The Nature of Sympathy

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with a new introduction by
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Chapter VIII

THE PHYLOGENETIC ORIGIN AND EXTENSION OF FELLOW-FEELING

It has now been shown that fellow-feeling is an ultimate and *original* function of the spirit, whose empirical genesis is in no way due in the first place, to other processes, such as reproduction, imitation, illusion or hallucination, in the life of the individual. This does not *merely* mean that fellow-feeling is 'innate' (in every single human being), but that it is also part of the *constitution* of all emotional beings generally. Moreover, fellow-feeling certainly *is* innate, and in no sense first acquired in individual life; what is inborn, that is, is the more or less marked tendency to avail oneself of this function and to exercise it in practice. I say advisedly, the more or less marked tendency; for there can be no doubt that the considerable *variations* in the exercise of fellow-feeling, among different races, peoples and individuals, are not attributable to the variety of their experiences. The part which heredity plays in this has not yet been sufficiently investigated, but these tendencies differ basically from the outset, as any close observation of children will show. Shaftesbury, Hutcheson and Adam Smith long ago insisted on this point as an objection to all explanation of fellow-feeling in terms of utilitarianism and the associationist psychology.

It seems that fellow-feeling undergoes an extensive *development* in each individual; there is good reason to speak of a 'childish egoism', only later giving place, increasingly, to fellow-feeling. However, the essential part of this development is not due to fellow-feeling proper at all, but to growth in our understanding of the nature and differences of mental processes in other people.[1]

[1] This interest in the experiences of other people is also subject to development, which advances slowly with increasing understanding; child-psychology has only recently begun to describe its phases.

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We should also bear these factors in mind, for example, when judging primitive peoples and their attitude and behaviour to strangers and to other tribes. And the same holds good in considering the historical development of modes of feeling. The progress of civilization has often been ascribed to an enlargement of fellow-feeling—for instance, in the abolition of torture, the mitigation of capital punishment and flogging, and the stamping-out of barbaric sports such as bull-fighting or the wild-beast combats of the Roman arena. But quite wrongly, in our opinion. The prime credit for such moral reforms is due, not to enlarged sympathies, but to the enhanced susceptibility to suffering which civilization brings in its train. Those who are more susceptible to suffering, who suffer more than others under the same pain, are also more sensitive to pain in others than those who are less susceptible. The degree of susceptibility is constant, however, in both the idiopathic and heteropathic attitudes. An increase in its amount has nothing to do with an enhancement of sympathy. Nor does a greater susceptibility have any positive value in itself. It is only where susceptibilities are *equal* that a greater capacity for pity implies moral superiority. Besides, there are other motives for the above-mentioned reforms, some of which are also of moral value, though they are not relevant here.

Now while admitting that fellow-feeling is inborn in the individual man, attempts have been made to represent it phylogenetically as an 'acquired characteristic of the race'. Darwin and Spencer in particular have developed this idea at length. This is not the place in which to enter into the empirical details of these theories, nor into the wealth of interesting factual material presented by Darwin in his *Descent of Man* and *Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*, and by Spencer in his ethics and sociology. We wish only to say a few words about the *principles* of this explanation.

Darwin's account relies upon two principles: (1) The rise and development of the sympathetic emotions is a *consequence* of the rise and development of the *social instinct*. Thus in animals for whom a communal mode of life was found to promote the survival of the species, so that a gregarious habit became natural to them (by the formation of a tendency to avoid solitude), the sympathetic emotions must have proved exceedingly useful. For this reason they have not arisen or developed among non-social types (such as the predatory animals which do not hunt in packs). The sympathetic emotions are therefore epiphenomena of the social habit and the 'social instinct'—which continues to betray itself in the shape of an instinctive desire to regain the herd, as well as in the tendency to pining and wasting under solitary conditions (away

from the herd), even when the other requirements of life are fully supplied by artificial means.

(2) Darwin's second principle asserts that, once the sympathetic emotions have been formed, their *increase* is in accordance with progress in the intellectual development, the articulation and solidarity of interests, among members of the collectivity. This is brought about as the internecine struggle for existence among the members of a species comes to be more and more transformed into a struggle of the species as a *whole* against other species, or against Nature. The same basic ideas, with some divergences, are to be found in Spencer, who applies them to human history, and sees in excessive egoism and lack of sympathetic feeling an 'atavism' which the 'progress of the species' tends more and more to eliminate. His ideals, therefore, are the abolition of war, the advent of the 'industrial age' and the final attainment of 'social equilibrium'.[1]

Now are these principles tenable? I think not. For one thing, Darwin utterly confounds the element of *understanding* in the act of sympathy as a whole, with fellow-feeling proper. To put it more precisely, he mistakes the latter for the process in an animal whereby the experiences of another animal somehow come to influence and affect it; in man this may take the form of an act of understanding, but it need not do so, for man can also behave as a true herd-animal (in crowd-behaviour, for instance); in animals, however, the transference is generally by way of 'infection'. Now it is doubtless true that this process varies in any case, according to the abundance and fullness of intercourse in the social way of life. Hence the communicability of experience by ('infection') also *increases* with the range and intensity of social life, along with the power to understand and the ability to sympathize. But the former, as we have seen, is just as much of a prior condition for feelings and impulses which are the exact *opposite* of true fellow-feeling, such as brutality, cruelty, malice, envy, jealousy, spite, etc.[2] There is a certain sociality of life, a certain degree of communication, necessarily implied in these emotions, no less than in pity or rejoicing. This could not be otherwise, unless these internal dispositions were to be analysable as mere effects of an attitude intrinsically egoistic and idiopathic, coupled with the *absence* of any sort of participation in the experience of others.

[1] The empirical evidence offered for their assertions by both writers shows that they confound fellow-feeling and emotional infection. Cf. Darwin's *Descent of Man* and Spencer's *Ethics*, I, and *Psychology*, II.

[2] Cf. my essay, *Die Ursachen des Deutschenhasses* (Leipzig, 1917), which disputes Spencer's sociological thesis that the increasing contacts between nations through civilization and communication have led to greater love and fellow-feeling among them.

But cruelty, brutality, envy, jealousy and malice are far from being dispositions of a *merely* egoistical or idiopathic kind—unless we are to suppose that they envisage their objects as lifeless and insensible, like so many blocks of wood. This does not apply even to brutality (as has been said already). If you suppose a man to be a corpse or a tree-stump it is just not *possible* for you to be 'brutal' towards him; while in the cases of cruelty, envy, malice and spite, such a supposition would simply not make sense. They are all genuinely heteropathic attitudes, whose immediate intentional reference is to pain in others, not to the agent's own pleasure, whatever the pleasure that may actually result when the impulse is satisfied. If there is no truth in the oft-refuted assertion that man aims at his own pleasure even in helping others—though pleasure may certainly result from this, there is equally little truth in the notion that these hostile attitudes are entirely based on the individual's pursuit of his own pleasure—as if he had no eyes for the other's experience, or saw it, if at all, without having any regard for it. No indeed. The heteropathic attitude can be directed with equal immediacy upon pain or the diminution and destruction of value in another person, just as it can upon pleasure or the increase and realization of this value. While the social form of life is presupposed by *negative* heteropathic attitudes no less than by positive ones.

We light here upon an ambiguity in the concept of 'fellow-feeling' which profoundly affects our problem. One may rejoice at another's joy and also repine at it; grieve at his sorrow, and also gloat upon it. Both require that the state of mind should be conveyed or understood. Normally one only speaks of 'fellow-feeling' in connection with the first-mentioned alternatives in each case, where the state of mind and the functional reaction to it both have the same polarity. But Darwin's account would only hold good for a sense of 'fellow-feeling' which included the second alternatives as well. Now this is a matter of the highest importance for ethics. For it is surely obvious that fellow-feeling has *positive* moral value in the *first* sense only, and equally obvious that all attitudes where the polarities are reversed are *negative* in value. But Darwin connects the mere fact of sociality and its increase with the presence of fellow-feelings of the positive kind only; whereas he should have attributed it to the presence and development of *all* the heteropathic feelings and qualities, including the negative ones. This leads him to the fundamentally erroneous belief that 'social development' as such is in some sense a condition of moral *progress* and a source of *positive* moral energy, and finally to the proposition 'Good is to live in company: evil, to dwell alone' —a notion which deservedly roused Nietzsche to violent protest.

This can also be applied, of course, to man and his history. The growth of social relations among nations and infra-national groups, and the increased solidarity of their interests, have not accentuated the heteropathic responses, as such, for all their effect upon our capacities for understanding. But the enrichment of understanding due to the greater intimacy of human contact has provided these responses with far more varied material. They have become, in consequence, unusually *diversified*, though the diversity extends to the *negatively* valuable as well as to the *positive*. In the course of its history, civilization has given rise to quite new forms of cruelty, brutality, envy, malice, etc., which never previously existed. Closer contacts and increased solidarity of interests have brought new 'vices' as well as new 'virtues', in their train.

There is equally little foundation for the Darwinian assumption that the sympathetic emotions are merely epiphenomenal to the 'social instinct', the latter being itself a consequence of the social mode of life. We may confine ourselves to remarking that, so far as concerns the mere capacity for perceiving the liveliness of other living things and assimilating their experience, this feature is certainly not a consequence of the social mode of life, but is in some form, however elementary, a *natural endowment of all living creatures*. Nor is it a consequence, but a *presupposition*, of the possibility of any kind of sociality; for this, as such, must always be more than a mere spatial proximity and purely causal efficacy of things upon each other. There is no such thing as a 'society' of stones. Things are only 'social' when they are in some sense present 'for one another'. Hence the sociality and capacity of living things to pursue a reciprocal existence of any sort lie outside the relation of cause and effect. The development of such capacities is not the empirical consequence of an outwardly social form of life. On the contrary, the governing relation is one of parallel co-ordination.