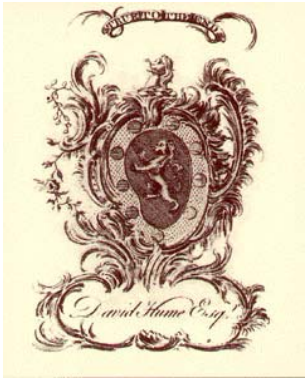

Sympathy and Other Selves
Tony Pitson
Hume Studies Volume XXII, Number 2 (November, 1996) 255-272.

HUME STUDIES
Volume XXII, Number 2, November 1996, pp. 255-271

Sympathy and Other Selves

TONY PITSON

Introduction

Throughout Books II and III of the *Treatise* Hume makes considerable use of the notion of sympathy. For the most part this notion refers not to a feeling or passion as such, but rather to a kind of mechanism by which these and other mental states are communicated from one person to another. According to the way in which Hume describes this mechanism—for example, when it is first introduced in *Treatise* II i 11—it appears to operate as follows: we become aware of the sentiments or inclinations of someone else through their effects in that person's appearance and behaviour and in this way acquire an idea of the person's state of mind; and the idea which is thus acquired is then converted into an impression, so that we come to experience something comparable to the other person's own state of mind, as a result of the enlivening effect of the ever-present impression of self. Discussion of sympathy so understood tends to focus on the process in which our idea of the other person's state of mind is converted into the corresponding impression and the role played in this by the impression of self. As I intend to show, however, there are important questions about the way in which the idea itself is supposed to be acquired, and how this is to be reconciled with Hume's philosophical position both in the *Treatise* and elsewhere. In other words, the focus of the following discussion is the initial stage in the process which is supposed to result in our sharing the mental states of others. I believe we shall find that this—the epistemological—aspect of sympathy provides an important parallel to Hume's earlier treatment of the understanding.

Tony Pitson is at the Department of Philosophy, University of Stirling, Stirling, FK9 4LA, Scotland. Email: aep1@forth.stirling.ac.uk

Other Selves: The Epistemological Problem

The topic of other selves is usually approached in philosophy from the perspective of both epistemology and the philosophy of mind. The epistemological issue is one concerning our knowledge of other selves. More precisely, what is at stake is the nature, extent and basis of such knowledge. Discussion of this issue often focuses on the question of whether we can, strictly speaking, be said to have knowledge of other selves at all. The reason why this question should have become the focus of discussion is one which deserves treatment in its own right. But it appears to arise from an underlying view of the nature of the self, viz., Descartes' dualism. The separation between mind and body involved in this doctrine leads naturally to the question as to whether the other beings by whom I am surrounded are anything more than just bodies. Is it not consistent with what I can observe that these other beings should be no more than machines?[1] Do I therefore have any reason for supposing that I am not the sole worldly possessor of a mind?

When we consider Hume's position in the light of this familiar way of regarding the issue of other selves, there is one striking fact which emerges immediately. This is that Hume appears to entertain no doubt whatsoever about our capacity for gaining awareness of the mental states of others—and, indeed, never directly addresses the issue of scepticism in this context. (Nor, we might note, does he hesitate to ascribe mental states to non-human animals—as, for example, in *Treatise* I iii 16). The existence of others as the subjects of mental states is presupposed both in Hume's discussion of the understanding in Book I of the *Treatise*, and also in his discussion of the passions—in particular, the indirect passions—in Book II. His account of sympathy, as we shall see, is one which in effect attempts to explain how it is possible for us to be aware of the contents of other people's minds. Since he nevertheless accepts some form of dualism (though not, as his discussion in *Treatise* I iv 5 makes clear, Descartes' substance dualism), this feature of Hume's position warrants closer examination. A natural way of responding to the scepticism about other selves which appears to result from Descartes' dualism is to seek for some form of argument which would justify the ascription of mental states to others on the basis of the bodily behaviour, and other circumstances, we observe. Hence the Argument from Analogy which we find, for example, in Mill.[2] In essence, the argument is that I may justifiably ascribe mental states to others on the basis of the analogy between their behaviour and circumstances and my own when I am the subject of certain mental states. An underlying assumption is that mental states form a causal link between external circumstances, in so far as they affect the body, and bodily behaviour. How, then, might Hume be expected to view the kind of causal inference envisaged in this argument? In order to deal with this question I will consider what he has to say about the role of analogy in inductive, or "probable," reasoning; and I will go on to look at his use of certain assumptions about

inductive reasoning in a context which appears interestingly relevant to the present one.

Hume's remarks about reasoning from analogy reflect the fact that causal inference in general rests upon the constant conjunction of two objects in past experience, and the resemblance of a present object to one of them (T 142). In the case of analogy, the crucial factor is the relation of resemblance. In Hume's words, "as this resemblance admits of many different degrees, the reasoning becomes proportionably more or less firm and certain" (T 142). Hume goes on to describe reasoning from analogy as a species of probability

> where we transfer our experience in past instances to objects which are resembling, but are not exactly the same as those concerning which we have had experience. In proportion as the resemblance decays, the probability diminishes; but still has some force as long as there remain any traces of the resemblance. (T 147)

It appears, then, that the principles governing analogical inference concern both the union of the relevant objects (since this is a factor which bears on probable reasoning generally), and, in particular, the resemblance between the present object or impression and the objects whose conjunction we have experienced in the past. This may, it seems, be applied to the particular case of the inference to other minds, so that the union in question is one involving one's own mental states and bodily behaviour, while the resemblance has to do with the relation between oneself and the others to whom mental states are ascribed on the basis of their behaviour. The former raises the question of how far the analogical inference to other minds, as a species of probable reasoning, conforms to the rules for causal judgement (cf. T I iii 15); while the latter provides the principle of association distinctive of analogical inference in general, and of the inference to the mental states of others in particular.

In pursuing the question of how far the particular kind of causal inference involved in this case satisfies the requirements of Hume's "Logic" (T 175), we might consider the parallel provided by his discussion of belief in the existence of external objects (T I iv 2). Hume discusses this belief from the point of view both of the "vulgar" and also of philosophy itself. So far as the latter is concerned, Hume treats this as amounting to a view of the senses and their operation that distinguishes between objects or bodies themselves and the perceptions of which we are immediately aware. In fact, Hume himself appears to endorse this distinction to the extent that he makes use of familiar types of argument intended to establish that the senses provide us with immediate awareness only of perceptions or images rather than of external objects (EHU 152). What emerges from such arguments is a "new system" according to which external objects give rise to perceptions by means of which we experience those objects in sense perception. Now it seems clear that, for

Hume, this system cannot be attributed directly to the understanding. The reason he gives for this is that while objects and perceptions are supposed to be related as cause and effect, and thus conjoined with each other, we are quite unable to observe any conjunction between them (T 212). For according to this philosophical system, we can directly experience only the perceptions themselves and not the objects that are supposed to correspond to them. We are unable, therefore, to justify any inference from one to the other (T 193, 212), since such inferences depend upon our experience of cause and effect in the form of an observed constant conjunction between the items concerned. It is entirely consistent with perceptions occurring in the mind as they do that they should be the product of the mind itself or some other spiritual cause (EHU 153); we cannot appeal to experience as providing any rational basis for the claim that our perceptions are caused by external objects (and still less that they resemble such objects—T 216).

A number of issues obviously arise here—for example, the rational defensibility of the philosophical account of perception to which Hume refers, and the question of Hume's own position in relation to this account and possible philosophical alternatives. But I want to ignore these in order to concentrate on two essential points. The first is that the "new system" is a causal account of perception, and is treated by Hume as such; and the second is that he criticises it as being unable to justify the presumed causal relation between perception and its objects. Now in some ways the epistemological issue concerning other selves seems very similar to the one with which we have just been concerned. For one thing, Hume appears to accept that the contents of another person's mind are not immediately perceived by us and are known only by their "signs" or effects (T 151). In accordance with this, his account of human testimony treats the ideas of others as causal links between the facts or objects represented and the words or discourses through which we are made aware of these facts (T 113). Thus, Hume's account of the way in which we acquire an idea of the other person's state of mind assumes in general a causal relation between mental states and such items of behaviour as a person's utterances, so that the latter may be regarded as "external signs" of the mental states in question. This is implicit in the initial account of sympathy, where "affections" are said to be known by their effects (T 317). Elsewhere Hume refers to the relation of cause and effect by which we are convinced of the reality of the passion with which we sympathise (T 320), and to the effects of passion in the person's voice and gesture (T 576). All this presupposes a causal relation between the mental and the physical, a possibility which Hume has tried to establish earlier in *Treatise* I iv 5, where he enunciates the general principle that anything may be the cause or effect of anything, with experience determining that mental and physical occurrences are indeed causally related. Furthermore, Hume gives an account of sympathy on which it does appear to involve a type of causal inference:

> No passion of another discovers itself immediately to the mind. We are only sensible of its causes and effects. From *these* we infer the passion: And consequently *these* give rise to our sympathy. (T 576)[3]

Now the parallel with the perceptual case, as envisaged in the "new system," seems quite close. There is an inference to the existence of something which can never immediately be known—the state of mind of the other person—from its associated causes and effects. But can this be justified, any more than the corresponding inference from perceptions to objects? If not, Hume would apparently be committed, after all, to questioning the extent to which we can be said to have knowledge of other selves.[4]

Sympathy and Our Awareness of the Mental States of Others

It seems clear that Hume does not in fact see the inference to the mental states of others as presenting the same difficulties as the philosopher's inference from perceptions to external objects. So what, for Hume, is the difference between the two? Perhaps it is in part that experience does, after all, enable us to be acquainted with the causal relation between mental and physical events. For it might be thought that we are at least able to experience this in our own case, whereas the supposed conjunction between perceptions and objects is something we are never able directly to observe. There is of course a considerable complication here, namely, that from the point of view of the philosophical system the human body—including one's own—is just another object of perception (cf. T 191). To this extent, the inference to the mental states of others should inherit all the difficulties of the philosophical system together with difficulties of its own. In fact, Hume takes the existence of the human body for granted in his discussions of sympathy and explicitly remarks on the bodily similarities between human beings. This, in turn, reflects his belief that objects or bodies exist in addition to the perceptions of which we are immediately aware, even if he is forced to acknowledge the impossibility of grounding a view of this kind either in the senses themselves, or in reason, or even in the imagination. I shall therefore proceed in my discussion of Hume on other selves by granting him the assumption that bodies exist, and then seeing how this is supposed to provide the basis for an apparent inference to the mental states of others. This will also make it possible to grant Hume the assumption that in one's own case—but not, of course, that of others—one can directly experience the conjunction (though not the necessary connection) of mental and physical states. To this extent, there will after all be a relevant difference between the present case and that of perception and its objects.

We should note here that Hume does appear to accept some features of the asymmetry between self-knowledge and knowledge of others which

is so prominent in Descartes. In fact, he appears to claim that so far as the contents of one's own mind are concerned, appearance and reality coincide (T 190, 366); while the contents of other minds may simply be concealed from us (T 593).[5] Hume also appears to commit himself to various principles concerning the use of analogical reasoning which are of obvious relevance in this context. His discussion of the Argument from Design, for example, contains the claim that only when two kinds of object have been found to be constantly conjoined can we infer the existence of one from that of the other (EHU 148). Perhaps more to the point, Hume also makes much, in this context, of the principle that if a cause is known only by its effect then we ought to ascribe to it no more than is requisite to produce that effect (EHU 136). This last principle seems particularly disturbing since the thought occurs that the behaviour of others might be explained in some way which does not assume their possession of mental states (e.g., on the hypothesis that they are no more than highly complex machines or automata somehow contrived to behave as they do). The crucial point, then, seems to be this: that in order to be justified in ascribing mental states to others on the basis of their behaviour we should have discovered a constant conjunction between these types of cause and effect; whereas experience reveals their conjunction at most only in one case—our own—and leaves it an open question what may be the cause of the behaviour of others.

Now in spite of this, Hume seems to endorse a constant conjunction between body and mind generally and not just in our own case.[6] This is borne out by the bold assertion that "Every thing is in common betwixt soul and body" ("Of the Immortality of the Soul," 268). We should recall, too, the nature of Hume's project as he describes it at the beginning of the *Treatise*, namely, to establish a science of man where it is evident that the focus of concern is the mind itself. There is no suggestion that this science is to be pursued by reference to the mind of the author alone—on the contrary, the method to be employed is "a cautious observation of human life," in particular, of "men's behaviour in company, in affairs, and in their pleasures" (T xix). The principles which Hume claims to underlie the mind's functioning are evidently meant to apply to the mind generally (on analogy, in fact, with Newtonian principles governing the behaviour of objects or bodies). But how can Hume take for granted the possibility of obtaining knowledge of the minds of others, if this depends on a problematic inference from the bodily behaviour (and other circumstances) we are able to observe to mental states which are not directly available to us?

Hume and the Process of Sympathy

Now it may be, of course, that Hume's position in relation to our knowledge of other selves is ultimately inconsistent. But before we reach this

conclusion we should look more closely at his account of sympathy. Thus, consider the way in which Hume initially characterizes it, viz., as

> that propensity we have to sympathize with others, and to receive by communication their inclinations and sentiments, however different from, or even contrary to our own. (T 316)

We may notice immediately that sympathy is not defined cognitively, as a process of inference by which we obtain knowledge of the mental states of others. In fact, the reference to "communication" seems to suggest that sympathy is a process by which the mental states of others are somehow transmitted to us.[7] In other words, it appears that Hume is treating sympathy, as he introduces this notion, on analogy with the process by which, for example, motion may be transferred from one object to another (in accordance with Newtonian theory). In the latter case, we observe that motion is communicated upon impulse (T 111, 164; EHU 28, 48, 75, 78; "Abstract," 649)—though, strictly speaking, what we really observe is that the movement of one ball, for example, as it comes into contact with another, is followed by the movement of the second ball ("Abstract," 650). There is even one passage in which Hume makes explicit the comparison between sympathy and the communication of motion from one object to another:

> As in strings equally wound up, the motion of one communicates itself to the rest; so all the affections readily pass from one person to another, and beget correspondent movements in every human creature. (T 576)

Hume employs other analogies to illustrate his view of the relation between ourselves and others, for example, "the minds of men are mirrors to one another"—the point of this being the way in which sentiments may be reflected from one mind to another, in a process which may continue until the original sentiment has perhaps decayed away (T 365). Again, Hume confirms that sympathy, in the present sense, is more than just a matter of a kind of cognitive recognition of the feelings of others when he writes that "[t]he sentiments of others can never affect us, but by becoming, in some measure, our own" (T 593). There are obvious puzzles here arising from the literal impossibility of observing the mind of another person or self (as I might observe my own reflection in a mirror), and similarly of sharing the sentiments of another mind in any sense other than having sentiments which may be like those of someone else. Given this, what sense can we make of the ways in which Hume nevertheless characterises sympathy?

It is evident that talk of the contact between one mind and another can only be metaphorical. But I think one can see why Hume is inclined to adopt this kind of metaphor in talking about sympathy. I have suggested already

that sympathy, as Hume introduces this notion, is not a cognitive process of inferring the mental states of others from their behaviour and utterances.[8] The alternative—and one which helps to explain why Hume should take for granted the legitimacy of ascribing mental states to others—is that in the presence of others a complex process of association occurs as a result of which one is led almost irresistibly to acquire sentiments corresponding to those experienced by these others. This obviously reflects the fact that human beings do, after all, resemble each other. And it is also to be expected that where there are special points of resemblance between oneself and some other person (having to do with manners, nationality, etc.), this will further facilitate the process of sympathy (T 318). (The associative relations of contiguity and causation will naturally have a similar influence, as Hume confirms). But Hume makes it clear here that the transition by which the mind is carried from its own perceptions to those of others is one made by the imagination. Thus, Hume's account of the process of sympathy itself is generally expressed in the language of his theory of association and, in particular, the notion that an idea may be converted into an impression through the enlivening effects of a related impression. In this case, the idea is that of a perception conceived of as belonging to another mind, and the related impression is that of oneself (i.e., as a complex system of perceptions). The whole process is, according to Hume, "an object of the plainest experience, and depends not on any hypothesis of philosophy" (T 319–320). Here it seems is where we encounter the difference, for Hume, between the process by which, according to the philosophical theory, objects are supposed to make themselves known to us in experience, and the process of sympathy by which we come to share the mental states of others. For the supposition of a causal relation between objects and impressions is not only one for which neither reason nor the senses are responsible; but it cannot be ascribed to any original tendency of the imagination (T 212). On the other hand, our attribution of mental states to others in the light of their behaviour does directly reflect propensities of the imagination. We thus find an explanation in human nature, on Hume's view, for our acceptance of other minds or selves.

When Hume talks of the idea one forms of the sentiments of another it is natural to understand this as a reference to belief. For Hume has earlier characterised belief as a lively idea related to a present impression (T 93, 97, etc.), and the present impression in this case would presumably be provided by one's perception of the other's behaviour or utterances, as well as the circumstances in which these occur. The belief that someone else has a certain sentiment is then supposed to be converted into the very sentiment itself. In general the effect of belief is to make ideas themselves more impression-like in degree of force and vivacity (T 119), thus facilitating the process by which an idea might be transformed into the impression it represents. Correspondingly, the absence of belief will normally prevent an idea from having this kind of

effect on the mind (cf. T 121).[9] Where the feelings of another person are concerned, the belief is in effect a causal one which reflects a propensity of human nature to ascribe emotions to external objects generally—a propensity which is modified through experience as we learn to identify appropriate objects of sympathy (T 224–225), so that it comes to be exercised in accordance with the degree of resemblance (contiguity, etc.) between oneself and the subject of emotion involved. But in so far as belief is in this way involved in sympathy, it is not characteristically a matter of a belief being consciously formulated as part of some explicit process of inference from bodily behaviour. Rather, a process of association is involved for which imagination rather than the understanding is responsible. This is one reason why it would be so misleading to represent Hume as a proponent of the Argument from Analogy, passages such as the one previously mentioned—from T 576—notwithstanding; and it also explains how the vulgar position may recognise the distinction between mental states and behaviour without being committed to any form of problematic inference from the one to the other.[10]

It might be objected to this interpretation of Hume's position on the epistemology of sympathy that it is consistent with the possibility that he is, after all, committed to a version of the Argument from Analogy considered as a kind of inductive inference. For even if it is true that our beliefs about the mental states of others are the product of imagination rather than of reason, this needs to be set against the fact that, for Hume, inductive inference is itself ultimately to be ascribed to the imagination (T 92, 97). If, however, we look more closely at Hume's position on this latter point, we find that it is connected with an observation about causation, viz., that "reason fails us in the discovery of the ultimate connexion between cause and effect" (T 91). Hume's thought here seems to be that our inability to understand why certain objects or events are constantly conjoined also prevents us from establishing that nature will continue to operate in accordance with our expectations. Thus, our inductive beliefs are determined by custom and association, rather than by reason. But this limitation on reason does not in itself prevent the philosopher from trying to establish rules by which we might determine whether objects are so conjoined that their relation is one of cause and effect. Hume is thus committed to a distinction between those inferences from experience which occur in accordance with such rules and those, on the other hand, which transgress them. Hence the critique of the philosophical system of perception, and also of the Argument from Design. Given the literal impossibility of observing a constant conjunction between mental and physical states generally, and not just in one's own case, the Argument from Analogy would in fact present special difficulties for Hume as a piece of inductive inference. His unquestioning acceptance of the existence of other minds or selves should not, therefore, be seen as a product of any such inference; nor,

I would suggest, does Hume found our ordinary beliefs about the mental states of others in an inference of this kind.

For this kind of reason we should, I think, see belief in the existence of other minds or selves as an instance of those beliefs which, for Hume, might be classified as "natural." In other words, our acceptance of the existence of others as the subjects of mental states—as selves—bears comparison with our belief in the existence of body and the beliefs about the unobserved which we form on the basis of past experience. In all these cases what marks off the beliefs in question as "natural" is the fact that they are neither the product of reason, nor capable of being vindicated by reason—but, above all, that they are beliefs that are unavoidable for us in virtue of our nature as human beings.[11] It is scarcely surprising, therefore, that the propensities involved are ones that in each case we share in common with non-human animals. While, then, it may be true that Hume does not explicitly address the question of the basis for our acceptance of the existence of other selves,[12] this would seem to provide an instance of belief about a matter of fact or existence that may be considered "natural" in the sense explained.

Sympathy and the Understanding

This might be the appropriate place at which to make a crucial point about sympathy, and one which has implications for our understanding of Hume's philosophy generally. There is no doubt that Hume often represents sympathy as a more or less involuntary response to those around us: as, for example, when he remarks on the contagiousness of passions (T 605; cf. EPM 251). In doing so he arguably captures a highly significant feature of our responses to others where, as we have seen, we arrive at beliefs about their mental states without engaging in the process of inference associated with the Argument from Analogy. Leaving aside the basis for this view of sympathy in Hume's own discussion, it is worth noting its wider philosophical interest. It seems not implausible to suggest that our instinctive responses to others underlie the more subtle kinds of belief which, under certain circumstances, we form about their mental states. One thinks here, for example, of Wittgenstein's remark about our "primitive" reactions to the pains of others, as expressed in the way we tend and treat them. Such reactions are not themselves the outcome of any form of inference from one's own case; they are essentially prelinguistic, though the relevant language game is based on them.[13] Wittgenstein remarks elsewhere that one's attitude towards the other person in this kind of case is an attitude towards a soul.[14] Of course there are often circumstances in which our responses to others do not take this kind of instinctive or primitive form, but represent genuine processes of thought. There may be good reason, for example, to suppose that someone's behaviour is not to be taken at face value, so that we take this into account in deciding

whether they really are in pain. But we might take Wittgenstein's remarks to suggest that these more considered responses are possible only to the extent that we are capable of the kinds of primitive reactions to which he refers. Our beliefs about the mental states of others do not originate in anything like a process of inference, and this indeed represents an impossible starting-point for our acceptance of others as the subjects of such states.

While recognizing the dangers of comparing philosophers from such different traditions, it seems to me that one might read Hume's remarks about sympathy as indicating a position rather similar to the one I have ascribed to Wittgenstein. Our largely instinctive reactions to others, in regard to their natural expressions of pleasure and pain, are ones we share in common with non-human animals; they amount to something like a propensity to be caught up in the feelings of others quite independently of any process of assessing what those feelings might be in the light of their behaviour. But we may contrast with this other varieties of sympathy to which Hume refers in the *Treatise*. For instance, there is the kind of sympathy which goes beyond the present moment and involves the pleasures or pains which we anticipate will be experienced by others (T 385). This kind of extended sympathy, however, depends upon our capacity to respond to the person's present situation, as Hume goes on to make clear (T 386). Again, there are examples of what Hume calls "remote" sympathy, as in the case of the person who admires the fortifications of a city by virtue of sympathizing with the inhabitants who benefit from them, even if they are his enemies. This is the kind of case in which sympathy reflects our ability to stand back from our immediate circumstances in order to take a more considered view of things—on analogy with the perceptual case in which our judgements of the sizes of objects allow for the distance from which they are seen (T 603). This, in turn, enables Hume to make sympathy the foundation of our moral (and aesthetic) sentiments, while at the same time allowing that our value judgements transcend the features peculiar to our own point of view.

Thus, sympathy is not always, for Hume, the straightforward principle of communication whose force may be observed "thro' the whole animal creation" (T 363). It plays a crucial role in our sense of beauty and also in our judgements of virtue and vice (T 499, 577, 590, 601)—indeed, sympathy is described as "the chief source of moral distinctions" (T 618). Since our possession of a moral (and aesthetic) sense is supposed to differentiate us from animals, we might expect that the role of sympathy in this context will also possess some distinctive features. But there remains the crucial point that even the sentiments associated with our moral and aesthetic judgements have a natural foundation. This, of course, relates to the fact that, for Hume, our moral and aesthetic discriminations are rooted in our experiences—sometimes themselves the product of sympathy—of pleasure and pain. There are some kinds of beauty, for example, which are immediately pleasing to us, even

though in many other cases the "proper sentiment" depends on the use of reason (EPM 173; cf. *Essays*, 232–234).

Now the crucial point here is that these features of sympathy have their parallel in Hume's treatment of the understanding in Book I of the *Treatise*. What I have in mind here, in particular, is what Hume has to say about the difference between those beliefs formed on the basis of experience that represent "instinctive" responses to that experience, and those beliefs, on the other hand, that are the outcome of genuine processes of ratiocination. A good example of Hume's account of this kind of difference is supplied by his discussion in T I iii 8 ("Of the causes of belief"). Here he starts with the view of belief as involving an idea caused by an impression as a result of our past experience of the conjunction of the perceptions concerned. In this kind of case belief is the product of custom rather than any operation of thought (T 102). In the light of this Hume declares probable reasoning to be nothing but a species of sensation (T 103). While custom may thus operate independently of reflection, Hume points out that in the case of more unusual associations reflection may assist custom (T 104). But it seems that while there may be various cases in which the inferences we draw from experience depend on the use of reason and judgement, at the root of all such inferences is the custom-based transition from impression to idea that enables belief to arise immediately and non-reflectively.[15]

These important points of analogy between sympathy and the acquisition of our inductive beliefs provide an additional perspective on Hume's remark that "sympathy is exactly correspondent to the operations of our understanding" (T 320). It is evident that Hume is referring at this point mainly to the general influence of the various principles of association which enable us to share the mental states of others: principles to which Hume also appeals in accounting for the more instinctive responses to experience which result in belief. But in the light of the above, it appears that Hume's own claim concerning the analogy between his "systems" of the understanding and of the passions goes still deeper, for in each case we are reminded of the foundational role which is played in our mental lives by the associatively governed responses to experience which account for the kinds of belief concerned.[16]

Conclusion

I have indicated that Hume does not appear to recognise any epistemological problem concerning other selves. There may be puzzles about the nature of our responses to the mental states of others; but there is, for Hume, no puzzle concerning the possibility of our being aware of what these states are. One could put this last point by saying that on Hume's account the character of our mental states in many cases reflects our awareness of the mental states of others. Thus, Hume writes:

> Whatever...passions we may be actuated by; pride, ambition, avarice, curiosity, revenge or lust; the soul or animating principle of them all is sympathy; nor wou'd they have any force, were we to abstract entirely from the thoughts and sentiments of others. (T 363)

This is not necessarily to say that I would not feel pride, for example, at all independently of the thoughts and feelings of others; but what does seem clear is that in the form in which it is experienced by human beings, pride is inseparable from that concern with self which belongs to our practice of surveying ourselves in reflection by considering how we appear to others (EPM 276; T 589, 615). This whole process of self-survey, which is surely so important to a persons's sense of his or her own identity, obviously assumes the existence of other minds like our own. But if the very occurrence of the passions as we ordinarily experience them reflects such an assumption, then we can scarcely be in the position envisaged by the Argument from Analogy of engaging in an inference from the occurrence of such states in ourselves to the existence of such states in other selves. Rather, our acceptance of others as the subjects of mental states forms part of that response to experience for which nature itself is ultimately responsible, and which provides the basis for those more complex forms of belief that arise through reason or the understanding.[17]

NOTES

1 I will refer to these writings of Hume: *A Treatise of Human Nature*, edited by L. A. Selby-Bigge, 2nd ed. revised by P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978) with "Abstract of the *Treatise*" (cited as T and "Abstract"); *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (EHU) and *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (EPM), edited by L. A. Selby-Bigge, 3rd ed. revised by P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975); *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (*Dialogues*), and "Of the Immortality of the Soul," from *Hume on Religion*, edited by R. Wollheim (Cleveland: Meridian Press, 1963); and *Essays, Moral, Political and Literary* (*Essays*), edited by E. F. Miller (Indianapolis: Liberty Press, 1985).

In this context we should note Descartes' notorious view of animals as machines. See, for example, Part V of *Discourse on the Method*, in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vol. I, translated by J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff and D. Murdoch (London: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

2 J. S. Mill, *An Examination of Sir William Hamilton's Philosophy* (London: Longman's Green, 1889), 243–244.

3 As an illustration of what Hume appears to be saying here, inference may proceed, for example, from the effects of passion in a person's voice and gesture to their mental cause; or from circumstances associated with the occurrence of a certain kind of passion, to that passion considered as an effect. (T 576).

4 Philip Mercer, in his account of Hume on sympathy (*Sympathy and Ethics* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972]), appears to see Hume as committed to

an account of our knowledge of other selves that involves the type of inference associated with the Argument from Analogy (31); but he does not recognise the problems that would then appear to arise, for Hume, from this view of how we come to entertain the idea of another person's mental state. Perhaps this is partly because Mercer seems to ascribe to Hume the kind of standard Cartesianism that one might expect to be associated with the Argument from Analogy—in spite of the fact that, as noted above, Hume explicitly rejects a central doctrine of Cartesian dualism.

5 Hume's treatment of a person's awareness of his own mental states is a topic worthy of consideration in its own right. Contrary to his claim that a person's perceptions "must necessarily appear in every particular as they are, and be what they appear" (T 190), Hume seems committed at various important points to the view that a person may be mistaken about his perceptions (we apparently misconstrue the secondary impression which is the source of our idea of necessary connection as an impression of sensation; we fail to recognise calm passions for what they are, taking what are impressions in this case as ideas; we have a "false sensation" of liberty of indifference within ourselves; and so on). Perhaps we might see Hume as distinguishing here between a kind of self-awareness that would result from philosophical reflection on the mind's operations, and the kind of unreflective self-awareness associated with our ordinary mental life. But, in any case, Hume's acceptance that one's mental states are, at least in certain circumstances, transparent to oneself, evidently contrasts with his recognition that awareness of the mental states of others is neither immediate nor foolproof.

6 See, for example, *Dialogues* 145, where experience is said (by Philo) to reveal that mind and body always accompany each other.

7 In a different context "receive by communication" might be taken to refer to a process of verbal communication, but that does not seem in general to be what Hume has in mind in writing about sympathy—cf. Hume's remark about sympathy as involving the communication of passion among animals (T 398).

8 I therefore take issue with the suggestion to be found recently in Robert Gordon's "Sympathy, Simulation, and the Impartial Spectator," *Ethics* 105.4 (July 1995): 727–742 (especially 727–728), that Hume makes the sympathetic communication of emotion essentially dependent upon cognition and inference.

9 There is the complication here of the case of vicarious emotion—as in the case, for example, where we blush for the behaviour of someone else who appears not to be conscious of their foolishness (T 371)—where sympathy is supposed to arise by a transition from an affection that is not believed to exist. In this case, however, the imagination is affected by a general rule so that we come sympathetically to share the feeling which the other person might normally be expected to experience, so that even here belief has an important role to play.

10 In this context, it is worth noting a passage in which Hume refers to "a kind of *presensation*; which tells us what will operate in others by what we feel immediately in ourselves" (T 332—I am grateful to Jane McIntyre for drawing

this passage to my attention). So far as I am aware the word "presensation" does not occur elsewhere in his philosophical writings. It may well have been borrowed from Shaftesbury's "The Moralists" (*Characteristics*, vol. 2), where it refers initially to something like an innate capacity in animals to organise behaviour, or to respond to experience, in certain ways (Part II, Section IV). Subsequently, it is suggested that something of the same sort, but to a higher degree, is to be found in human beings (Part III, Section II). Interestingly, Shaftesbury's discussion goes on to link this with the idea that our aesthetic and moral distinctions have their foundation in nature, that "discernment itself is natural." (I owe the reference to Shaftesbury's "The Moralists" to a referee for this paper). One can only conjecture what Hume himself has in mind here, but we might suppose that "presensation" refers to some form of non-cognitive event or process, and that its cause would be a constitutional one. This would fit, at least, with what I say here about Hume's treatment of beliefs about other selves as they are involved in the process of sympathy.

11 Belief in the existence of other selves is one to which Kemp Smith refers as a Humean natural belief in his well-known discussion of Hume's naturalism (*The Philosophy of David Hume* [New York: Macmillan, 1949]—see, for example, 75–76 and 176). He seems, however, simply to include this belief within the more general category of belief in the existence of independent objects (116, 124), as though belief in other selves failed to raise distinctive issues of its own considered from a Humean perspective. Incidentally, on Kemp Smith's account, belief in the existence of independent objects is one of the two natural beliefs recognised by Hume, the other being belief in the causal interrelation of these objects (409–410, 455, 483 and 543). It is not obvious, perhaps, why the category of Humean natural beliefs should be restricted in this way (so as to exclude, for example, belief in the self as something unified and identical over time), though that is not an issue here. More important in this context is Kemp Smith's view of the features distinctive of natural belief, viz., that it is non-theoretical (76), rationally unaccountable (86), inevitable and indispensable (87), explicable solely by reference to human (and brute animal) nature and the causes associated with these (94, 454), an involuntary product of the mechanisms of association (114, 170, 176), and a kind of belief that is general in character (549). I would suggest that the belief in other selves, as it figures in Hume's account of sympathy, satisfies most, if not all, of these criteria.

It is worth adding here that Kemp Smith appears to find some difficulties in Hume's treatment of belief in other selves as a type of natural belief. More specifically, Kemp Smith sees Hume as committed to the view, arrived at by generalising the Hutchesonian thesis concerning the primacy of feeling over reason, that cognition is a mode of immediate awareness. At the same time, Kemp Smith appears to suggest that our consciousness of other selves cannot involve this kind of immediacy, but requires a kind of cognitive judgement for which Hume fails to allow. (This, at any rate, is how I interpret his remarks on 550–551). But Kemp Smith does not really explain why Hume should be committed to the view of cognition as "immediate awareness," nor why an account of the belief in other selves which invokes the various principles of association (together, e.g., with the propensity to "project" our emotions)

should be inadequate.

12 See P. F. Strawson, *Scepticism and Naturalism* (London: Methuen, 1987), 11.

13 See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Zettel*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1967), remarks 537, 540, 541, and 545.

14 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1963), 178.

15 The comparison with Wittgenstein is worth noting once more at this point. Thus, in *On Certainty* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1969), Wittgenstein writes as follows: "At the foundation of well-founded belief lies belief that is not founded" (section 253; cf. 166). Sections 475 and 499 also seem to contain striking Humean echoes.

16 Kemp Smith draws attention to Hume's view of the doctrines of belief and sympathy as independently confirming one another and, in particular, the fact that they both concern the "manner" in which an idea is entertained (Kemp Smith, *The Philosophy of David Hume* 161, 170). But Kemp Smith also wants to claim that Hume's doctrine of belief is modeled upon his account of sympathy, in support of the more general claim that Book II of the *Treatise* was composed prior to Book I. I can see no reason to accept these further claims of Kemp Smith.

17 If, as I have argued in this paper, we are to interpret Hume as committed to the view that belief in the existence of other selves is to be classified as natural, there is an obvious question as to how we are to account for our possession of this belief. While the particular beliefs we form about the mental states of others will, in many cases, involve a process of association reflecting the influence of the relations of resemblance, contiguity and causation, it seems that we cannot explain in this way why we should be prepared to ascribe mental states to others in the first place. This is where it is tempting, at least, to suggest that we are dealing with a kind of knowledge that may be described as natural because it is innate. (One might think in similar terms, e.g., of belief in the existence of body as something that exists independently of perception—the tendency to objectify our perceptions in this way cannot plausibly be represented as the product of an acquired habit of association, as Hume's discussion of this belief perhaps inadvertently reveals). One has obvious reservations about the idea that Hume, in particular, might be committed to the existence of kinds of knowledge that are innate, given his well-known comments on innatism (e.g., T 7; EHU 22n). But since he recognises that one legitimate meaning of "innate" is "original," in the sense of not being derived from prior perceptions, there seems no reason why he should not accept this classification of the belief in other minds. Indeed, we have seen already that he relates this belief to our tendency to project mental states as something that reflects our nature as human beings. We should note also that Hume is quite prepared to recognise the existence of knowledge that is a matter of "instinct" (e.g., EHU 108), so this should lessen any reluctance to attribute claims of innatism to Hume. Of course, we might wonder how such claims are to be reconciled with Hume's empiricism, and how he would be able to account for the existence of innate knowledge without resorting to theistic

hypotheses of the kind associated with rationalism. (In this latter connection, e.g., one might attempt to appeal to evolutionary theory on Hume's behalf). But these are issues that cannot be pursued here. I should add that these final remarks are prompted by some very helpful comments made by Randy Carter on an earlier version of this paper presented to the 22nd International Hume Conference in Park City, Utah, July, 1995.

Received August 1995
Revised January 1996