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The Humean Sentimentalist Learns from the Aristotelian Anscombe

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1. *Empathy in Moral Sentimentalism*

Elizabeth (G.E.M.) Anscombe is my favorite twentieth-century philosopher: not just because I am an adherent of a movement, contemporary virtue ethics, that she initiated, but also because she has so much to teach us about the nature of the mind. In this essay I shall draw on some of her major insights about the mind. But I shall use those insights within a form of virtue ethics whose recent revival she almost certainly never anticipated: Humean, not Aristotelian, virtue ethics. I need to begin with some background.

Sentimentalist virtue ethicists in the roughly Humean tradition base normative morality on sentiments like compassion, benevolence, and, more generally (though this is a concept Hume never explicitly refers too), caring concern about others. In my 2010 OUP book *Moral Sentimentalism*, I defended a neo-Humean virtue ethics and also a neo-Humean account of the meaning of moral terms. I sought to show that such systematic sentimentalism can be developed in ways that allow it to be plausible in contemporary terms. This sentimentalism can intuitively account for respect, autonomy, justice, and the validity of deontology; and it can also show us how to understand the meaning of moral terms in a way that allows for the full validity and objective truth of moral judgments. But I am not going to try to repeat the arguments for these conclusions here or state my reasons for thinking that neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics doesn't do comparably well with these philosophical tasks. Rather, I shall focus at least initially on the role empathy plays in moral sentimentalism and then show you why I think Anscombe has much to teach us sentimentalists.

The sentimentalist typically holds that empathy plays an important role in or behind the sentiments that sentimentalism bases morality on. But until very recently I think I had a somewhat distorted view of *how* empathy motivates altruistic behavior or just plain sympathy with the plight of others, a distorted view, however, that I shared with some of the most significant recent psychologists who have written on the subject of empathy. Martin Hoffman, Nancy Eisenberg, C.D. Batson, and I myself (following their lead) have long believed that the relation between empathy and sympathy/altruism is an empirical issue, that human sympathy and altruistic motivation develop as a result of developing empathy and that this is an entirely contingent matter that we have to learn about from the science of psychology (or personal observation)[1]. But I now think we have all been mistaken about this. I therefore propose to tell you now why I think we have been confused on this subject, and that conclusion will prepare us for the contributions Anscombe's thought can make to virtue-ethical sentimentalism.

For the purposes of this essay, I understand empathy the way Bill Clinton taught us to think about it. Wanting someone's pain to be diminished or ended is sympathy, but empathy involves *feeling* someone's pain or pain distress. Via empathy someone's feelings spread by a kind of contagion (Hume's word) from one person to another; so empathy is a kind of psychological mechanism, but the question is: how does this mechanism relate to sentiments like compassion and benevolence (I shall leave sympathy to one side) that constitute the normative basis of sentimentalist virtue ethics?

Well, imagine a father who is empathically infected by his young daughter's enthusiasm for stamp collecting. He doesn't merely become enthusiastic in an unspecific or vague way. The enthusiasm has the same intentional object as his daughter's, namely, stamp collecting. In other words, empathy (as opposed to *mere contagion*) takes in an attitude, motive, or feeling with its intentional object. Now if someone feels pain and is distressed about it, then they automatically count as motivated to alleviate that pain. That's just what distress *means*. But then consider someone who empathizes with, who empathically takes in, the other person's distress at their pain. This means feeling distressed oneself about their pain, and ex vi termini this constitutes altruistic and compassionate motivation to alle-

[1] See M. Hoffman, *Empathy and Moral Development*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2000; N. Eisenberg, *The Caring Child*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1992; C.D. Batson, *Altruism in Humans*, Oxford University Press, New York 2011; and my own *Moral Sentimentalism*, Oxford University Press, New York 2010.

viate that person's pain. So on strictly conceptual grounds empathy can involve compassion or benevolence toward another. (Of course, this motivation may not issue in action if stronger contrary motives are also in play in the given situation.)

However, those who accept the above argument have sometimes said to me that even if empathy entails compassion, etc., on the grounds just mentioned, there still might be such a thing as compassion (or sympathy) *without* empathy. But I think Anscombe's ideas can give us reason to doubt this last claim, and they do so within a certain problem issue for sentimentalism that I believe has never been mentioned previously. Here is the problematic issue.

We all agree that compassion (or benevolence) is or can be a motive. But we also think of compassion as a feeling and as an emotion, and to complicate things further, we also regard compassion as a virtue. But how can compassion be or "compassion" designate all of these things? Is the notion ambiguous? This question needs to be answered if normative sentimentalism, which bases everything on sentiments like compassion, is to be put in good working order, and I think the best way to answer it involves relying on Anscombe. She can help us see that compassion isn't possible without empathy and that that fact can help us overcome the idea that "compassion" is an ambiguous term designating a number of different though contingently related things.

2. *Anscombe and Moral Sentimentalism*

In her famous book *Intention* Elizabeth Anscombe made a conceptual point that very much bears remembering[2]. She argued (roughly) that certain desires don't in fact make any sense, that if someone claimed to desire a saucer of mud, we couldn't attach any sense to what they were saying unless they went on to suggest some intelligible reason why they wanted this: e.g., they needed the mud in saucer form for a beautifying facial. The point is well taken; it makes no sense to suppose that someone just wants a saucer of mud and has no further reason for this desire beyond the simple desire itself; and this bears immediately on the question of the relationship between empathy and compassion. But before I go into that, let me first note couple of curious historical facts.

[2] G.E.M. Anscombe, *Intention*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford 1957, p. 70 and passim.

In his *Reasons and Persons* (OUP, 1984, p. 123 f.) Derek Parfit speaks about having the basic attitude of "future Tuesday indifference" and clearly considers such an attitude to be possible but irrational. But this constitutes a failure to learn the lesson of Anscombe's example of saucers of mud. If we can't basically *want* a saucer of mud, neither, it would seem, could someone, for no further reason, simply be *indifferent* (only) to future Tuesdays.

Then there is the work of Philippa Foot, Anscombe's close philosophical associate. In her 1961 Aristotelian Society paper "Goodness and Choice", Foot says it is impossible for someone to have as a basic value "always turning northeast after turning northwest" (I have adjusted her example). This is fundamentally the same point Anscombe was making earlier with her saucer of mud example, but Foot never mentions Anscombe in this connection. Did she fail to see the relevance of what Anscombe had said previously? But let's return to whether there can be compassion without empathy.

The Shakespearian critic A.C. Bradley once wrote of Iago's motiveless malignity toward Othello, but Iago actually thought Othello had previously mistreated him by passing him over for promotion. He was seeking *revenge* on Othello, and I think Anscombe's saucer argument gives us reason to doubt whether there can be such a thing as pure or basic malice in the absence of some further motive like revenge. But then if ungrounded malice is impossible, the same may hold for ungrounded compassion. For compassion to exist pure and simple and in the absence of empathy, it would have to be some kind of basic instinct, and if a basic instinct of malice is impossible, how could a basic instinct of compassion be possible? Rather, empathy helps us understand how compassion can get its motivational grounding or foothold, and it is difficult to think of any other way this could be done.

The case of psychopathy may help us here. Psychopaths lack compassion and lack empathy, and it is often said that the former lack is due to the latter. But if compassion can come from other sources, then perhaps there would be some way of getting psychopaths to be compassionate other than via the kind of empathy that psychologists believe cannot be instilled into those who are already psychopaths. Well, no one has ever figured out a way to do this, and I would guess that empathy is the only way in which genuine compassion toward others can be launched. A basic instinct of compassion makes no more sense than a basic desire for a saucer of mud. (If one acts to help needy others out of a sense of duty/conscience or in order to promote the Good [whatever that is], it isn't appropriate to describe one as acting from compassion.)

So I think we have some reason to hold that the kind of receptive empa-

thy that takes in others' feelings of distress automatically and on conceptual grounds entails compassion for those others and that compassion cannot rest on anything other than such receptive empathy. The latter point is made with the help of Anscombe's arguments about saucers of mud, and our total conclusion here can now help us deal with the issue, the problem for sentimentalism, that I mentioned earlier. If the feeling or emotion of compassion can be traced to empathy, but is separable from compassionate motivation, then the term "compassion" refers to at least two different and separate or separable mental entities, and the term "compassion" will probably have to be construed as ambiguous. This raises or would raise problems for moral sentimentalism that, as I mentioned, sentimentalism has never been aware of much less dealt with. But if, as (with Anscombe's help) one can argue, compassionate motivation and compassionate feeling cannot be separated, then compassion is one phenomenon and the term "compassion" doesn't have to be considered ambiguous. When we use the term, we can be trying to highlight the empathic/feeling side of this single phenomenon, and that is what we are doing when we talk of compassion as a feeling. And when we want to highlight the motivational side of it, we can speak of compassion as a motive. But there is just one phenomenon that can be viewed under different and indissolubly linked aspects.

This then allows us to speak of the or a virtue of compassion, a single morally desirable and admirable state of character with different but necessarily connected aspects – one that can lead on given occasions to instances of compassion with the same sort of structure. Moreover, what we have said actually helps traditional or historical moral sentimentalism by allowing us to explain more clearly than it has ever been able to do how empathy can lead to moral and compassionate motivation and action. The psychologists mentioned above treat that connection as merely empirical and metaphysically contingent, and Hume's discussion of sentiments like compassion and benevolence doesn't explicitly tie these to empathy (what he, for lack of the term "empathy" called sympathy). If, as Hume says, benevolence is an "original instinct," then benevolence seems to exist in possible separation from the operations of empathy, and the same will hold for compassion. But I have tied compassion and, by parity of reasoning, benevolence and caring to empathy in the strictest way, and this means that empathy doesn't yield compassionate motivation in a merely contingent way but necessarily does so. This gives moral/altruistic motivation a fuller explanation than anything one finds previously in the sentimentalist literature.

So I have made use of Anscombe's saucer of mud insight to offer a (partial) defense of sentimentalist virtue ethics, and I wonder whether any neo-Aristotelian could make such good use of this insight. If not, then perhaps it is the sentimentalist kind of virtue ethics that, of all present-day forms of virtue ethics, comes closest to following her ideas. That conclusion together with the arguments used to reach it might well have surprised Anscombe herself, but it may be true nonetheless. However, I want to proceed now with another topic, and when we do, we will find that Anscombe's point about saucers of mud is hardly the only idea we need to borrow from her philosophy of mind.

3. *Moral Sentimentalism and Yin/yang*

I am now going to make what will seem to most of you like an incredible leap of topic. I think the sketchy (but new) defense of virtue-ethical sentimentalism I have just given offers a philosophical foothold for the ancient Chinese complementarity of yin and yang, and if that is the case, moral sentimentalism illustrates some themes, some ideas, that go beyond Western culture. Now yin and yang are nowadays not thought to be serious topics for philosophical thinking – even by the Chinese. Like us Westerners they are accustomed to various popularizations of yin and yang – as with macrobiotic diets; and they are aware, as most of us Westerners are not, of how ancient yin-and-yang explanations of physical phenomena (e.g., of how sunlight differentially affects the two sides of a hill) have had to yield to more quantitative and mathematical explanations of such phenomena of the sort that are the mainstay of (elementary) modern physics. But despite these problems or limitations, I think that suitably updated notions of yin and yang can be useful for present-day philosophical purposes, and I am going to try to persuade you of that here and now. We will also see how this brings Anscombe once again into the philosophical picture.

What do I mean by updated versions or notions of yin and yang? In a recent article, I have argued that we can make the most ethical sense of yin and yang via the Western notions of receptivity and active directed control[3]. Yin is often equated with passivity and often with pliancy or pliability, but it is also often equated with receptivity (there is no term in Chinese for "recep-

[3] See my *Updating Yin and Yang*, in «Dao», 12, 3 (2013), pp. 271-282. That article emphasized the rational quality of some control more than I think is necessary for our purposes here.

tivity" and "yin" may be the closest that language comes to our notion of receptivity). And I think that, unlike passivity and pliability, receptivity is a positive and broadly valued quality that, equated with yin, can be counterbalanced with or against the quality I am proposing to equate with yang, the quality (and notion) of active directed/controlled purpose (or purposiveness).

I have argued elsewhere that Western philosophy has tended to emphasize active control at the expense of the value and virtue of receptivity, but the point then is that we need and need to value both active control and receptivity in our lives and thought. And I think these two qualities can be viewed as necessary complements in the moral or ethical life. Again, I have made the arguments for this conclusion elsewhere[4]. But for present purposes and given what I argued earlier, something very interesting (I think) follows if we conceive yin and yang in this updated philosophical way. When we empathize with the distress of someone who is in pain, we are receptive to them in a way the psychopath never is with anyone. And when we ipso facto are then motivated to help (remember, though, that this doesn't mean we actually will help – other motivational factors may override our compassion), we are motivated to actively do something effective as a means to alleviating the pain of the other person; and this motivation to help shows us as active, directed in our purpose, and interested in exerting control over what will happen to the other person.

So I am saying that compassion, benevolence, and the like have the yin quality of receptive feeling and the yang quality of desiring actively to help in a specific way – they have both of these at the same time and, as I have been arguing, each aspect is inseparable from the other. This gives yin and yang a deeper, further foothold in our discussion because that complementarity is traditionally viewed as involving just such an inextricable or irrecusable relationship. The traditional symbol of yin and yang depicts yin with a small circle of yang in it and yang with a small circle of yin in it, and this is one way to symbolize the ancient view that yin and yang is a necessary complementarity, that yin and yang are really yin/yang. (There is another, ancient tradition of yin and yang that treats them as contraries rather than as complementary, but that tradition is less useful for our philosophical purposes.)

The present discussion gives these ancient and philosophically somewhat vague (and till now suspect) notions a particular and definite embodiment. If you can't have compassion as feeling without compassion as moti-

[4] See my *From Enlightenment to Receptivity: Rethinking Our Values*, OUP, Oxford 2013.

vation and vice versa, then you can't have a certain sort of receptivity without also having a certain sort of controlling or directed activeness and vice versa; and if one buys my updating of the notions of yin and yang, then in the sphere of moral sentiments you can't have yin without yang or yang without yin and they are invariably instantiated together. The virtuous moral sentiments thus all have a yin/yang character, and that is a philosophically significant fact both about the sentiments and about the ancient Chinese complementarity of yin/yang.

But if moral sentimentalism lends itself to an interpretation via the Chinese categories of yin and yang, we really shouldn't be too surprised. What we call moral sentimentalism had its origins, in the modern West, in eighteenth-century Britain, but there is a strong element or aspect of sentimentalism in traditional Confucianism: in Mencius and in neo-Confucians like Cheng Hao and Wang Yangming who were strongly influenced by him. However, the specific idea that yin/yang applies to compassion and other particular moral sentiments doesn't seem to have occurred to any Confucian or neo-Confucian (or later Chinese) philosopher, so what I have just been saying is intended as a contribution to the overall Confucian tradition at the same time that it represents, as I believe, a philosophical application of yin/yang to or within moral sentimentalism. (I also think yin/yang has applications outside of ethics, but that is a long story to be told on another occasion.)

Moreover, our bringing yin and yang and what is called yin/yang into the discussion allows another idea of Anscombe's to appear and show some of its significance. In *Intention* (section 32) Anscombe mentioned the possibility that a list of items could serve two different purposes: it could be a list of grocery items written down by a wife for guiding some husband in his purchase of groceries, or it could be a list compiled by a detective being paid (by the wife?) to report all the items that the husband bought in the grocery store or supermarket. The recently familiar philosophical notion of "direction of fit" largely comes from this example of Anscombe's. It is commonplace among philosophers of mind now to say that beliefs have a mind-to-world direction of fit and desires a world-to-mind direction of fit because beliefs are supposed to fit the world whereas desires are supposed to make the world *fit them*. Similarly in Anscombe's original list example, the detective's list has a mind-to-world direction of fit because it is supposed to fit what the husband does independently in the world with the grocery shopping; and the list given the husband by the wife has a world-to-mind direction of fit because it is supposed to result in a world where the husband has bought what the wife has wanted him to buy.

Now some philosophers have argued that certain mental items (called "besires") can exhibit or exemplify both directions of fit at the same time. For example, it is sometimes said that explicitly evaluative beliefs can reflect the world at the same time that they express a wish or desire that the world change in certain ways that reflect *them*[5]. But in the light of our earlier discussion we don't need to refer to or bring in value judgments in order to find examples of mental items that have both directions of fit. Compassion as a feeling involves empathy with and receptivity toward the (actual or apparent) distress of another, and that shows compassion as having a mind-to-world direction of fit. But as a motive compassion shows or exemplifies a world-to-mind direction of fit, and since these two aspects of compassion are inseparable, we can see that compassion as a virtue and given instances of human compassion have both directions of fit (and can be called besires). Philosophers have realized that Anscombe's original list example is the source of the interesting distinction between a world-to-mind direction of fit and a mind-to-world direction of fit and also, though indirectly, of the less-well-accepted notion of a besire. But I hope what I have said about compassion (and by extension various other moral sentiments) gives us a new kind of putative example of besire and thereby helps that notion (further) establish its philosophical validity. In so doing, it would also further highlight the importance of Anscombe's basic idea of direction of fit and it would be doing so in the overall context of defending virtue-ethical sentimentalism and its connection with ideas gathered from China. But all of that just indicates further how important Anscombe's ideas about the mind are for our philosophical future.

Abstract

Elizabeth Anscombe is an Aristotelian, but her insights allow one to make a better case for moral sentimentalism. The sentimentalist tradition emphasizes both the empathic and the active sides of compassion, benevolence, and other such sentiments, but hasn't previously allowed us to see how these two aspects of the moral sentiments necessarily work together. However, Anscombe's idea that one cannot simply desire a saucer of mud allows the sentimentalist to argue that compassion, e.g., as a motive cannot exist all on

[5] For more on besires and on the notion of direction of fit, see the references to those concepts in various articles in the online *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

its own but requires empathic feeling. It can also be argued that empathy doesn't merely lead to compassionate motivation but entails it. The two sides of compassion are necessarily tied together, and the paper ends by showing us how we might more deeply understand such a moral sentiment and others in terms of the traditional Chinese idea of the necessary complementarity of yin and yang.

Keywords: Anscombe; compassion; empathy; Hume; sentimentalism; yin/yang.

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