

Part III

Debating Sympathy

Chapter 7

Sympathy and Its Discontents:

“Greatest Happiness” versus the “General Good”

Human beings, on this point, only differ from other animals in two particulars. First, in being capable of sympathising, not solely with their offspring, or, like some of the more noble animals, with some superior animal who is kind to them, but with all human, and even with all sentient, beings. Secondly, in having a more developed intelligence ... any conduct which threatens the security of the society generally, is threatening to his own, and calls forth his instinct (if instinct it be) of self-defence. The same superiority of intelligence joined to the power of sympathising with human beings generally, enables him to attach himself to the collective idea of his tribe, his country, or mankind, in such a manner that any act hurtful to them, raises his instinct of sympathy, and urges him to resistance.

J. S. Mill 1861 *Utilitarianism*

7.1 Competing Views of the Scientist¹

Early utilitarians held that the scientist is akin to the philosopher in Book V of Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*, someone who arranges and makes systematical sense of ordinary wisdom. This systematization begins with a judgment, founded on our common sense of sympathy, about the character and actions of other people (WN, V.1. 153)².

The scientist makes models which summarize information and help other ordinary people see their way, but there is little beyond this division of labor among equals that separates him from those he studies.³ And, significantly in our view, the scientist is included in the phenomena under study. In the latter half of the nineteenth century, by contrast, the scientist became a self-proclaimed expert who can distinguish between superior and

¹In this chapter, as in the study of eugenics (especially in Chapters 5 and 6), we consider the characterization of the “scientist” – as opposed to the broader notion of the “expert” – by the scientist himself.

²“As soon as writing came into fashion, wise men, or those who fancied themselves such, would naturally endeavour to increase the number of those established and respected maxims, and to express their own sense of what was either proper or improper conduct, sometimes in the more artificial form of apologues, like what are called the fables of AEsop; and sometimes in the more simple one of apophthegms, or wise sayings, like the Proverbs of Solomon, the verses of Theognis and Phocyllides, and some part of the works of Hesiod. They might continue in this manner for a long time merely to multiply the number of those maxims of prudence and morality, without even attempting to arrange them in any very distinct or methodical order, much less to connect them together by one or more general principles from which they were all deducible, like effects from their natural causes. The beauty of a systematical arrangement of different observations connected by a few common principles was first seen in the rude essays of those ancient times towards a system of natural philosophy. Something of the same kind was afterwards attempted in morals. The maxims of common life were arranged in some methodical order, and connected together by a few common principles, in the same manner as they had attempted to arrange and connect the phenomena of nature. The science which pretends to investigate and explain those connecting principles is what is properly called moral philosophy.” Smith (1776, V 1 § 153).

³See Smith's famous example of the street porter and the philosopher, quoted above, as epithet to Chapter 1. (Smith 1776, 1.2 § 4).

inferior humans, and who consequently knows how best to direct sympathy.⁴

In this chapter, we argue that Charles Darwin's *Descent of Man* was a critical text in the transition. Here, Darwin proposed to replace the early utilitarians' "greatest happiness" principle with a goal of the "general good" entailing biological perfection. Darwin stressed the evolutionary role of sympathy in developing moral sense among humans. At the same time, he asked whether undirected sympathetic tendencies served to interfere with biological perfection.

Between Darwin's 1859 *Origin of Species* and the 1871 *Descent of Man*, many social commentators considered whether and how the principle of natural selection applied to humans. We focus on a popularizer we have seen before (Chapter 3), Charles Kingsley. Kingsley connected the Carlylean belief that "charity begins at home" with the racial anthropology of James Hunt (above, Chapter 4), to argue that sympathy required direction towards the truly deserving.

We begin by examining the notion of sympathy in Hume and Smith. Hume's sympathetic principle moves from *equality in fact* to sympathy. This we juxtapose to Adam Smith's reversal of the causation, which goes from sympathy to *judgment of*

⁴David Hume's problem of the fate of "another rational species" strictly inferior to ours is much to the point (see Levy-Peart 2004). Hume's analysis distinguishes between the thought experiment of actual inferiority and belief in the inferiority of non-Europeans confronted with European military technology. Unlike his more famous "sensible knave" problem, Hume sees no way out of his conclusion that the other rational race will be exterminated or enslaved. We have argued that Smith's sympathetic approach offers a different conclusion. The difference between equals who sympathize with each other, as Hume has it, or sympathy which equalizes people, as Smith has it, is critical.

equality.⁵ Second, we explicate the utilitarian principle of sympathy in terms of concern for those nearby and afar. We consider the challenges to the early utilitarian impartial weighting scheme that emerged in the literary community, and from evolutionary biology. As sympathy came to be seen as an impediment to evolutionary perfection, more voices urged that sympathy be suppressed. Darwin's *Descent of Man* explicitly countenanced the suppression of sympathy in a tradeoff of happiness for the perfection of the race.

2. Sympathy in Hume and Smith⁶

For Hume, sympathy is an empathy we feel for those like us. We are motivated to obtain the praise or approbation of those with whom we sympathize. By contrast, Smith holds that we feel sympathy for and earn the approbation (or disapprobation) of those unlike as well as those like us. We obtain approbation as we step outside ourselves and regard our own actions dispassionately. Hume and Smith agree that approbation applies only in conditions of existential equality, but for Smith this condition embodies all of human-kind, whereas in Hume it extends only to those who are not "strictly inferior" to us. As such, the analysis below is a result of Smith's deep analytical egalitarianism considered throughout this book.

⁵If, as Smith insists, we start with sympathy, then we can appeal to Edgeworth's demonstration (1881, pp. 45-6) that sympathetic traders will share more equally than unsympathetic ones.

⁶For detail on sympathy in Hume and Smith, see Levy-Pearl 2004. There is a recent history of attempts to incorporate sympathy and/or empathy into economic models, e.g., Arrow (1977) and the literature discussed in Sugden (2002). The 19th century controversy over the concern for family relative to strangers has received less attention.

For Hume, sympathy requires entering into the sentiments of others, something we can do only if the other is similar to us. In Book II, ch. xi (“Love of Fame”) of the *Treatise*, Hume holds that the ability to sympathize requires physical and intellectual similarity among people:

Now 'tis obvious, that nature has preserv'd a great resemblance among all human creatures, and that we never remark any passion or principle in others, of which, in some degree or other, we may not find a parallel in ourselves. The case is the same with the fabric of mind, as with that of the body. However the parts may differ in shape or size, their structure and composition are in general the same. There is a very remarkable resemblance, which preserves itself amidst all their variety; and *this resemblance must very much contribute to make us enter into the sentiments of others, and embrace them with facility and pleasure.* (Hume 1739-1740, p. 38 emphasis added)

The sentence we emphasize is at the foundation of the difference between Hume and Smith on sympathy, approbation, and moral obligation. Hume pointed to this difference himself in a famous letter to Smith.⁷ Sympathy for Hume is akin to what we might call empathy today: we enter in the passions of others, and we can do so because these people

⁷Hume's letter of 28 July 1759 in Smith (1977, 43): “I am told that you are preparing a new Edition, and propose to make some Additions and Alternations, in order to obviate Objections. I shall use the Freedom to propose one, which, if it appears to be of any Weight, you may have in your Eye. I wish you had more particularly and fully prov'd, that all kinds of Sympathy are necessarily Agreeable. This is the Hinge of your system ... And indeed, as the Sympathetical Passion is a reflex Image of the principal, it must partake of its Qualities, and so be painful where that is so.” Lindgren (1974, 21-22): “The doctrine of sympathy is typically thought to be simple and straightforward. The most popular interpretation is that sympathy is the same as empathy. ... This view, first suggested by David Hume (letter to Smith, July 28, 1759), was rejected in a note added by Smith to the third [second] edition of the *Moral Sentiments*.” Haakonssen (2002, xiv) highlights how the discussion helped Smith formulate his position: “... this pleasure [of understanding another's sentiments] is distinct from whatever sentiments we may have about the object of our sympathetic understanding, sentiments which may be either pleasing or displeasing. It seems that Smith himself only came to complete clarity about this matter in the light of David Hume's criticism of his handling of it in the first edition ...”

think and look like us.⁸

For Hume, human beings are made moral because they are motivated by the approbation that they receive from others with whom they sympathize (Hume 1739-1740, p. 316). Hume infers that the amount of approbation (or disapprobation) we obtain from those with whom we sympathize, “depends on the relation of the object to ourselves”:

we are most uneasy under the contempt of persons, who are both related to us by blood, and contiguous in place. Hence we seek to diminish this sympathy and uneasiness by separating these relations, and placing ourselves in a contiguity to strangers, and at a distance from relations. (Hume 1739-1740, p. 322).⁹

By contrast, Smith holds that sympathy is something akin to an estimation procedure in which we imaginatively exchange positions while preserving our consciousness. Sympathy is Smith’s device to connect our concerns with those of others by imagining how others see us.¹⁰ In his construction, sympathy differs from “fellow

⁸Schochet (2001) argues that the difference between Hume’s and Smith’s use of “sympathy” marks the transition from an older to a new use. “Sympathy” had traditionally be associated with musical vibrations where physical similarity was important for generating mutual vibration. Musical theory and renaissance magic are connected in Walker (1975). A glance at the indices in Thorndike (1923-58) reveals hundreds of references to “sympathetic magic” and “sympathy.”

⁹Approbation (and disapprobation) from those we are unlike, is less powerful as a motivating force: “we receive a much greater satisfaction from the approbation of those, whom we ourselves esteem and approve of, than of those, whom we hate and despise. In like measure we are principally mortify’d with the contempt of persons, upon whose judgment we set some value, and are, in a peat measure, indifferent about the opinions of the rest of mankind.” (Hume 1739-1740, p. 321) Since approbation is external to the individual receiving it, people may escape disapprobation by leaving kin and kith behind (p. 322).

¹⁰Harman (1986, p. 14): “There is an interesting irony in the way in which Hume’s use of the term ‘sympathy’ leads Smith to his own very different theory, a theory that in my view is much better than Hume’s at accounting for moral phenomenology. Smith’s criticism of Hume’s use of the term ‘sympathy’ is not a serious one. It is of no importance whatsoever whether the meaning that Hume gives to the term ‘sympathy’ is the ordinary one. ... The irony is that taking Hume’s term seriously leads Smith to a more

feeling” or some self-motivating experience of what is in another’s mind. Without reflection and education, we may very well get bizarre results – in Smith’s example, we think the problem of death is the cold, lonely grave and the gnawing vermin – but we sympathize nonetheless. With education and reflection, we learn that the problem of death is really the “awful futurity.”

Because sympathetic judgements are predictable, albeit often biased, sympathy is similar instead to what we would, today, call an estimate:¹¹

Every man, as the Stoics used to say, is first and principally recommended to his own care; and every man is certainly, in every respect, fitter and abler to take care of himself than of any other person. Every man feels his own pleasures and his own pains more sensibly than those of other people. The former are the original sensations; the latter the reflected or sympathetic images of those sensations. The former may be said to be the substance; the latter the shadow. (1759, VI.II.4)

Smith continues to describe how sympathy is felt most readily for those we know best:

After himself, the members of his own family, those who usually live in the same house with him, his parents, his children, his brothers and sisters, are naturally the objects of his warmest affections. They are naturally and usually the persons upon whose happiness or misery his conduct must have the greatest influence. He is more habituated to sympathize with them. He knows better how every thing is likely to affect them, and his sympathy with them is more precise and determinate, than it can be with the greater part of other people. It approaches nearer, in short, to what he feels for himself. (1759, VI.II.5)

accurate account of morality. A purely verbal point yields a powerful substantive theory.”

¹¹Levy 1995 defends this reading in part by noting that early in *TMS* Smith considers how individuals sympathize with the dead and the insane. They erroneously impute unhappiness to the insane. Sudge (2002, p. 76) quotes the insanity evidence against Fontaine’s (1997) account of the sympathetic individual “becoming” the other person. The estimation interpretation allows one to apply such considerations as robustness to other aspects of the utilitarian discussions. See Levy 2001.

Then, Smith makes the leap from habituated imagination to affection: “What is called affection, is in reality nothing but habitual sympathy” (1759, VI.II.10).

Sympathy is the foundation of rules of justice, i.e., reciprocity, which become internalized as conscience. We are motivated by motivated by what we imagine – “reason, principle, conscience, the inhabitant of the breast, the man within, the great judge” – to perform what Smith describes as “generous” acts:

When our passive feelings are almost always so sordid and so selfish, how comes it that our active principles should often be so generous and so noble? When we are always so much more deeply affected by whatever concerns ourselves, than by whatever concerns other men; what is it which prompts the generous, upon all occasions, and the mean upon many, to sacrifice their own interests to the greater interests of others? It is not the soft power of humanity, it is not that feeble spark of benevolence which Nature has lighted up in the human heart, that is thus capable of counteracting the strongest impulses of self-love. It is a stronger power, a more forcible motive, which exerts itself upon such occasions. It is reason, principle, conscience, the inhabitant of the breast, the man within, the great judge and arbiter of our conduct. (1759, III,III.i.46)

Generosity is founded on the same principles as justice but it has a wider scope because it extends beyond contractual relationships (Smith 1759, IV I §21; Levy-Pearl 2004). It establishes “noble” feelings of connection even among strangers, those unlike us (1759, III,III.i.46).

For Smith, man becomes a moral agent by earning the approbation that comes from recognizing we are all equally deserving of sympathy:

It is he who, whenever we are about to act so as to affect the happiness of others, calls to us, with a voice capable of astonishing the most presumptuous of our passions, that we are but one of the multitude, in no respect better than any other

in it; and that when we prefer ourselves so shamefully and so blindly to others, we become the proper objects of resentment, abhorrence, and execration. It is from him only that we learn the real littleness of ourselves, and of whatever relates to ourselves, and the natural misrepresentations of self-love can be corrected only by the eye of this impartial spectator. It is he who shows us the propriety of generosity and the deformity of injustice; the propriety of resigning the greatest interests of our own, for the yet greater interests of others, and the deformity of doing the smallest injury to another, in order to obtain the greatest benefit to ourselves. It is not the love of our neighbour, it is not the love of mankind, which upon many occasions prompts us to the practice of those divine virtues. It is a stronger love, a more powerful affection, which generally takes place upon such occasions; the love of what is honourable and noble, of the grandeur, and dignity, and superiority of our own characters. (1759, III i §46)

The question of whether perceived inferiority removes a person from sympathy is central to the debates we study below.

3. Habitual Sympathy for those Abroad and at Home

The phrase, “habitual sympathy,” is taken from the discussion in which Smith lays out the idea that habituated sympathy, one’s affection for others, varies inversely with their social distance from us.¹² Economists and social commentators alike in the mid-nineteenth century were preoccupied with the weight of one’s obligation to strangers relative to those of family. The utilitarian ideal was one of strict impartiality between self and other.¹³ Writing in the *Edinburgh Review* on James Mill’s theory of government, T. B. Macaulay identified the Utilitarian Greatest Happiness Principle with the Golden Rule of Christianity:

¹²This is sometimes referred to as the shape of the “sympathetic gradient”.

¹³In Chapter 9 we provide detailed evidence and examine the policy implications of this claim.

The “greatest happiness principle” of Mr Bentham is included in the Christian morality; and, to our thinking, it is there exhibited in an infinitely more sound and philosophical form, than in the Utilitarian speculations. ... “Do as you would be done by: Love your neighbour as yourself;” these are the precepts of Jesus Christ. Understood in an enlarged sense, these precepts are, in fact, a direction to every man to promote the greatest happiness of the greatest number. Macaulay in Lively and Rees (1978, 175).

In his most considered statement on utilitarianism, John Stuart Mill also identified the spirit of utilitarian philosophy with the Golden Rule:

the happiness which forms the utilitarian standard of what is right in conduct, is not the agent’s own happiness, but that of all concerned. As between his own happiness and that of others, utilitarianism requires him to be as strictly impartial as a disinterested and benevolent spectator. In the golden rule of Jesus of Nazareth, we read the complete spirit of the ethics of utility. To do as you would be done by, and to love your neighbour as yourself, constitute the ideal perfection of utilitarian morality. Mill (1861, p. 218).

Darwin ended chapter IV of the first part of the second edition of *Descent* –

“Comparison of the Mental Powers of Man and the Lower Animals – *continued*” – with an allusion to how the Golden Rule of Christianity forms “the foundation of morality”:

The moral sense perhaps affords the best and highest distinction between man and the lower animals; but I need say nothing on this head, as I have so lately endeavoured to shew that the social instincts,–the prime principle of man’s moral constitution –with the aid of active intellectual powers and the effects of habits, natural lead to the golden rule, “As ye would that men should do to them, do ye to them likewise;” and this lies at the foundation of morality. (1888, pp. 130-29)

He then announced the topic of the next chapter:

In the next chapter I shall make some few remarks on the probable steps and means by which the several mental and moral faculties have been gradually evolved. That such evolution is at least possible, ought not to be denied, for we daily see these faculties developing in every infant; and we may trace a gradation

from the mind of an utter idiot, lower than that of an animal low in the scale of a Newton. (1888, p. 129)

The question he addressed next was whether we can retain our current moral sense – entailing sympathy for the weak – and continue to advance?

If humans evolve, they are not homogeneous, and the question arises as to whether they are all equally deserving of sympathy or the resources that flow from sympathetic agents. Between Smith and Darwin, social commentators challenged the notion of unregulated sympathy in the service of hierarchy.¹⁴ The doctrine that sympathy required direction – by an expert of some sort who was able best to distinguish the deserving from the undeserving – was embodied in the Carlylean phrase “charity begins at home.” The phrase found its way into attacks on human homogeneity, such as Kingsley’s 1850 *Alton Locke*. (Levy-Pearl 2001-2002). Maintenance of hierarchy within the *household* also requires that sympathy be extended first to those who “deserve” it most, i.e., to those at home, and only thereafter to those elsewhere. This is one lesson in Charles Dickens’ 1852 *Bleak House* in which the character of Mrs. Jellyby is criticized for neglecting her family for the benefit of African slaves.

Here is how Mrs Jellyby is introduced:

... a lady of very remarkable strength of character, who devotes herself entirely to the public. She has devoted herself to an extensive variety of public subjects, at various times, and is at present (until something new attracts her) devoted to the

¹⁴As we have seen (above, Chapters 3, 4, 5 and 6), such challenges were often specifically directed at the Irish, Africans, former West Indian slaves, women, and Jews.

subject of Africa; with a view to the general cultivation of the coffee berry—and the natives ... (1977, p. 35)

Mr. Jellyby has, in some sense, lost personality, inverting the usual hierarchy:

“And Mr. Jellyby, sir?” suggested Richard.

“Ah! Mr. Jellyby,” said Mr. Kenge, “is—a—I don’t know that I can describe him to you better than by saying that he is the husband of Mrs. Jellyby.”

“A nonentity, sir?” said Richard, with a droll look.

“I don’t say that,” returned Mr. Kenge gravely, “I can’t say that, indeed, for I know nothing whatever of Mr. Jellyby. ... he is, so to speak, merged—Merged—in the more shining qualities of his wife.” (1977, p. 35)

If Mrs. Jellyby’s affections were refashioned so that she sympathized more with those close to her, her services could be freely available to her husband and daughters.

As it is, she neglects them while she is distracted by the supposedly non-deserving.

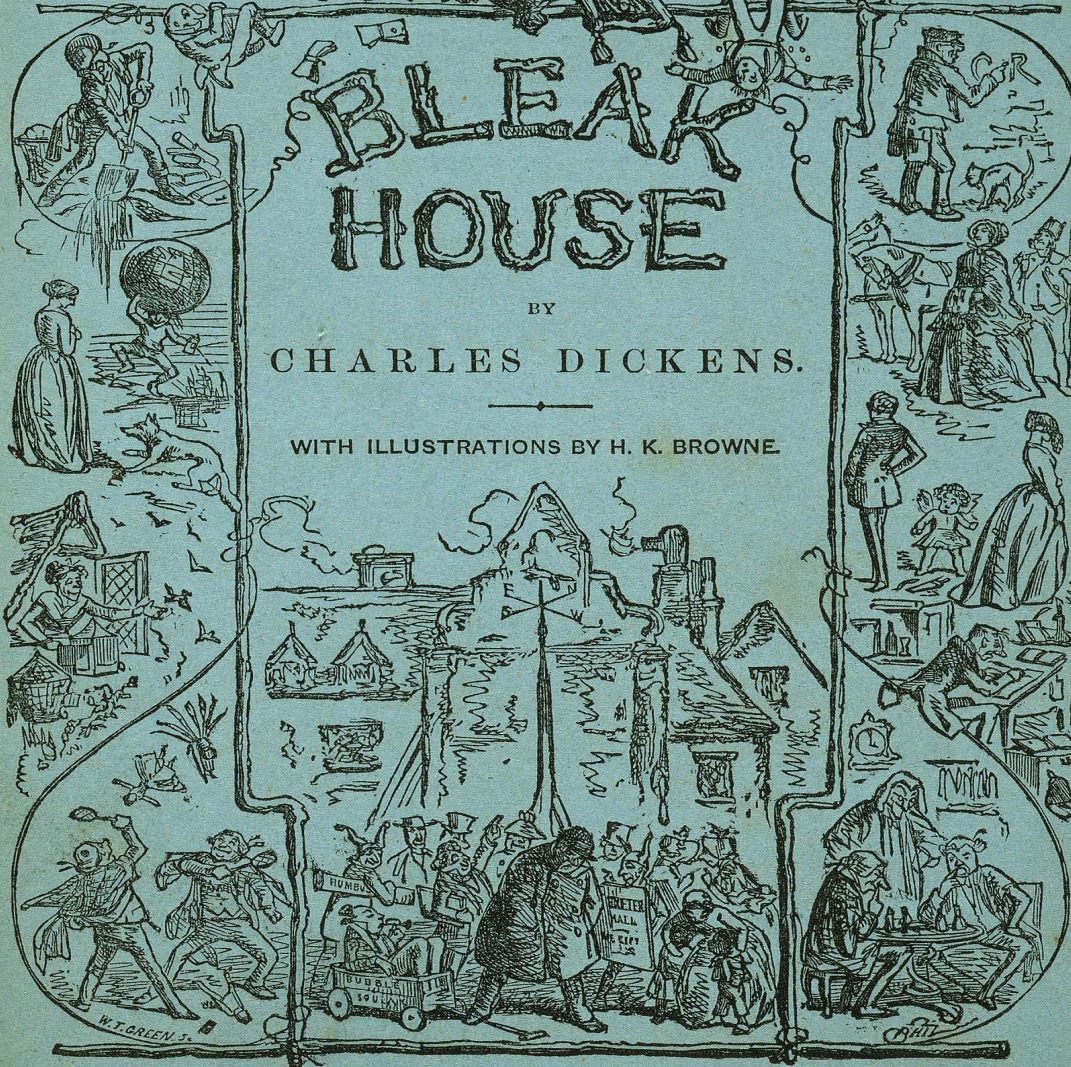
PR4556

No. XVIII.

A 1853
Office

AUGUST.

Price 1s.



LONDON: BRADBURY & EVANS, BOUVERIE STREET.

AGENTS: J. MENZIES, EDINBURGH; MURRAY AND SON, GLASGOW; J. M'GLASHAN, DUBLIN.

The Author of this Work notifies that it is his intention to reserve the right of translating it.

A cartoon from *Punch* published during the days of the Eyre Controversy¹⁵ conveys the same theme. The caption, “Telescopic Philanthropy”, is the title of the chapter from *Bleak House* in which Mrs. Jellyby is introduced.

The message here is that while resources are being diverted to help the undeserving in Jamaica, English children go hungry. To solve the problem of the poor of England, one need convince people like



Mrs J to sympathize less with distant folks and more for those within her household.

The issue of the “appropriate” level of weighting of the well-being of strangers and kin suggests that there is a good deal at stake in how (and whether) we sympathize with others. As strangers are believed to be more like family, we sympathize with them more, and resources will be diverted from the household to strangers. Belief is important here because Smith’s European has actually never seen a person from China; he has read about

¹⁵The Eyre controversy resulted after a minor dispute involving former Jamaican slaves. The governor, Edward James Eyre, reacted swiftly to quell the rebellion. He imposed martial law and called in the army to restore order. By the time the army was done, over 400 Jamaicans were dead, and thousands homeless. Britons were horrified by the methods of state terror, including flogging with wire whips and the use of military courts to deny civilians their rights. All major political economists of the time worked unsuccessfully to have Eyre convicted for his crimes. See Levy-Pearl 2001-2002, article 3; Semmel 1962.

them and he may have seen them in pictures. The stories and pictures in *Punch* and elsewhere contain representations that tell people the undeserving are unlike his family and more akin to beasts.¹⁶

Perhaps not surprisingly given the difficulty of following through on the utilitarian moral imperative,¹⁷ the equal weighting ideal of early utilitarians would soon be overthrown. Evolutionary biology provided the “scientific” rationale for the criticism of impartiality which had first been launched in literary criticism of the evangelical-economic anti-slavery movement.¹⁸

4. Sympathy in 19th Century Biology

Sympathy played a key role in 19th century evolutionary biology, as the means by which individual self-interest is connected to group interests in matters of justice and beneficence, and thus as a means of protecting the weak from the strong.¹⁹ As such,

¹⁶We have touched upon an example from Charles Kingsley’s *Water Babies* in Chapter 3. Below, we provide the text and image in which characters who are undeserving of sympathy are represented as beast-like.

¹⁷That difficulty left early utilitarian economists open to the charge of hypocrisy or “cant”. See Chapter 9.

¹⁸In his study of the British debates over emancipation, Drescher finds that racism played no interesting role (2002, pp. 79-81) but that it entered British discussion in an important way with Thomas Carlyle’s 1849 “Negro Question” (p. 219).

¹⁹Scholars who think about the “Adam Smith Problem” (Peters-Fransen 2001) have puzzled over where Smith’s sympathetic principle goes in the 19th century. To our knowledge, the link between sympathy and evolutionary biology has escaped attention. Haakonssen (2002, p. xxiii) notes “The *Theory of Moral Sentiments* did, however, have an independent legacy, though one that one is ill charted. Together with the work of Hume, it had established sympathy as a central moral concept for any attempt at a naturalistic ethic, and we find this reflected – though with few explicit acknowledgments by the

sympathy was also seen as the key impediment to natural selection. Even as the suggestion was made that humans are creatures motivated by sympathy, early eugenicists responded that such sympathetic tendencies should be suppressed. As eugenics triumphed in the late nineteenth century, the “unfit” became “parasites” removed from sympathy.

The earliest instance we know of the principle of sympathy in evolutionary biology is found in Erasmus Darwin’s 1803 *Temple of Nature*:

How Love and Sympathy the bosom warm,
Allure with pleasure, and with pain alarm,
With soft affections weave the social plan,
And charm the listening Savage into Man. (1803, Canto I:219-223)

In a note to Canto III:466 Darwin adds:

From our aptitude to imitation arises which is generally understood by the word sympathy, so well explained by Dr. Smith of Glasgow (1803, pp. 122-23).

A detailed discussion of the role of sympathy in evolution begins with the work of Herbert Spencer.²⁰ Relying explicitly on Smith, Spencer argued in his 1851 *Social Statics* that sympathy is the foundation for our perception that others possess rights. So, sympathy forms the basis for moral action:

utilitarians of the nineteenth century.” In the utilitarian-influenced evolutionary ethical discussions, citations to Smith or *Moral Sentiments* are explicit, e.g., Erasmus Darwin (1803, pp. 122-23), Herbert Spencer (1851, p. 96), T. H. Huxley (1934, p. 88).

²⁰In Chapters 8 and 10 we consider the question of who directs evolution for Spencer and Darwin. We also consider Spencer and Mill on utilitarianism, as well Edgeworth’s criticisms of both for assuming homogeneous humans.

Seeing, however, that this instinct of personal rights is a purely selfish instinct, leading each man to assert and defend his own liberty of action, there remains the question – Whence comes our perception of the rights of others? The way to a solution of this difficulty has been opened by Adam Smith in his “Theory of Moral Sentiments.” It is the aim of that work to show that the proper regulation of our conduct to one another, is secured by means of a faculty whose function it is to excite in each being the emotions displayed in surrounding ones ... the faculty, in short, which we commonly call Sympathy. (1851, p. 96)

After a two-page discussion extending Smith’s account, Spencer explains that justice and beneficence are both rooted in sympathy:

It was elsewhere hinted ... that though we must keep up the distinction between them, it is nevertheless true that *justice* and *beneficence* have a common root, and the reader will now at once perceive that the common root is – Sympathy. (1851, p. 98)

It soon became clear that as sympathy was extended to the weak among us, the principle of natural selection would not apply to humans. In 1864, A. R. Wallace made the case precisely:

If a herbivorous animal is a little sick and has not fed well for a day or two, and the herd is then pursued by a beast of prey, our poor invalid inevitably falls a victim. So in a carnivorous animal the least deficiency of vigour prevents its capturing food, and it soon dies of starvation. There is, as a general rule, no mutual assistance between adults, which enables them to tide over a period of sickness. Neither is there any division of labour; each must fulfill *all* the conditions of its existence, and, therefore, “natural selection” keeps all up to a pretty uniform standard.

But in man, as we now behold him, this is different. He is social and sympathetic. In the rudest tribes the sick are assisted at least with food; less robust health and vigour than the average does not entail death. ... Some division of labour takes place ... The action of natural selection is therefore checked ... (1864, p. clxii).

The question was whether this result was to be greeted with enthusiasm, or not.

The co-founder (with Francis Galton) of eugenics, W. R. Greg, responded that, since sympathy blocked the “salutary” effects of natural selection, it should be suppressed (Greg 1875, p. 119). Eugenicists used Hume’s dimensions of inferiority – physical and intellectual – and the debate that followed focused largely on what it was to be undeserving, “feeble and unfit.” (Carlson 2001) Much of the eugenics rhetoric attempted to show that the “unfit” were a *breed* apart, and therefore *undeserving* of sympathy. Greg described the Irish, who for all intents and purposes, were sub-human relative to their human counterpart, the Scots: “careless, squalid, unambitious Irishman, fed on potatoes, living in a pig-stye, doting on a superstition, multiply like rabbits or ephemera” (Greg 1868, p. 360; above, chapter 4). In later years, the eugenics movement focused on families of criminals such as the Jukes to make the case that sympathy stops at the door of the unfit.

Between the *Punch* cartoons of Fenians as subhuman and the eugenics movement, we find a justification of biological improvement in Charles Kingsley’s 1862-63 *Water-Babies*. Although *Water-Babies* is regarded today as a “charming” children’s story, it was reviewed by both the *Times* and James Hunt’s *Anthropological Review* in all due seriousness as a popularization of Darwin that applied the doctrine of natural selection to humans (Levy-Pearl 2001-2002).

We reprint the ape image drawn by Linley Sambourne which accompanied the

1885 edition, and we quote in full the passage abbreviated in Chapter 3:

And in the next five hundred years they were all dead and gone, by bad food and wild beasts and hunters; all except one tremendous old fellow with jaws like a jack who stood full seven feet high; and M. Du Chaila came up to him, and shot him, as he stood roaring and thumping his breast. And he remembered that his ancestors had once been men and tried to say, "Am I not a man and a brother?" but had forgotten how to use his tongue; and then he tried to call for a doctor, but he had forgotten the word for one. So all he said was "Ubbobbo!" and died.

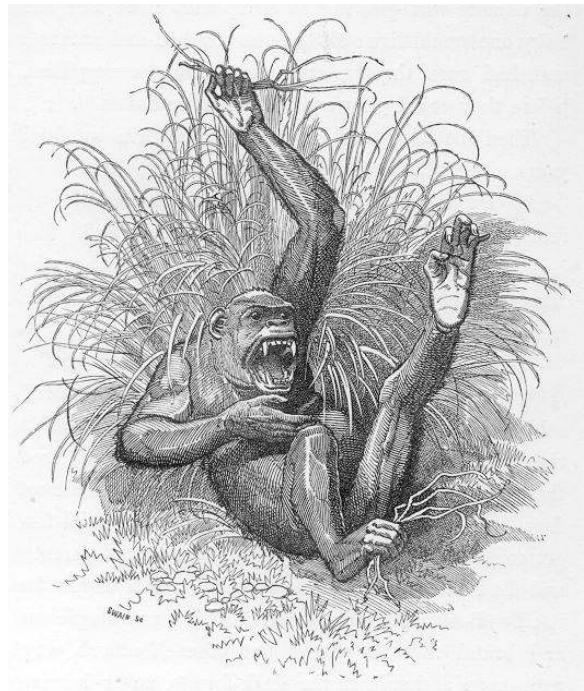
And that was the end of the great and jolly nation of the DoAsYouLikes. And, when Tom and Ellie came to the end of the book, they looked very sad and solemn; and they had good reason to do, for they really fancied that the men were apes ... though they were more apish than the apes of all apanies.

"But could you not have prevented them from becoming apes?" said little Ellie, at last.

"At first, my dear; if only they would have behaved like men, and set to work do what they did not like. But the longer they waited, and behaved like the dumb beasts, who only do what they like, the stupider and clumsier they grew; till at last they were past all cure, for they had thrown their own wits away. It is such things as this that help to make me so ugly, I know what when I shall grow fair."

"And where are they all now?" asked Ellie.

"Exactly where they ought to be, my dear." (Kingsley 1863, pp. 236-37).



As we have seen (3.3), *The Times* recognized that *Water-Babies* turned the possibility of Darwinian devolution into a Carlylean trope.

When Darwin's son, Leonard Darwin, reflected upon how shocking it would have been for Gregor Mendel, a Catholic priest, to visit his father, he recalled the name of only

one famous religious visitor, Kingsley. (Keynes 1943). There is perhaps no better testimony to Kingsley's role in adding a theological element to the idea of natural selection. As early as 1855, Kingsley rejected the factual claims associated with the *Bible* in favor of science – “Geology has disproved the old popular belief that the universe was brought into being as it now exists, by a single fiat” (1855: 71). In his 1871 ‘The Natural Theology of the Future’, Kingsley rejected the ethical claims of sympathy by appeal to “Physical science”:

Physical science is proving more and more the immense importance of Race; the importance of hereditary powers, hereditary organs, hereditary habits, in all organized beings, from the lowest plant the highest animal. She is proving more and more the omnipresent action of the differences between races; how the more favoured race (she cannot avoid using the epithet) exterminates the less favoured, or at least expels it, and forces it, under penalty of death, to adapt itself to new circumstances; and, in a word, that competition between every race and every individual of that race, and reward according to deserts, is (as far as we can see) an universal law of living things. (1871: 373)²¹

As noted in Chapter 4, the second pillar of eugenic thinking was that the unfit lacked the capacity for reason and the ability to control their impulses. Thus, the “unfit” were unable to participate in the reciprocal relationships associated with markets. At best, they *might* deserve help; they would never achieve equality. Here again the co-founder of the movement, Greg, held that the Irish were incapable of being peasant

²¹“At some future period, not very distant as measured by centuries, the civilised races of man will almost certainly exterminate, and replace, the savage races throughout the world. At the same time the anthropomorphous apes, as Professor Schaaffausen has remarked, will no doubt be exterminated. The break between man and his nearest allies will then be wider, for it will intervene between man in a more civilised state, as we may hope, even than the Caucasian, and some ape as low as a baboon, instead of as now between the negro or Australian and the gorilla.” (Darwin 1888, p. 160).

proprietors (Greg 1869, p. 78). The counter argument was of course made by Mill.²²

In the disagreement between Hume and Smith on sympathy and approbation, we can see how the later eugenics argument later played out. The “unfit” were held to be undeserving of sympathy, human “parasites” whose removal was needed if the human was to save himself (Carlson 2001, pp. 188-89).²³

These discussions of biological science and the “unfit” culminated in Darwin’s *Descent of Man*. Here, Darwin put forward a new goal, the “general good”, to replace the greatest happiness goal of utilitarianism. The “general good” signified biological perfection, as opposed to human happiness:

In the case of the lower animals it seems much more appropriate to speak of their social instincts, as having been developed for the general good rather than for the general happiness of the species. The term, general good, may be defined as the rearing of the greatest number of individuals in full vigour and health, *with all their faculties perfect*, under the conditions to which they are subjected. As the social instincts both of man and the lower animals have no doubt been developed by nearly the same steps, it would be advisable, if found practicable, to use the same definition in both cases, and to take as the standard of morality, the general good or welfare of the community, rather than the general happiness; but this definition would perhaps require some limitation on account of political ethics. (1871, p. 125) [Emphasis added]

The emphasized passage gives warrant to the “scientist” to decide what is or is not

²²The passage in Greg and Mill are quoted in full, as epithets to Chapter 3. In Chapter 8, we present a *Punch* cartoon of simple-minded Irish folk, incapable of making trades with John Bright. We find this contrast unsurprising in the light of the view by Greg that sympathy must be blocked and Mill’s position that undirected sympathy extends to those across the globe.

²³The “parasite” under many guises – the “Jew harpy,” the Irish/Jamaican “cannibal,” the economic/evangelical “canter” – plays a much neglected role in paternalistic theorizing. See Levy-Pearl (2001-2002) and Chapter 9.

“perfect.”

Darwin provides a classical gloss on how self-interested calculations interfere with biological improvement:

The Grecian poet, Theognis, who lived 550 B.C., clearly saw how important selection, if carefully applied, would be for the improvement of mankind. He saw, likewise, that wealth often checks the proper ~~fac-~~action of sexual selection. He thus writes:

‘With kine and horses, Kurnus! We proceed
By reasonable rules, and choose a breed
For profit and increase, at any price:
Of a sound stock, without defect or vice.
But, in the daily matches that we make,
The price is everything: for money’s sake,
Men marry: women are in marriage given
The churl or ruffian, than in wealth has thriven,
May match his offspring with the proudest race:
Thus everything is mix’d, noble and base!
If then in outward manner, form, and mind,
You find us a degraded, motley kind.
Wonder no more, my friend! The cause is plain,
And to lament the consequence is vain.’ (1871, p. 33)

Sympathy is vital in Darwin’s account of human development. In Chapter IV of Part I he uses the sympathetic principle to move from individual to group interests.²⁴ But

²⁴Darwin (1871, p. XXX): “The all-important emotion of sympathy is distinct from that of love. ... Adam Smith formerly argued, as has Mr. Bain recently, that the basis of sympathy lies in our strong retentiveness of former states of pain or pleasure. ... In a like manner we are led to participate in the pleasures of others.” [Darwin’s note to text: See the first and striking chapter in Adam Smith’s ‘Theory of Moral Sentiments.’ ...]” Thomas Huxley was also explicit in his use of Smith’s sympathetic principle for evolutionary explanations that require moving from individual to group interests: “An artificial personality, the ‘man within,’ as Adam Smith calls conscience, is built up beside the natural personality. He is the watchman of society, charged to restrain the anti-social tendencies of the natural man within the limits required by social welfare.” (1934, p. 88).

Darwin questioned whether sympathy has survival value in the next chapter, which opens with a discussion of Wallace (1864):

It is extremely doubtful whether the offspring of the more sympathetic and benevolent parents, or of those who were the most faithful to their comrades, would be reared in greater numbers than the children of selfish and treacherous parents belonging to the same tribe. He who was ready to sacrifice his life, as many a savage has been, rather than betray his comrades, would often leave no offspring to inherit his noble nature. The bravest men, who were always willing to come to the front in war, and who freely risked their lives for others, would on an average perish in larger numbers than other men. Therefore it hardly seems probable, that the number of men gifted with such virtues, or that the standard of their excellence, could be increased through natural selection, that is, by the survival of the fittest ... (1871, p. 132-33)

Here, interestingly enough, Darwin appeals to a Lamarckian process:

as the reasoning powers and foresight of the members became improved, each man would soon learn that if he aided his fellow men, he would common receive aid in return. From this low motive he might acquire the habit of aiding his fellows; and the habit of performing benevolent actions certainly strengthens the feeling of sympathy which gives the first impulse to benevolent actions. Habits, moreover, followed during many generations probably tend to be inherited. (1888, p. 133)

Thus, we have no really good reason from the principle of natural selection, to believe that traits which tend to produce biological perfection will be inherited.

It is important to recognize that biological perfection is the new goal. Darwin clarified this when he asked whether sympathy ought to be checked in the section entitled *Natural Selection as affecting Civilised nations* (1871, p. 138-46). The context entails a policy of vaccination. For a utilitarian, the policy of vaccination is justified because, on balance, it saves lives. But for Darwin, vaccination serves to preserve the

weak and it is consequently “injurious to the race of man”:

There is reason to believe that vaccination has preserved thousands, who from a weak constitution would formerly have succumbed to small-pox. Thus the weak members of civilized societies propagate their kind. No one who has attended to the breeding of domestic animals will doubt that this must be highly injurious to the race of man. It is surprising how soon a want of care, or care wrongly directed, leads to the degeneration of a domestic race; but excepting in the case of man himself, hardly any one is so ignorant as to allow his worst animals to breed. (1883, p. 139)

Darwin explicitly attributes this misdirection of effort to the “instinct of sympathy”.

Although he finds that sympathy leads to such dilatory effects, he nonetheless concludes that it is mainly a positive attribute. But he worries about the effects of unregulated sympathy in the case of the “weak and inferior” and he hopes that marriage among this group will be checked:

The aid which we feel impelled to give to the helpless is mainly an incidental result of the instinct of sympathy, which was originally acquired as part of the social instincts, but subsequently rendered, in the manner previously indicated, more tender and more widely diffused. Nor could we check our sympathy, even at the urging of hard reason, without deterioration in the noblest part of our nature. ... We must therefore bear the undoubtedly bad effects of the weak surviving and propagating their kind; but there appears to be at least one check in steady action, namely the weaker and inferior members of society do not marry so freely as the sound; and this check might be indefinitely increased by the weak in body or mind refraining from marriage, though this is more to be hoped for than expected. (1871, p. 139)²⁵

As the chapter continues, Darwin cites the arguments of the co-founders of eugenics,

²⁵ He had informed the reader earlier about his worry over the uncontrolled breeding of humans: “In another and much more important respect, man differs widely from any strictly domesticated animal; for his breeding has never been long controlled, either by methodological or unconscious selection.” (Darwin 1871, p. 33)

Greg and Galton, against the Malthusian recommendation to increase human happiness by delaying marriage. The problem with Malthus is that the “poor and reckless” cannot be trusted to restrain from marriage (above, Chapter 4):

A most important obstacle in civilized countries to an increase in the number of men of a superior class has been strongly insisted on by Mr. Greg and Mr. Galton, namely, the fact that the very poor and reckless, who are often degraded by vice, almost invariably marry early, whilst the careful and frugal, who are generally otherwise virtuous, marry late in life ... (1871, p. 143)

Darwin returns to this contention when the book concludes. The attraction of breeding a better race is again clear, and he suggests a “plan” is needed to regulate marriages:

Man scans with scrupulous care the character and pedigree of his horses, cattle, and dogs before he matches them; but when he comes to his own marriage he rarely, or never, takes any such care. ... When the principles of breeding and inheritance are better understood, we shall not hear ignorant members of our legislature rejecting with scorn a plan for ascertaining whether or not consanguineous marriages are injurious to man. (1871, pp. 642-43)

He adds that there is a tradeoff between the struggle for survival and happiness that results from over-population:

The advancement of the welfare of mankind is a most intricate problem: all ought to refrain from marriage who cannot avoid abject poverty for their children; for poverty is not only a great evil, but tends to its own increase by leading to recklessness in marriage. On the other hand, as Mr. Galton has remarked, if the prudent avoid marriage, whilst the reckless marry, the inferior members tend to supplant the better members of society. Man, like every other animal, has no doubt advanced to his present high condition through a struggle for existence consequent on his rapid multiplication; and if he is to advance still higher, it is to be feared that he must remain subject to a severe struggle. Otherwise he would sink into indolence, and the more gifted men would not be more successful in the battle of

life than the less gifted. Hence our natural rate of increase, though leading to many and obvious evils, must not be greatly diminished by any means. (1871, p. 643).

This paragraph featured prominently in a trial over the distribution of contraceptive information in which the contending parties were seen by the *Times* as Darwin and Mill (see Chapter 10 below).

Thus, evolutionary biology was used to provide a rationale for suppressing sympathy towards the undeserving. At the same time, evolutionary theory was used to oppose the utilitarian ideal of strict impartiality. In both cases, hierarchy and control of sympathy were at issue.

5. Self-Directed Sympathy and Mill's "Urge to Resist"

Mill had envisioned a process by which sympathy would be extended to persons who formerly enjoyed a less-than-fully human status as such persons were increasingly given the means to participate fully in political and economic decision-making.²⁶ But the analytical machinery required for this process of self-directed improvement was soon to be denied. Post-Darwin, individuals came to be regarded as governed inexorably by the

²⁶Society "improves" because a growing number of individuals acquire "social feelings of mankind": "The desire to be in unity with our fellow creatures, which is already a powerful principle in human nature, and happily one of those which tend to become stronger, even without express inculcation, from the influences of advancing civilization" (1861, CW, x: 231). They do so without direction. While "the old theory" held that individuals were unable to recognize what was best for them, experience had shown the contrary: "The old theory was, that the least possible should be left to the choice of the individual agent; that all he had to do should, as far as practicable, be laid down for him by superior wisdom. Left to himself he was sure to go wrong. The modern conviction, the fruit of a thousand years of experience, is, that things in which the individual is the person directly interested, never go right but as they are left to his own discretion; and that any regulation of them by authority, except to protect the rights of others, is sure to be mischievous." (1869, p. 18).

same natural laws that govern the non-human. The notion that sympathetic individuals might change themselves was criticized in 1879 by W. S. Jevons who held that humans were essentially unimprovable:

Human nature is one of the last things which can be called “pliable.” Granite rocks can be more easily moulded than the poor savages that hide among them. We are all of us full of deep springs of unconquerable character, which education may in some degree soften or develop, but can neither create nor destroy. The mind can be shaped about as much as the body; it may be starved into feebleness, or fed and exercised into vigour and fullness; but we start always with inherent hereditary powers of growth (1879, p. 536).

Once individuals came to be regarded as “granite”, self-directed improvement came to be regarded as a pipedream and the dimension of sympathy became analytically irrelevant in economics.

The later utilitarian economist, F. Y. Edgeworth, was instrumental in the removal of sympathy from economic and utilitarian analysis late in the century.²⁷ Edgeworth likened the utilitarian problem of maximizing well-being, to that of lamps generating light:

Up to this, sentient beings being regarded as so many lamps of different lighting power, the questions have been what lamps shall be lit, and how much material shall be supplied to each lamp, in order to produce the greatest quantity of light. And the answers, neither unexpected, nor yet distinctly foreseen by common sense, are, that a limited number of the best burners are to be lit, and that most material is to be given to the best lamp.

²⁷See Chapter 10 for the details of Edgeworth’s criticisms, in particular the limited context in which sympathy matters.

In Edgeworth's account, individuals differ in perfection; evolutionary fitness maps to the capacity for pleasure. And the scientist can see into the minds of other humans to measure their subjective states, just as he might measure luminescence.

As a consequence of the differential capacity for happiness, Mill's doctrine of moral equality must be deeply questioned:

Pending a scientific hedonimetry, the principle 'Every man, and every woman, to count for one,' should be very cautiously applied. (1881, p. 81)²⁸

In Edgeworth's eugenic exercise agents receive orders to remove their lesser associates to unprogressive lands or to celibate monasteries.²⁹ And the agents obey the decrees. Let us reflect again upon what Mill has told us about human nature in *Utilitarianism*:

Human beings, on this point, only differ from other animals in two particulars. First, in being capable of sympathising, not solely with their offspring, or, like some of the more noble animals, with some superior animal who is kind to them, but with all human, and even with all sentient, beings. Secondly, in having a more developed intelligence ... any conduct which threatens the security of the society generally, is threatening to his own, and calls forth his instinct (if instinct it be) of self-defence. The same superiority of intelligence joined to the power of sympathising with human beings generally, enables him to attach himself to the collective idea of his tribe, his country, or mankind, in such a manner that any act

²⁸Mill "take[s] for granted that there is no *material* difference (no difference of kind, as Mill says in his "Logic") between human creatures. If, however, utilitarians were really convinced that there existed either now, or (what is more conceivable) in a past stage of the world's evolution, a broad distinction ... , presumably the establishment of a privileged class would commend itself to utilitarian sense..." (Edgeworth 1877, p. 55).

²⁹For people with an inferior capacity for pleasure, Galton had offered a solution: "What approach is useful in such cases is to be determined by Mr. Todhunter's principle. [*Researches*; below p. 93] Again, mitigations might be provided for the classes not selected. [Cf. Galton, 'The weak could find a welcome and a refuge in celibate monasteries,' &c.' also Sully, *Pessimism*, p. 392.] ... Again, *emigration* might supplement total selection; emigration from Utopia to some unprogressive country where the prospect of happiness might be comparatively zero." (1881, p. 72).

hurtful to them, raises his instinct of sympathy, and urges him to resistance. (Mill 1861, p. 248.)

Sympathetic beings would resist Edgeworth's decrees.³⁰ But late in the century the hedonic calculus, supported by evolutionary theory, purportedly enabled the scientist to dismiss the bounds of sympathy which otherwise link him to the concerns of ordinary people, and to turn off the heartbreak that accompanies their concerns.

³⁰Martin Luther King made the case, more than half a century later: "Moreover, I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states. I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly." (King 1963, pp. 1-2). In Chapter 10 we show that the Pareto Principle blocks Edgeworth's proposal. This suggests that commitment to the Pareto Principle is the expression of a minimal amount of sympathy.