that these distortions have profound consequences. Restoring the true concept of sympathy is not only essential for revitalizing morality but also for ensuring the achievement of justice. In this corrective process, the rationality of the observer is paramount, and this rationality can be cultivated through the construction of group morality.

Keywords: Hume; Sympathy; Abuse of Morality; Observer

1. INTRODUCTION

Sympathy is a pivotal concept in ethics, holding a fundamental role in moral judgment. David Hume, a prominent modern moral sentimentalist philosopher, offered a pioneering, thorough, and systematic analysis of sympathy, highlighting its essential function in moral judgment. However, in practical application, the interpretation of sympathy has become increasingly ambiguous, resulting in conceptual confusion and distortion. The conflation of sympathy with related concepts such as pity and empathy can lead to the extremity of moral sentiments, thereby contributing to the misuse of morality in social contexts.

A precise understanding of the essence of sympathy and the development of the ideal observer within the framework of sympathy are crucial for restoring moral order, which is vital for the ultimate achievement of social justice.

2. THE MECHANISM OF SYMPATHY

The concept of sympathy has roots in ancient Greece, where it initially referred to the emotional transmission between individuals. Throughout the late Greek period and the long Middle Ages, thinkers expanded upon this idea, broadening its meaning to encompass not only shared feelings but also cooperation and mental association. The 18th century marked a significant evolution in the understanding of sympathy, with philosophers like David Hume and Adam Smith providing systematic explanations. During this period, sympathy underwent a paradigm shift, firmly establishing itself within the domain of ethics. Among the many thinkers who explored the concept of sympathy, David Hume stands as the most influential. Hume argued that emotions hold absolute precedence over reason in their influence on morality. He asserted that, because emotions and actions do not directly affect one another, reason is inherently inert. This inertness implies that reason alone cannot establish effective moral standards. Instead, emotions are the foundation of human morality, with reason playing a secondary role that cannot independently generate moral principles. According to Hume, emotions can serve as the basis for morality due to the innate human perception of pleasure and pain. He described this perception, which drives all moral actions and judgments, as the “peculiar sensation of pleasure and pain.” Given the subjectivity of human emotions, the pleasure or pain experienced by the moral subject themselves cannot serve as a reliable reference for moral judgment. Instead, the pain or pleasure perceived by the observer eliminates the subjective bias of utility on the moral subject, providing the true foundation for moral judgment. As Hume noted, “No man is absolutely indifferent to the happiness and misery of others.”(David, 2023) People naturally form impressions of the pain or pleasure experienced by others. This basic emotional response is transmissible and can influence others, leading them to develop emotional tendencies akin to those of the original subject, thereby generating sympathy. In *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Hume elucidates the workings of this sympathy mechanism. According to Hume, when sympathy operates as a psychological mechanism, the mental activities of others are transformed into impressions within ourselves, which then generate sympathy. Hume distinguishes between impressions and ideas, noting that impressions are stronger and more vivid than ideas. He explained, “I comprehend all our sensations, passions, and emotions as they make their first appearance in the soul. By ideas, I mean the faint images of these in thinking and reasoning.”(Hume, 2000) The operation of

the sympathy mechanism entails the sharing of ideas and the collaboration of impressions between the moral subject and the observer. When people perceive the pleasure or pain of others, they often focus more on their own emotions than on those of others. The foundation of sympathy is rooted in self-love; self-preservation underlies the emergence of all subjective emotions, and the ability to receive and transform the emotions of others depends on self-awareness. People experience sympathy because, on a subconscious level, they project their own emotions into the situations of others or have encountered similar circumstances, enabling them to empathize with the pleasure or pain of others. Hume referred to this as the connection between ideas and impressions. However, even when individuals find themselves in the same situation, they may perceive the phenomenon differently due to the influence of their emotional stance, which is closely tied to self-interest. As Hume noted, “Our concern for our own interest gives us a pleasure in the pleasure, and a pain in the pain of a partner, after the same manner as by sympathy we feel a sensation correspondent to those, which appear in any person, who is present with us.”(Hume, 2000) We are more likely to develop similar emotional tendencies toward those who share our stance and are closely connected to us. Although the goal of sympathy is to resonate with the emotions of others, it is essentially a form of self-emotion. The alignment with others’ emotions is primarily driven by the self and is closely linked to self-awareness and personality. Consequently, the so-called shared emotion experienced by the individual is filtered through self-awareness and cannot fully align with the emotions of the sympathy object. To mitigate the influence of subjectivity on sympathy, Hume introduced the concept of extensive sympathy. Extensive sympathy builds upon narrow sympathy and is designed to correct its limitations. As the name implies, extensive sympathy has a broader scope than narrow sympathy. Through imagination, sympathy can transcend time and space. Imagination, like sympathy, is an innate human faculty, and when sympathy is activated, it is often accompanied by the involvement of imagination. Hume noted, “It is certain that sympathy is not always limited to the present moment, but that we often feel by communication the pains and pleasures of others, which are not in being, and which we only anticipate by the force of imagination.”^[3] Under the influence of extensive sympathy, we anticipate the future pleasures and pains of others, thus broadening the scope of our concern. This expansion allows individuals to cultivate a wider empathy for others, enabling them to transcend self-interest and develop a deeper consideration for others and society. Additionally, extensive sympathy

differs from narrow sympathy in that it is not solely guided by emotional instincts but places a stronger emphasis on the corrective role of reason. To eliminate bias and self-interest, and to manage the self-serving aspects of human nature, rational introspection is essential. This process allows for the formation of stable and neutral perspectives in moral judgment. In extensive sympathy, we act as both subjects of moral sentiment and observers distinct from the parties involved in moral actions. Hume's exploration of sympathy was both comprehensive and detailed, profoundly influencing subsequent research in moral sentiment theory. The principle of sympathy directly generates moral sentiment, systematically integrating emotional factors into ethical reasoning within moral judgment. As moral sentiment theory continues to evolve, modern interpretations of sympathy have diverged from Hume's original concept, even leading to the emergence of new ideas like empathy, which may potentially replace sympathy as the foundation of moral sentiment.

3. THE CONFUSION AND EVOLUTION OF THE CONCEPT OF SYMPATHY

When Hume's principle of sympathy functions as a psychological mechanism, it is often supported by both emotion and reason. While Hume emphasized the central role of emotions in morality, he also recognized the indispensable role of reason. The two have a distinct hierarchical relationship in moral distinctions. As Hume famously stated in *A Treatise of Human Nature*, "Reason is the slave of passions." Emotion serves as the foundation of morality, while reason acts as a tool to provide general standards. With emotion as the basis of values, the methodological role of reason becomes crucial in the pursuit of ultimate moral goals. Reason ensures that the sympathy mechanism operates correctly; without rational moderation, sympathy can easily drive moral sentiments to extremes. In daily life, sympathy and pity are often confused, and this common misunderstanding is understandable. During the 18th century, when interest in moral sentimentalism was at its peak, the spread of ideas across languages led to translations that did not differentiate between sympathy and pity. As a result, the boundaries between the two concepts were frequently blurred, and they were used interchangeably. Rationalist philosopher Immanuel Kant, influenced by Rousseau and Hutcheson, also examined sympathy. While Kant strongly advocated for the primacy of reason in morality, he acknowledged the rapidity and intensity of emotions

in moral judgment. He regarded sympathy as an indirect duty of virtue and often conflated it with pity, without making clear distinctions between the two. However, Hume's concept of sympathy differs significantly from pity. Hume's notion of sympathy includes self-utility, encompassing both self-love and altruistic emotions. As moral sentimentalism evolved, the role of reason in sympathy was significantly reduced, and the value of self-utility was nearly discarded, with increasing emphasis placed on concern for others. Many thinkers have described sympathy as a purely altruistic emotion, equating it with pity. For instance, Schopenhauer argued that "the one taking the active role in the action or omission has in view solely the well-being and woe of another and altogether intends nothing but that this other remain unharmed or even receive help, support, and relief." (Hume, 2000) Here, Schopenhauer completely excluded self-interest from sympathy, suggesting that self-love is not the foundation of sympathy and should not even be considered. However, what Schopenhauer described is a pity. When sympathy is treated as a specific emotion, it does indeed share an intrinsic connection with pity. Like sympathy, pity is a human emotion that expresses concern for others. However, pity is more proactive and intensely subjective. The term "pity" itself conveys kindness, with a clear bias in its underlying motivation. The object of pity is always someone unhappy or in difficult circumstances. In contrast, sympathy is neutral; the emotional signals it conveys can be either joyful or painful. Emotions and actions driven by sympathy possess a degree of rationality. Although individual emotions are unique, in certain moral situations, we often observe that most people's emotional responses are similar. This similarity stems from the role of extensive sympathy in discerning the subtle sensations of pleasure and pain. Sympathy establishes a dynamic equilibrium between the specificity of individual emotions and the universality of morality, harmonizing emotion and reason in a way that pity cannot. As a distinct human emotion, pity is susceptible to blindness and subjectivity, often emerging from a subjective perspective and the personal relevance of the situation. People tend to pity those who are close to them or who have undergone similar experiences. While pity does reflect kindness, it cannot be solely attributed to concern for others as it remains influenced by subjective motives. In contrast, sympathy is not confined to any specific emotion; it functions as an inherent psychological mechanism that enables the emergence of various emotions supportive of morality. Unlike pity, which is often restricted to responses to suffering, sympathy fosters a broader, more inclusive connection with others, enhancing its utility in moral judgment. The confusion between sympathy and pity

extends to the evolution of sympathy into empathy, which holds significant implications in moral philosophy. As the sympathy mechanism functions, sympathy and empathy can sometimes be used interchangeably. However, empathy is more closely aligned with sympathy than pity and might even serve as the emotional foundation of sympathy. Bill Clinton succinctly differentiated the two by stating, “The difference between empathy and sympathy is that empathy means feeling someone’s pain, while sympathy means being or feeling sorry that the person is in pain without necessarily, at the same time, actually feeling their pain.” Empathy thus evokes a more profound emotional response compared to sympathy. Both involve the transmission of emotions, but empathy engages with the emotions themselves, not merely the emotional tendencies. Due to its vividness and specificity, modern researchers in moral sentimentalism have increasingly prioritized the study of empathy over sympathy. Since the 20th century, moral sentimentalism, previously overshadowed by rationalist approaches, has experienced a resurgence, fueled by advances in genetic biology and psychology. These developments have highlighted the limitations of pure rationalism in ethical inquiry, leading modern ethicists to revisit and reinterpret Hume’s moral sentiment theory through the framework of empathy. American ethicist Michael Slote expanded upon Hume’s principle of sympathy by developing a nuanced theory of empathy. Slote’s concept of empathy revises and advances Hume’s original idea, enhancing its moral explanatory power by delineating empathy into a structured, three-stage process. In the first stage, empathy arises from the moral agent’s emotional connection with the object of their actions, forming the foundation for the agent’s moral sensibility. The second stage shifts to the observer, whose empathy towards the moral agent becomes the primary basis for moral judgment (Schopenhauer, 2009). This stage underscores the importance of an external perspective in evaluating moral actions. Finally, in the third stage, the moral agent experiences empathy in response to the observer’s feedback, which in turn shapes the agent’s self-awareness and reflective moral consciousness. These three stages of empathy create a more distinct division of roles in moral events, with a stronger emphasis on emotional alignment compared to sympathy. Slote asserts in *The Philosophy of Yin and Yang* that “the caring, compassion, and benevolence that an ethics of care emphasizes as the basis for morally good or decent behavior seem to require empathy.” (Slote, 2018) From Slote’s perspective, empathy should be considered more foundational than both caring and sympathy, as it functions by first receiving others’ emotional information, which then gives rise to caring and sympathy. In this sense,

empathy operates as a mechanism within the broader framework of sympathy. Slote even suggests that while Hume did not explicitly use the term “empathy,” (Slote, 2018) his descriptions align closely with what we now refer to as empathy in contemporary discourse. Slote points out that what Hume called sympathy, we today often refer to as empathy in the West (Frazer & Slote, 2015). Although Slote distinguishes between sympathy and empathy in their specific meanings, he acknowledges that they share a common root. Empathy, as a latent psychological capacity, underpins the emergence of sympathy and can be seen as an integral component of it. While extracting empathy from sympathy to explain moral duties and motives might provide a more direct understanding, it is important to recognize the inherent limitations of empathy—namely, its susceptibility to the spatial and temporal boundaries of personal experience. Achieving the deep emotional resonance that empathy demands for distant or unfamiliar individuals is often difficult. Furthermore, in the realm of moral judgment, overly vivid and intense empathy can destabilize the process, as it is more prone to being influenced by biological instincts. Conversely, the appropriate detachment inherent in sympathy is better suited to maintaining neutrality in moral judgment, thus fostering a more balanced and objective evaluation (Baier, 1993).

4. THE EMERGENCE OF THE MORAL ABUSE PHENOMENON

Pity and empathy share certain similarities with sympathy in their occurrence, but they are inherently more subjective. Pity and empathy emphasize the emotions of others more directly. In contrast, the principle of sympathy is grounded in self-love, where emotional connections with others are established through the recognition of one’s own emotions. This foundational element of self-love is crucial for maintaining a balanced moral relationship, as it ensures that emotional connections are not solely outwardly focused but are also reflective of one’s internal state. Without this element of self-love, pity and empathy can lead to an imbalance, where emotions that should arise from self-awareness are instead forcibly projected onto others. When these externally directed emotions are reflected in the self, they often encounter resistance from self-awareness, necessitating increased self-processing to reconcile this dissonance. A meaningful moral life cannot exist without the cultivation of one’s spirit. In moral philosophy, the pursuit of morality is fundamentally linked to the pursuit of spiritual fulfillment, which is inextricably tied to self-recognition

and self-love. The self-love inherent in sympathy is not merely a form of materialistic self-interest; it is a deeper, spiritual self-benefit that underpins the construction of correct moral values. In contrast, pure altruism, when devoid of self-love, is not only difficult to achieve in practice but often results in moral emptiness or compromise, ultimately leading to self-harm. This represents a form of moral thinking abuse that arises from a lack of self-love. For moral judgments to be robust and sustainable, they must adhere to a closed-loop process: starting with the self, extending towards others, and then returning to the self. If any part of this loop is disrupted, it opens up the possibility for uncontrolled and infinite moral deviations, undermining the coherence and stability of moral reasoning (Taylor, 2015).

When moral thinking overreaches, it bypasses the critical recognition of one's own emotions, resulting in an excessive focus on the emotions of others. This imbalance can create unrealistic moral expectations from others, which are detrimental to sound moral judgment. Our efforts to empathize with others are often based on context-dependent associations, but without proper self-awareness, the accuracy of these associations becomes questionable. Excessive emotional involvement can distort empathy, rendering it an unreliable basis for moral judgment and potentially leading to biased conclusions. For example, in a violent incident, we may naturally feel pity and empathy towards the victim, leading us to condemn the perpetrator's actions, hope for the victim's resistance, and wish for the perpetrator to be punished. These emotionally charged expectations can amplify our feelings, driving us toward extreme and biased moral judgments. Our inherent tendency to side with the weaker party further destabilizes our moral assessments, skewing them away from objectivity. In contrast, sympathy allows for a more balanced emotional connection with all parties involved in a moral incident. While we may feel sadness for the victim and condemnation towards the perpetrator, sympathy also compels us to consider the causes, motives, and circumstances surrounding the perpetrator's actions. This broader perspective leads to a more comprehensive and nuanced judgment, one that acknowledges the emotions of both the victim and the perpetrator, rather than focusing solely on the suffering of the weaker party (Farr, 1978).

The absence of self-love can cause an overreach in moral thinking while misinterpreting self-love can result in an overreach in moral stance. Self-love is a critical component for the effective functioning of sympathy, serving as the bedrock upon which sympathy operates. When self-love is incorrectly identified with selfishness, sympathy can, ironically, become antagonistic to morality. Pity and empathy, concepts closely related to

sympathy, often attempt to exclude self-love, focusing solely on altruism. This exclusion is based on the mistaken belief that self-love is synonymous with selfishness. Hume pointed out that sympathy depends on our concern for our interests; however, these interests should be understood as a sense of inner pleasure and self-awareness, not merely as the pursuit of material gain. To clarify the concept of self-love, we can examine Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Maslow, an American social psychologist, proposed a five-tier model of human needs that progresses from physiological needs, safety needs, love and belonging needs, esteem needs, to self-actualization needs. This hierarchy mirrors the levels of self-love, which similarly progresses from basic self-preservation to moral self-fulfillment. Maslow referred to the first four levels as deficiency needs, meaning that these needs arise from a lack of something and can be satisfied through external means. The pursuit of these needs aims at self-sufficiency and filling perceived deficiencies. However, overemphasis on these needs can lead to alienation and ultimately fail to contribute to genuine happiness. This deficiency needs to correspond to a superficial concern for self-interest in the context of sympathy. If this superficial concern is mistaken for the full extent of self-love, it can degenerate into self-pity. A typical example of this dynamic is seen when an elderly person on a bus demand that someone give up their seat, and if refused, they morally condemn the other person. This scenario exemplifies moral coercion. Here, the elderly individual, by demanding moral behavior from others, overextends their position, transitioning from a participant in the moral situation to a judge of moral behavior. Their self-pity inhibits their capacity to sympathize with the imagined opposing party. It is important to emphasize that morality is fundamentally rooted in self-discipline. When we fulfill our obligations to others, it should be done voluntarily and with self-awareness. Moral actions that stem from coercion contradict the essence of morality and may lead the coercer toward unethical behavior. The moral coercion resulting from an overextended moral stance undermines harmonious social order. It damages relationships and narrows the scope of morality, increasingly subjecting spontaneous moral behavior to external regulation, which fosters moral complacency and laziness (Cohon, 1997). The highest level of self-love, which is self-actualization, represents the most essential form of self-interest. Attaining this level necessitates the guidance of reason. However, the distortion of sympathy has led to an overreliance on emotions in moral judgment, thereby diminishing the role of reason. Sympathy, in its true form, possesses a neutral quality that depends on the equilibrium maintained by reason.

While emotions tend to react more swiftly to moral actions, it is the reason that moderates these emotions, ensuring they remain within appropriate boundaries. Empathy similarly attempts to establish a normative emotional response, but this effort is grounded in the empathy-altruism hypothesis (Frazer & Slote, 2015). This hypothesis presupposes the inherent goodness of empathy, yet not all forms of empathy are necessarily benevolent. As Hume observed, “the same concern for our interest makes us feel a pain in the pleasure, and a pleasure in the pain of a rival; and in short, the same contrariety of sentiments as arises from comparison and malice.”^[(Hume, 2000)] When emotions are expressed with malicious intent, they can produce outcomes that are antithetical to those intended by sympathy. As previously discussed, concern for others that bypasses self-love cannot be authentically cultivated. Conversely, focusing on superficial interests can easily give rise to negative emotions. Ultimately, the moral stance overreach stemming from a misunderstanding of self-love is fundamentally rooted in a lack of reason. Furthermore, reason serves as a standard for emotions, acting as a safeguard to ensure that they remain regulated. Emotions moderated by reason possess greater moral value compared to those that are extreme or unbridled. When emotions become unregulated, they can give rise to what is known as the “moral abuse phenomenon,” where overly intense or pessimistic feelings cause moral judgments to become negatively skewed. The confusion between empathy and sympathy often leads to excessively intense emotions in moral judgments, obstructing a neutral and balanced perspective. This imbalance can culminate in moralism, which is the overextension and overreach of moral evaluation and criticism. Moralism is particularly prevalent in the digital media landscape. In many widely discussed online moral cases, individuals often rush to occupy the moral high ground, harshly criticizing the involved parties with heightened emotions and strong language. When new information emerges that repositions the criticized party as the weaker side, these same individuals often quickly reverse their stance. The second wave of moral condemnation is frequently more intense than the first. The absence of rational moderation in this second wave of empathy is compounded by guilt over previously condemning the subject, leading to increasingly subjective and uncontrolled moral judgments. This deficiency of reason results in unregulated emotions, causing observers to make impulsive moral judgments and attempt to influence the final moral outcomes based on these judgments. At this point, observers may perceive morality as all-powerful and may attempt to undermine basic social norms under the guise of morality to soothe their unregulated emotions. Paradoxically, they may

engage in immoral actions in the name of morality. Moralism exaggerates the role of morality and fundamentally misunderstands its function. The foundation of social moral life is law, and moral demands should strive for higher standards, using the law as a baseline rather than attempting to replace it. Law, guided by reason, is an essential tool for advancing moral progress. When moral judgment overreaches and encroaches upon the domain of law, it crosses a critical boundary. Such overreaching not only fails to preserve moral order but can also precipitate moral disorder in society. The altered concept of sympathy compromises the necessary sense of detachment integral to the sympathy mechanism, resulting in an imbalance between concern for others' emotions and concern for one's own emotions. Although this shift may appear to align more closely with moral imperatives, it does not necessarily correspond with the complexities of moral life. At the current stage of human moral sentiment development, it is evident that sympathy, as traditionally understood, provides more reliable moral guidance.

5. THE ROLE OF THE OBSERVER IN MORAL RESTORATION

The abuse of morality is primarily triggered by emotional deviations. In real life, emotions exert a more immediate influence on moral behavior than reason, and reason is often perceived as a derivative of emotion—a tool shaped by emotional experiences to attain happiness. Regulating emotions through reason essentially involves adjusting the emotions themselves. The absence or weakening of reason is a critical factor that contributes to deviations in moral emotions. While pity and empathy are intended to provide emotional healing within moral contexts, they frequently overlook the intrinsic connection between reason and emotion. This oversight allows emotions to become unchecked and extreme, leading to various instances of moral abuse. Hume's principle of sympathy achieves neutrality through the moral sense of the observer. The observer, though present within moral events, remains detached from the moral actions themselves. Although the observer is primarily a spectator of moral actions, they are also an active participant in moral emotions. The moral sense of the observer serves as the key reference for the outcome of moral judgment and is central to determining whether instances of moral abuse can be corrected. We must understand how the observer attains a neutral stance and a stable perspective. An ideal observer is characterized by three essential traits: "First, they are free from any personal interest in the

evaluation; second, they ensure objectivity in moral judgment or evaluation; and third, this objectivity leads to universality.”(Flew, 2013) The second and third characteristics—objectivity and universality—are attainable through the regulation of emotions by reason. However, the first characteristic, being free from personal interest in the evaluation, seems to depend on external conditions. At first glance, anyone without personal ties or interactions with either party involved in the moral action might meet this criterion. Yet, in practice, if the observer empathizes with the situation of either party, this supposed lack of interest cannot be consistently maintained. The complexity of human emotions defies rigid external criteria, and because the principle of sympathy hinges on the transmission of emotions, genuine disinterest must be rooted in internal causality. In essence, all three characteristics of an ideal observer may ultimately rely on the correction of emotions by reason. It becomes clear that the moral judgments of a rational observer are more reliable and play a crucial role in correcting the abuse of morality. A rational observer must embody dual roles: both as a participant who can share emotions with the moral actor and as a detached, objective viewer. This duality allows morality to integrate the soft healing power of emotions with the firm guidance of universal principles. To establish such an ideal observer’s moral stance, it is essential to cultivate an ideal character. An effective observer must first possess the capacity for self-love. Hume argued that an observer gains emotional insight into others’ pleasures and pains through the faculty of imagination, which is intrinsically connected to their own emotions. Consequently, the observer must comprehend self-love and recognize their emotional landscape to effectively empathize with others’ emotions. To prevent conflicts of interest, it is crucial to distinguish between superficial self-love and intrinsic self-love. An ideal character prioritizes self-actualization, emphasizing intrinsic self-love, which is oriented towards the fulfillment of the self’s spirit, while consciously limiting superficial self-love. Regulating superficial self-love is vital in eliminating conflicts of interest with the subjects of moral evaluation. The balance between self-directed emotions and the emotions of others hinges on this regulation. Achieving this equilibrium not only prevents overreach in moral stance but also enhances genuine concern for others, thereby harnessing the full healing potential of moral emotions. Intrinsic self-love fosters a moral cognitive framework that includes self-awareness, an understanding of ethical norms, and a recognition of virtues. This framework underpins the capacity to provide appropriate responses to others’ pleasures and pains, thereby avoiding moral overreach and ensuring

a proper sequencing of emotional reactions. An ideal observer must possess a clear understanding of the ethical boundaries between virtue and norms. This understanding is crucial in addressing the issue of moral judgment overreach and in preventing the disorderly expansion of moral judgment. Both virtue and norms play equally important roles in social life, and neither can substitute for the other. From their origins, norms represent the common decency derived from human moral life and possess a certain universality. Adhering to norms is an individual's responsibility while living a virtuous life is a duty inherent to being human—one is externally enforced, while the other is self-imposed through self-awareness. Virtue and norms, while overlapping, operate within different spheres of influence and cannot replace one another. Social norms essentially establish the moral baseline. An observer's approval or disapproval of moral actions should be grounded in this baseline, rather than overstepping it or attempting to replace its function. A well-established system of norms, founded on justice, safeguards the rights of both the weaker and stronger parties in moral situations. Based on this foundation, the observer's objective understanding of an event should encompass both sides of the moral action. The significance of a rational observer in morality lies not only in providing care and healing but also in ensuring the realization of justice. The observer's feedback on acts of sympathy should serve to encourage virtuous deeds and suppress immoral ones. Any deviation or excessive feedback beyond this normative framework undermines justice. Moralism represents an extreme form of sympathy feedback, characterized by a lack of moral understanding and a deficiency in reason, which manifests as excessive judgment. A generalized form of morality is also an alienated form, deviating from the essence of true morality. Moralism not only harms the moral actors involved but also exacerbates resistance to morality. Forcing self-imposed duties through external enforcement severely damages self-awareness, leading inevitably to the disruption of moral order. The fairness of an observer lies in their ability to maintain an impartial stance while evaluating the actions of all parties involved in a moral situation. Moral judgments often become skewed when they are based on emotional resonance with one side, leading to errors that can inadvertently shield the immoral behavior of opportunists. Fortunately, a growing number of people today are learning to manage their emotions during moral incidents, exercising patience until the full picture emerges. This development undoubtedly represents progress in the character of the observer. When we discuss the observer, we are referring to the stance taken in moral judgment. A certain degree of detachment is essential for

moral judgments to achieve objectivity and universality. This detachment ensures that moral conclusions are fair and widely applicable. However, when observers make judgments about ongoing moral actions, they may become emotionally involved and voluntarily participate in the moral event, potentially leading to a shift in their stance. Therefore, the theory of the observer is not an endorsement of indifference to morality, but rather a call for balanced engagement. Hume's principle of sympathy and his observer theory hold profound significance for constructing a just social order. Within a moral system that incorporates emotional healing, there exists a strong normative element that considers not only individual spiritual well-being but also the well-being of others and society as a whole. The correct application of the principle of sympathy is essential for restoring social and moral life. In the process of restoring morality, individuals can simultaneously reconstruct their value systems, achieving harmonious development in alignment with societal progress. In modern society, the imbalance between material advancement and the development of individual virtue often results in a false sense of spiritual prosperity. The phenomenon of moral abuse is a key indicator of this superficial spiritual prosperity. Particularly in societies where material progress outstrips the development of collective morality, severe instances of moral abuse can disrupt the balance of the social ecosystem and hinder the advancement of the ethical system. Therefore, a deeper understanding and restoration of the concept of sympathy within Hume's framework offers valuable insights into the construction of group morality and the development of the social ethical system.

References

- Baier, A. C. (1993). Moralism and cruelty: Reflections on Hume and Kant. *Ethics*, 103(3), 436-457.
- Cohon, R. (1997). The common point of view in Hume's ethics. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 827-850.
- David, H. (2023). *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*. BoD—Books on Demand.
- Farr, J. (1978). Hume, Hermeneutics, and History: A "Sympathetic" Account. *History and Theory*, 17(3), 285-310.
- Flew, A. (2013). *Hume's Philosophy of Belief (Routledge Revivals): A Study of His First Inquiry*. Routledge.
- Frazer, M. L., & Slote, M. (2015). Sentimentalist virtue ethics. In *The routledge companion to virtue ethics* (pp. 197-208). Routledge.
- Hume, D. (2000). *A treatise of human nature*. Oxford University Press.
- Schopenhauer, A. (2009). *The two fundamental problems of ethics* (Vol. 3). Cambridge University Press.

- Slote, M. (2018). *The Philosophy of Yin and Yang*. Chinese-English bilingual edition, Beijing: Shangwu Yinshuguan.
- Taylor, J. A. (2015). *Reflecting Subjects: Passion, Sympathy, and Society in Hume's Philosophy*. Oxford University Press, USA.