

Chapter V

CONCEPT OF SYMPATHY : DAVID HUME AND MAX SCHELER

We have seen in an earlier chapter that medical care involves interpersonal relations and it touches the domain of the moral in as much as the concepts of freedom, obligation, responsibility etc. are involved. In the present chapter we propose to consider the concept of sympathy as denoting the human dimension between the physician and patient. We shall consider to accounts of sympathy one offered by David Hume and the other by Max Scheler.

Suffering or the sight of suffering touches accord of sympathy in the human heart. It moves one to do something to alienate the distress of the other person. There cannot be a therapy without a human concern as its primary motive. Epicurus in his De Rerum Natura says,

"Hollow are the words of the philosopher that do not serve to heal any human suffering. Just as there is no use in medicine if it does not rid the body of disease, so is philosophy of no use if it cannot banish the sickness of the soul".

It is only likely that philosophers dealing with moral psychology should say something about sympathy. Let us now turn to David Hume to see how he conceives of it as rendering human communication possible.

According to David Hume sympathy is just one among many possible motives for wanting to help another person. But the help which is offered out of sympathy is without interest, there can be no ulterior motive for sympathetic concern. 'Sympathy' is used as equivalent in meaning to the following :

- (1) 'fellow-feeling', (2) 'Knowing what another is feeling,'
- (3) 'being in agreement with another's opinion' and (4) 'feeling sorry for another or pity'.

Hume thinks of sympathy primarily as the transference or communication of an emotion, sensation, or even an opinion from one individual to another.

Hume considers the minds of men as mirrors to one another, not only because they reflect each others emotions, sentiments and opinions may be often reflected and may decay away by insensible degrees.

Hume opens his Treatise with the basic assumption i.e. "All the perceptions of the human mind resolve themselves into two distinct kinds, which I shall call Impressions and Ideas. And those two kinds of perceptions differ only in the degrees of force and vivacity. Ideas are weak copies of impressions in thinking and reasoning. ~~The impressions in thinking and reasoning.~~ The impressions may be divided into (a) original and (b) secondary or reflective. The original impressions

arise without any preceding thought or perception. But in the case of a secondary impression there is some antecedent perception of pleasure or pain.

Sympathy is a very powerful principle in human nature. It is the principle which explains our love and esteem for the rich and our contempt for the poor. In turn, the rich man and the poor man are correspondingly pleased or pained through sympathy with this esteem or contempt. It is in this sense that we are each 'mirrors' to one another. In sympathy there is an evident conversion of an idea into an impression. This conversion arises from the relation of objects to ourself. Ourself is always intimately present to us. The strength of the association between ourself and the other person is governed by the presence or absence of the relations of resemblance, contiguity and cause and effect. Hume recognizes that sympathy arises more easily for us with those who in some way resemble ourselves in any respect viz., manners, character, country or languages. It is a matter of fact that we sympathize more with our neighbours than with those on the other side of the world, more with our contemporaries than those long dead. These three relations function so as to strengthen the association of the agent's idea of the other's passion and the agent's impression of self.

Hume is concerned not with how the idea of another's passion comes to be converted into the corresponding impression

but with how the idea comes to be entertained in the first place. Hume clears his view by giving following example i.e. in the case of an operation of surgery before it begins the preparation of the instruments, the laying of the bandages in order, the heating of the iron, with all the signs of anxiety and concern in the patients and assistants would have a great effect upon my mind and excite the strongest sentiments of pity and terror. No passion of another discovers itself immediately to the mind. We are only sensible of its causes or effects. From these we infer the passion. And consequently these give rise to our sympathy. Hume recognises that sympathy requires prior knowledge or belief about the other person's state of mind. Since direct knowledge of another's state of mind is impossible, we have to rely for the knowledge on a method of inductive inference. Without the relation of cause and effect we could never come to entertain the idea of another's state of mind and the subsequent conversion of this idea into the corresponding impression could never take place. For this reason, Hume emphasizes the importance of the causal relation in the sympathetic mechanism. In general, it can be said that the relations of resemblance, contiguity and cause and effect govern the conversion of the idea into the impression.

We judge more of objects by comparison, than by their intrinsic worth and value. Hume admits, that the mere fact that

we realize that another person is suffering does not necessarily mean that we shall sympathize with him. "The direct survey of another's pleasure naturally gives us pleasure and therefore produces pain, when compared with our own", (Treaties). Through comparison I may feel pain at the sight of another's happiness. Hume describes a situation, where a man has stood on the sea shore while a storm is raging at sea. He can perceive distinctly the horror, hear the passengers' cries of the ship which is in a great danger. In such a case no man will feel happy. This circumstance will arise compassion and sympathy. Through the presence of the relation of contiguity the suffering of these people has been converted into the corresponding impression. Hume's general conclusion is that if the idea of another's passion is too faint, it cannot even exert any influence on the agent's feeling by comparison, but that if it is very vivid it will affect him by sympathy only.

There are two distinct stages in the genesis of sympathy : (a) from my observation of another's behaviour and manner I infer his state of mind and (b) the idea of the affection which I thus entertain is converted into the corresponding impression. eg. From the scene of weeping someone we infer that he is in some kind of distress. In so far as I associate myself with him, my ideally entertained distress will be converted into an actual feeling of distress.

One can distinguish four elements in the sympathetic mechanism :

- (a) my idea of a particular passion
- (b) my idea of this passion as belonging to another person
- (c) my impression of self and
- (d) my impression of the passion or the passion itself.

The whole mechanism relies on the theory that an idea differs from its corresponding impression only in degree. We can only sympathize with feelings which we ourselves have already experienced. Hume thinks that 'Sympathy' refers to an involuntary process over which we have no control. To him sympathy is an instinctive response.

There are two different kinds of sympathy viz. 'limited' and 'extensive'. In the limited sympathy the agent is only aware of what the other person is feeling at that particular time. Hume clears it by giving following example, "I saw a person perfectly unknown to me, who while asleep in the fields, was in danger of being trod under foot by horses, I should immediately run to his assistance and in this I should be actuated by the same principle of sympathy, which makes me concerned for the present sorrows of a stranger."

In extensive sympathy the agent is aware of what the other person is feeling at the particular time and what might

happen to the other person. When the present misery of another has any strong influence upon and gives me a lively notion of all the circumstances of that person, whether past, present, future, possible, probable or certain. And naturally by means of these lively notion I shall be interested in them and will show sympathy towards them. But if I become indifferent about another's misery viz. his good fortune or bad, I will never feel extensive sympathy, nor the passions related to it.

Philip Mercer has commented in his 'Sympathy and Ethics' that Hume's doctrine of sympathy is unduly egocentric in three respects :

- (a) To sympathize with another means, according to Hume, that the agent must experience the actual feeling which the other person is feeling,
- (b) we can only sympathize with those feelings which we have previously experienced on our own account,
- (c) we need have no regard for the other person once the mechanism of sympathy has worked.

Hume uses 'sympathy' to refer exclusively to a special kind of transference of emotion and other feeling from one person to another. Hume was aware of the intimate links between human beings. The mutual relationships between human beings varies in degree to one another. It is the psychological mechanism of sympathy with which he is concerned. And he is sure that sympathetic

communication is one important cause in the generation of passions.

There are shortcomings in Hume's account of sympathy and needs a reconstruction of the concept. Hume's account have been said to be mechanical in operation and lacks the motivation efficiency of such notions as love, charity or benevolence. For Hume if X is in sympathy with Y, it does not follow that X will go out of his way to help Y. In Hume's mechanistic account even love and benevolence are contingently related. These difficulties have been sought to be amended and removed in another account of sympathy. As offered by Max Scheler in his The Nature of Sympathy a brief account of Scheler's views will now be given below.

For scheler sympathy and love are emotions in the literal sense of the term - in the sense of motions of movements, which lead us out of and beyond ourselves. Sympathy is a response to the experiences of others, which needs, moreover, as its vehicle, an underlying love.

If we love any human being we certainly love him for what he is, but at the same time we love him also for what he might be according to the possibilities of perfection inherent in his being.

One may look at the face of a felling child as a merely

physical object, or one may look at it (in the normal way) as an expression of pain, hunger etc. though without therefore pitying the child, the two things are utterly different. Thus experiences of pity and fellow-feeling are always additional to an experience in the other which is already understood.

The historians, the novelist, the exponent of the dramatic arts, must all possess in high degree the gift of visualizing the feelings of others, but there is not the slightest need for them to share the feelings of their subjects and personages.

It is a case of feeling the other's feeling, not just knowing of it, nor judging that the other has it, but it is not the same as going through the experience itself.

Throughout our visualising of the experience we can remain quite indifferent to whatever has evoked it.

All fellow-feeling is based upon love of some sort and vanishes when love is altogether absent, but the converse does not hold. Therefore fellow-feeling may vary in level and in degree of penetration into its object.

We often have fellow-feeling for someone we do not love. The love may not direct upon him in a concrete sense but

upon a generalised object - mankind, his family, his country, his membership of a class.

There are four types of fellow feeling :-

- (1) Immediate community of feeling, e.g. of one and the same sorrow, 'with someone'
- (2) Fellow-feeling 'about something', rejoicing in his joy and commiseration with his sorrow
- (3) Mere emotional infection
- (4) True emotional identification.

(1) Community of feeling :

Two parents stand beside the deadbody of a beloved child. They feel in common the 'same' sorrow, the 'same' anguish. A first feels sorrow by himself and is then joined by B in a common feeling.

(2) Fellow feeling :

All fellow-feeling involves intentional reference of the feeling of joy or sorrow to the other person's experience. But here A's suffering is first presented as A's in an act of understanding or 'vicarious' feeling experienced as such, and it is to this material that B's primary commiseration is directed. That is, my commiseration and his suffering are phenomenologically

two different facts, not one fact.

(3) Emotional Infection :

We all know how the cheerful atmosphere in a 'pub' or at a party may 'infect' the newcomers, who may even have been depressed before hand. It is the same when laughter proves 'catching' as can happen especially with children and to a still greater extent among girls, who have less sensitivity, but react more readily. The same thing occurs when a group is infected by the mournful tone of one of its members, as so often happens among old women, where one recounts her woes, while the others grow more and more tearful. Here there is neither a directing of feeling towards the other's joy or suffering, nor any participation in her experience. On the contrary it is characteristic of emotional infection that it occurs only as a transference of the state of feeling and does not presuppose any sort of knowledge of the joy which others feel.

The sole significance of fellow feeling as a datum for metaphysics can therefore lie only in its disposing us to realize, that independently existing persons in mutual relation: to one another are by nature predisposed for a communal mode of life and are teleologically adapted to one another. It is this natural predisposition which is intuitively grasped in fellow-feeling as a harmonious fulfilment of human worth and there attains conscious

In acts of love and hate there is certainly an element of valuation present, but fellow-feeling is in principle blind to value. Fellow feeling can itself have a value, independent of the value content which gives rise to joy or suffering in others, but then its value cannot be derived from the latter.