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HUTCHESON, HUME AND SYMPATHY: OBJECTIONS AND ANSWERS

Ernest C. Mossner writes in Hume's standard biography that, in the years 1739-40, the "friendly relations" between Francis Hutcheson and David Hume, "despite certain differences regarding moral doctrine, may be taken as illustrative of the principle of sympathy, which both regarded as one of the strongest in the constitution of human nature and one of the foundation stones of ethics ". Hutcheson - adds Mossner - must certainly have read "with approbation" the passage that opens the section Of greatness of mind of the book on morality of the *Treatise of Human Nature*, in which Hume states, among other things, that "this principle of sympathy is of so a powerful and insinuating a nature, that it enters into most of our sentiments and passions"<sup>1</sup>.

I think this judgment of Mossner is completely misleading; even neglecting his dependence on the classical monograph of Kemp Smith, who makes Hume almost a disciple of Hutcheson, Mossner may have based these statements on both the respectful and friendly tone of the letters addressed by Hume to the Irish moralist, and on the presence of public sense in Hutcheson's *Essay on Passions*. Unfortunately, we do not have Hutcheson's letters to Hume<sup>2</sup>, and some scholars - from Eugenio Lecaldano, in Italy, to Jennifer A. Herdt in a

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<sup>1</sup> See E.C. Mossner, *The Life of David Hume*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1980 (1954<sup>1</sup>), pp. 134- 38. Quotations, including that from Hume's *Treatise*, are read on p. 136.

<sup>2</sup> We read a flattering judgment on Hume's acumen in a letter from Hutcheson to Henry Home in April 1739, but regards the perusal of the first two books of the *Treatise*. See I. Ross, *Hutcheson on Hume's Treatise: An Unnoticed Letter*, in "Journal of the History of Philosophy", 4, 1966, pp. 69-72.

recent monograph largely devoted to the principle of sympathy - have underlined the differences between Hume's sympathy and Hutcheson's public sense<sup>3</sup>.

In Eighteenth century British texts we can trace at least three different meanings of the term sympathy: sympathy as emotional contagion or as mechanical communication of feelings and passions, sympathy as a process of imagination, by which we put ourselves in the place or in the role of others, finally, sympathy as joy for happiness and sadness for the unhappiness of others. Hume, for example, attributes to the term sympathy the first two meanings - mainly the first in the book on passions, the second in the book on morals - Hutcheson attributes the third meaning to the term public sense.

In the introduction to the Italian translation of the *Essay on Passions* I showed that Hutcheson was induced by the criticism of John Clarke of Hull and the authority of Shaftesbury to introduce public sense among the internal senses. I also argued that while for Shaftesbury the joy of happiness and sadness for the unhappiness of others is a consequence of love for others, for Hutcheson - and in this case the controversy with John Clarke had a decisive influence - public sense becomes the cause of benevolence, and benevolence loses, at least in part, its instinctive character<sup>4</sup>.

Hutcheson's hostility towards the concept of sympathy as an imaginary replacement of place is in fact already present in the first edition of the *Inquiry on Virtue*, as it undermines the

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. E. Lecaldano, *Dal 'senso pubblico' in in Hutcheson alla 'simpatia' in Hume, "Scienza e filosofia scozzese nell'età di Hume"*, ed. by A. Santucci, Il Mulino, Bologna 1976, pp. 37-73, and J.A. Herdt, *"Religion and Faction in Hume's Moral Philosophy"*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1997, in particular pp. 51-54, in which Mossner's interpretation is disputed.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. L. Turco, *Introduzione a Francis Hutcheson, Saggio sulla natura e condotta delle passioni*, ed. by L. Turco, Clueb, Bologna 1997, pp. lxx-lii and L. Turco, *Sympathy and Moral Sense: 1725-40*, in "British Journal for the History of Philosophy", 7, 1999, n. 1, pp. 79-101.

original, that is instinctive, and disinterested character of the *moral sense*.

It should be recalled in this regard that Hutcheson does not entrust the demonstration of the existence of moral sense only to introspective analysis. There is not only the sentimental difference between the admiration of a fertile field and the contemplation of a generous action. Hutcheson presents a series of arguments that are not based on introspection: "Some refin'd Explainers of Self-love may tell us that we hate or love characters, according as we apprehend we should been supported, or injur'd by them, had we liv'd in their days". But, without the hypothesis of a moral sense that enables us to appreciate humanity, mercy, faithfulness - Hutcheson objects - our self-love, would always make us side with the winner, even a successful tyrant or a traitor<sup>5</sup>. Yet his own friend James Arbuckle claimed in the pages of the "Dublin Journal" of 1725 - the year of the first edition of *Inquiry* - that most moralists recommended imaginary substitution with our fellow men as an indispensable condition for the appreciating of the fundamental rule of natural equity<sup>6</sup>.

Precisely a supporter of self-love and sympathy like the Scotsman Archibald Campbell - one of those selfish theorists of sympathy mentioned by Adam Smith in *Theory of Moral Sentiments* and which curiously the editors of the critical edition of his works deny the existence - had contributed, if this had been needed, to renew Hutcheson's hostility towards sympathy as an imaginary replacement of place and to make various corrections to the 1738 edition of the *Inquiry*. But this is a story that I have already told<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> F. Hutcheson, *An Inquiry into the Original of our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue*, London 1725 (facsimile rehearsal in *Collected Works of Francis Hutcheson*, ed. by B. Fabian, Olms, Hildesheim 1971), Treatise II, sect. I, III, pp.112-13.

<sup>6</sup> See the article by J. Arbuckle in the *Dublin Journal* of 24 April 1725, p. 14.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. L. Turco, *Sympathy and moral sense*, cit., pp. 89-100

When in the first section of part III, Book iii of the *Treatise - Of the origin of the natural virtues and vices* - Hume intends to show that our moral evaluations derive from sympathy, he presents two objections to his system: the first is that "The sympathy varies without a variation in our esteem. Our esteem, therefore, proceeds not from sympathy."; the second is that of "virtue in rags": "Virtue in rags is still virtue" we do not cease to consider a person as virtuous, just because their action is unsuccessful<sup>8</sup>. On this occasion, I am interested in trying to show that the two objections raised against the principle of sympathy are not probable, or "possible," objections that Hume seems to spontaneously propose to himself, just as a speaker at a conference would do today<sup>9</sup>. I believe it can be shown that these objections were raised by Hutcheson himself.

### 1. *The second objection and Hume's letters to Hutcheson*

First of all we must remember that Hume published the third book of the *Treatise, Of Morals*, 21 months after the first two, and that he was able to submit the original draft of his manuscript to Hutcheson's examination. From this period we

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<sup>8</sup> D. Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. by L.A. Selby-Bigge, II ed. reviewed by P.H. Nidditch, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1978, book III, part III, sect. I, respectively, pp. 580-581 and 584. This edition will be referred to in the following notes.

<sup>9</sup> See the *Annotations to Treatise*, 3.3.1 in the recent critical edition: D. Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. by D.F. Norton and M.J. Norton, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2000, p. 557. But also see A. Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. by A.L. Mcfie and D.D. Raphael, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1976, Part I, Sect. I, chap. II, 2, note. Concerning the "selfish theorists of sympathy" the curators, after observing that neither Hobbes nor Mandeville speak of sympathy, observe "Smith was probably making a reasonable conjecture about what a theorist of egoism could have said"; that is to say, a "possible" objection, rather than an author and a real text; cf. also *infra*, note 37

have three letters from Hume to Hutcheson. In the first letter, dated 17 September 1739, Hume thanked Hutcheson for his "reflections". The points of disagreement are known: the lack of warmth in defending the cause of virtue, the artificial character of justice, the virtuous character of what Hutcheson had called "natural abilities". Hume's interpreters have rarely emphasised and minimised much more often these differences. From the second letter, dated March 4, 1740, we learn that Hume had the opportunity to meet Hutcheson in person and made many cuts, additions and corrections, so that the volume changed greatly from the previously sent manuscript. Hume asks his correspondent, not without embarrassment, for a letter of recommendation to publishers; he sought in particular not to offend religious people and to test this he had sent to Hutcheson the modified version of the Conclusion of the volume. We learn from the letter of 16 March that Hume has concluded his contract with the publisher, that he does not despair of publishing a second amended edition of the *Treatise*, that he is primarily concerned with the religious consequences of a morality based on sentiment and submits a famous passage to Hutcheson's approval, in which he assimilates vice and virtue to secondary qualities - this too is a passage on which interpreters have varying opinions<sup>10</sup>.

We unfortunately know almost nothing of the tenor of the conversation between Hutcheson and Hume and it will be appropriate to return to the letter of September 1739, which precedes the interview as well as the correction of the manuscript. Towards the end of the letter Hume claims to have "many other reflections" to communicate to his correspondent

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<sup>10</sup> Stresses in an original way the distance between Hutcheson and Hume J. Moore, *Hume and Hutcheson in Hume and Hume's Connexions*, ed. by M.A. Stewart and J.P. Wright, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 1994, pp. 23-57. See particularly pp. 35-39 on Hutcheson's reactions to the reading of the ms. and on the changes made by Hume.

but does not want to annoy him. Then he changes his mind and adds a postscript of which only the first paragraph concerns us here, which I have divided into three points for the purposes of the argument:

I cannot forbear recommending another matter to your Consideration:

1. Actions are neither virtuous nor vicious; but only so far as they are proofs of certain Qualities or durable Principles in the Mind. This is a Point that I shou'd have establish'd more expressly than I have done.

2. Now I desire you to consider, if there be any Quality, that is virtuous, without having a Tendency either to the public Good or the Good of the Person, who possesses it. If there be none without these Tendencies, we can conclude, that their Merit is deriv'd from Sympathy.

3. I desire you wou'd only consider the Tendencies of Qualities, not their actual Operation, which depends on Chance. Brutus riveted the Chains of Rome faster by his Opposition, but the natural Tendency of his noble Disposition, his public Spirit & Magnanimity, was to establish her Liberty<sup>11</sup>.

Point 2 is the very theme of the first section of Part III of the book *Of Morals* and enunciates the main thesis: if it can be shown that all the qualities or dispositions of the mind that are considered virtuous are useful to oneself or to others, then merit or morality of actions can be founded only on sympathy, intended as an imaginary replacement of place. I neglect here the case of qualities pleasant to oneself or to others, since the criterion of utility is valid according to Hume for the overwhelming majority of virtues, and since, even in this case, Hume makes their appreciation depend on the intervention of sympathy<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> *The Letters of David Hume*, edited by J.Y.T. Greig, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1932, vol. I, pp. 34-35.

<sup>12</sup> See D. Hume, *Treatise*, cit., Book III, part III, sect. I, p. 590.

Point 1 constitutes in fact the premise of the section and probably represents one of those corrections of the third book which Hume speaks of in the letter of 4 March, 1740: actions in themselves, let alone a single action, are never the object of moral evaluation. Actions are taken into consideration only as indications of lasting principles of the mind, that is of the character of persons. Hume derives this thesis from his theory of indirect passions: the close relationship with the self that a cause must have in order to produce pride requires that this cause is neither unsteady nor short-lived<sup>13</sup>.

Point 3 is closely connected to the first: if the object of the evaluations are therefore the lasting provisions of the mind, we must consider the tendencies, that is the usual consequences of these provisions, and not the accidental consequences. This third paragraph is almost reiterated to the letter as a second objection against the principle of sympathy:

Where a person is possess'd of a character, that in its natural tendency is beneficial to society, we esteem him virtuous, and are delighted with the view of his character, even tho' particular accidents prevent its operation, and incapacitate him from being serviceable to his friends and country. Virtue in rags is still virtue<sup>14</sup>.

Brutus is not named here, but Hume mentions him when answering the first objection and I will come back to this point later.

## 2. *The objections of Hutcheson to Campbell*

Point 3 of the postscript of the letter in which Hume responds to Hutcheson's reflections thus coincides due to its

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 574-75, trans. en. pp. 607-609 and *Treatise*, cit., Book II, part I, sect. VI, pp. 292-93.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 584.

content with the second objection raised by Hume to the principle of sympathy as the criterion of moral evaluation. We do not know the text of Hutcheson's letter, but we know that Hutcheson has raised objections to the principle of sympathy as an imaginary replacement of place since the first edition of the *Inquiry on Virtue*, he added a couple in the 1729 edition to answer John Clarke, and at least four in the 1738 edition to answer Archibald Campbell. The most extensive appears in the appendix of additions and corrections of the 1738 edition and was to be placed, according to Hutcheson's instructions to the editor, after his original criticism of the principle of sympathy. Since it is complex I also divide it into paragraphs:

1a As Mr. Hobbes explains all the Sensations of Pity by our Fear of the like Evils, when by Imagination we place ourselves in the Case of the Sufferers;

1b so others explain all Approbation and Condemnation of Actions in distant Ages or Nations, by a like Effort of Imagination: we place ourselves in the Case of others, and then discern an imaginary private Advantage or Disadvantage in these Actions.

2a But as his Account of Pity will never explain how the Sensation increases, according to the apprehended Worth of the Sufferer, or according to the Affection we formerly had to him; since the Sufferings of any Stranger may suggest the same Possibility of our Suffering the like;

2b.1 so this Explication will never account for our high Approbation of brave unsuccessful Attempts, which we see prove detrimental both to the Agent, and to those for whose Service they were intended; here there is no private Advantage to be imagined.

2b.2 Nor will it account for our Abhorrence of such Injuries as we are incapable of suffering. Sure, when a Man abhors the Attempt of the young Tarquin, he does not imagine that he has chang'd his Sex like Caeneus.

2b.3 And then, when one corrects his Imagination, by remembering his own Situation, and Circumstances, we find

the moral Approbation and Condemnation continues as lively as it was before, tho' the Imagination of Advantage is gone<sup>15</sup>.

I believe that every reader is able to grasp the generic and superficial sense of Hutcheson's criticism: the mechanism by which Hobbes explains compassion and theorists of sympathy explain moral approval is indeed the same: an imaginary substitution of the spectator with the protagonists of the action (points 1a and 1b). But, first, the imaginary participation does not explain the variation of compassion (point 2a); secondly, it does not justify our esteem, when there are no interests at stake (point 2b.1), or when the same sympathetic participation is made impossible (a male could not sympathize with Lucretia) (point 2 b.2).

I also believe that each reader has no difficulty in recognizing in point 2b.1 a case analogous to Hume's second objection to virtue in rags. It fits very well indeed with the case of Brutus. The "brave unsuccessfull attempt" of Brutus to save the republic helped neither himself, who met a bad end, nor the Romans who lost their freedom anyway. And Hume's answer in the *Treatise* is known: a land with fertile soil and a good climate does not lose its beauty because it is uninhabited; nor does a man, whose body is all a promise of agility and energy, cease to look handsome because he has been sentenced to life. In the same way, when a character is suitable for benefiting society, imagination easily runs from cause to effect, neglecting the missing circumstances. The "general rules" create a kind of probability that is always capable of influencing the imagination<sup>16</sup>. This reconstruction therefore allows us to understand not only that the postscript of Hume's letter responded to an objection of Hutcheson on sympathy,

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<sup>15</sup> F. Hutcheson, *An Inquiry into the Originals of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue*, London 1738, Additions and Corrections (facsimile, Holland, Gregg Internationals, 1969).

<sup>16</sup> Cf. D. Hume, *Treatise*, cit., Book III, part III, sect. I, p. 584-85.

but also the close connection between the general premise on the passions which opens Hume's section on sympathy and his answer to the second objection.

### 3 Butler's note against Hobbes

Having therefore established that the second objection raised by Hume is in fact an objection by Hutcheson, it seems difficult to maintain however that the first objection of Hume's section on Sympathy can be deduced from the passage in appendix to the 1738 edition of Hutcheson's *Inquiry on virtue*. The question that Hume raises as a first objection is: why, as sympathy varies, does our moral approval not change? Now Hutcheson seems to support, in the case of Hobbes, a contrary thesis: the substitution of place with the other, that is sympathy, does not explain the variation of compassion; sympathy is identical, compassion variable.

First I point out that Hutcheson does not completely exclude the possibility of sympathising with feminine virtues. Point 2b.3 proposes the case of a correction of the imagination and therefore of a variation of sympathetic participation, without variation of approval or condemnation. It remains as lively as before. Secondly, although the two objections raised by Hume in the pages of the Treatise seem totally different, the second contains the first. Hume is indeed willing to admit that "Tis true, when the cause is compleat, and a good disposition is attended with good fortune, which renders it really beneficial to society, it gives a stronger pleasure to the spectator, and is attended with a more lively sympathy"<sup>17</sup>. Thus, both cases proposed by Hutcheson in points 2b.3 and 2b.1 raise, more or less directly, the problem of sympathetic variation without varying moral approval.

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p.585.

But there is a way to understand more fully and in greater depth the passage added by Hutcheson to the 1738 edition of his *Inquiry on virtue* against Campbell. Hutcheson's critique of Hobbes is inspired by a long note accompanying the first of two sermons -dedicated to compassion, in which Joseph Butler made a sharp and subtle critique of Hobbes:

*Hobbes defines pity, imagination, or fiction of future calamity to ourselves, proceeding from the sense (he means sight or knowledge) of another man's calamity. Thus fear and compassion would be the same idea, and a fearful and a compassionate man the same character, which every man immediately sees are totally different.*

In *Human nature*, Hobbes recognises in our greater compassion for friends and innocents proof of his explanation of piety founded on selfishness. In this circumstance Hobbes closely followed both the definition and some of the observations proposed by Aristotle in the *Rhetoric*; if anything, he moulded the central concept of the Aristotelian paragraph - the awareness of being susceptible of the same misfortunes as a necessary condition for feeling compassion - to his program of the selfish reduction of passions and his general definition of passions, as awareness of our future power as a function of our past power and in relation to the power of others<sup>18</sup>. According to Butler, who takes Hobbes' definition literally and does not show that he is aware of Aristotle - neither here nor within the two sermons - Hobbes apparently commits a serious semantic abuse, confusing fear and compassion. Butler treats Hobbes's observations not as evidences, but as inquiries subsequent to the definition and invites the reader to replace the Hobbesian definition to

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<sup>18</sup> See T. Hobbes, *The Elements of Law Natural and Politics*, ed. by F. Tönnies, London, 1889, part I, chap. IX, § 10 and Aristotle, *Rhet.* II, 8. Part I of the *Elements* was published by Hobbes under the title *Human Nature* in 1650 and was well known to contemporaries

discover semantic abuse through the linguistic non-sense. To ask oneself "the reason why we pity our friends in distress more than others" would be asking ourselves why "we are afraid of our friends" in misfortune more than others. In ordinary language the terms 'to compassionate', 'to pity' do not fit the Hobbesian definition. Our friends are the object of compassion, while according to the definition of Hobbes, the only object of passion is "ourselves (or a danger to ourselves)". The undoubted fact - continues Butler - that "the sight of our friends [or of the innocent] in distress rises in us greater compassion than the sight of others in distress" is in this way considered identical to the fact, however dubious, that "the sight of our friends in distress raises in us greater fear for ourselves, than the sight of others in distress"<sup>19</sup>. It is therefore a question of two different inquiries, Butler continues: suppose that a person is really in danger and has forgotten it; the most negligible event, like a simple noise, could reawaken in them the memory of the danger that they are in, but it would be absolutely ridiculous to make this noise or this incident the object of compassion. Yet, according to the Hobbesian explanation, "our greatest friend in distress is no more to us, no more the object of compassion", than this insignificant incident; one and the other could not arouse other emotions in our mind than reflections on our exposure to the same misfortune and fear of it. It is right to show what these explanations of human nature really are - concludes Butler - because they build a theory that "undermines the whole foundation of justice and universal honesty"<sup>20</sup>.

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<sup>19</sup> J. Butler, *The Analogy of Religion, Natural and Revealed ... Brief Dissertations: on Personal Identity and on the Nature of Virtue; and Fifteen Sermons*, ed. by S. Halifax, London, Bell & Daldy, 1864, *Sermon V, Upon Compassion*, p. 425 note.

<sup>20</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 426-27

The sight of "persons in distress" - explains Butler in the last paragraph of the note - is able to produce "three distinct perceptions or inward feelings":

real sorrow and concern for the misery of our fellow-creatures; some degree of satisfaction from a consciousness of our freedom from that misery; and, as the mind passes on from one thing to another, it is not unnatural from such an occasion to reflect upon our liability to the same or other calamities.

Only the first of these feelings identifies compassion. Butler concluded his note by observing:

One might add, that if there be really any such thing as the fiction or imagination of danger to ourselves from the sight of the miseries of others, which *Hobbes* speaks of, and which he has absurdly mistaken for the whole of compassion; if there be anything of this sort common to mankind, distinct from the reflection of reason, it would be a most remarkable instance of what was furthest from his thoughts, namely, of a mutual sympathy between each particular of the species, a fellow feeling common to mankind. It would not, indeed be an example of our substituting others for ourselves, but it would be an example of substituting ourselves for others. And as it would not be an instance of benevolence, so neither would it be any instance of self-love: for this phantom of danger to ourselves, naturally rising to view upon sight of the distresses of others, would be no more an instance of love to ourselves, than the pain of hunger is<sup>21</sup>.

"Substituting ourselves for others" means for Butler putting himself in the shoes of those in difficulty; "Substituting others for ourselves" does not have a symmetrical meaning, it does not mean putting those in difficulty in the comfortable clothes of the spectator, but expresses an affective transfer, a

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*

shift to the other of the love that I always have for myself. As he had immediately stated in the paragraph with which the sermon began and which preceded this note

When we rejoice in the prosperity of others, and compassionate their distresses, we, as it were, substitute them for ourselves, their interest for our own; and have the same kind of pleasure in their prosperity, and sorrow in their distress, as we have from reflection upon our own<sup>22</sup>.

As in the parable of the Good Samaritan, it means "being carried out and affected towards them as towards themselves"<sup>23</sup>.

The distinction is subtle and Butler himself does not seem coherent, because in the course of the sermon he will call *fellow feeling* the feeling of pleasure for the prosperity of others which, unlike compassion, has no name in ordinary language, perhaps signifying that the note, or at least his last paragraph, is a later addition to the sermon, in view of the publication. Moreover, the concluding part of the note on the one hand recognizes in Hobbes' explanation the involuntary and contradictory recognition of a mutual sympathy and a fellow feeling in the Hobbesian system, on the other it affirms the affective neutrality of this imaginary substitution of place, which would be neither an indication of self-love, nor of benevolence, or as we would say neither of selfishness nor of altruism.

#### 4. *The first objection*

In any case, the strategy of refutation of the existence of an absolutely disinterested *moral sense* by Archibald Campbell

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<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 425.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

started from the consideration that in the sympathetic replacement we move with our interests and our values into the situation of the other. Without resuming the many quotes of Campbell here, I will just mention one for all of them:

I endeavoured to shew, that as *Self-love* is the Standard whereby we can only judge of the *Virtue* or *Value* of any Action whatsoever, so when we love and honour A. for his Benevolence towards B. we secretly put ourselves in B's Circumstances, and in our Minds conceive ourselves the Objects of A's Kindness or Bounty: And after this Manner do we take Part in all the Concerns of our Fellow-men. So that there can be no *beneficent Action* done in any Part of the World, which, when it occurs to our Observation, does not affect us, and tend to *our own private Interest*, or serve to give us *Pleasure*<sup>24</sup>.

A clear indication that Hutcheson is using Butler's text to refute Campbell is that while Hobbes puts forward our greatest compassion for friends (or virtuous persons) as proof of the correctness of his definition, namely his reduction of compassion to fear for oneself, in Butler's text definition and subsequent inquiries are separate inquiries, the greatest fear for oneself in the case of friends and virtuous persons is an absolutely dubious fact, our best friend is treated as an accidental sound that reminds us of a dangerous situation. Hutcheson too in the cited passage of the appendix assumes the independence of the definition, argues that it does not explain the increase in compassion, since not only a friend, but any stranger (as in the case of the accidental sound of Butler) could remind us of our dangerous situation. Hutcheson furthermore must have already treasured this note from Butler since the composition of the *Essay on Passions*: here it is precisely replacing others with ourselves, rejoicing in

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<sup>24</sup> A. Campbell, *An Enquiry into the Original of Moral Virtue*, Edinburgh 1733, p. 440.

happiness and saddening in unhappiness, to constitute the *public sense* of Hutcheson. If anything, the difference lies in the fact that while for Butler instinctive is the capacity for an affective transfer (for which self-love continues to have a more central role in his perspective), for Hutcheson instinctive is immediately the *public sense*, the ability to perceive the other's interest in the same way as our own interest. Moreover, while for Butler in the providential economy of nature compassion is favoured over the ability to rejoice in the prosperity of the other, an effect or consequence of love for the other, in Hutcheson's perspective, and by the influence of John Clarke, public sense is always a cause and it allows us to rejoice and be saddened alike. Hutcheson must have immediately recognised that he could use Butler's criticism of Hobbes for his critique of Campbell. In this context Hutcheson's criticism acquires a deeper but also clearer meaning: the use of sympathy as an imaginary substitution of myself with the other, as it is unable to explain the original or instinctive character of compassion, and ultimately of the *public sense*, so it is not able to explain the original or instinctive character of *moral sense*.

Hume, however, was an attentive reader of Butler. In the section on compassion he had certainly claimed that Hobbes was wrong, because of his subtle reasoning on the instability of fortune, and on our being susceptible to the same sufferings of which we are witnesses, but he had also claimed that Butler was wrong, recognising sympathy as the cause of compassion, which is therefore a secondary affection, and endeavouring to explain why our compassion increases in the case of the magnanimous man, the patient character, the innocent person, thanks to the difference, with respect to the sympathy, of the conduct of the other; the passion communicated by sympathy sometimes gains strength from the weakness of the original and even stems from a transition from affections that have no existence: a man who is not overthrown by his misfortunes is pitied even more by reason

of his patience<sup>25</sup>. In short, the variability of sympathy and its character as an unreal and imaginary phenomenon - a point on which Campbell had also focused - explains the variability of compassion<sup>26</sup>.

But then we face this dilemma: either sympathy as an imaginary substitution of ourselves to others does not change our feelings, but then we cannot explain the variation of our compassion, as Butler and Hutcheson claim, or sympathy varies according to whether its object be a friend or a stranger, as Hume claims and how Hume may have made Hutcheson present in his conversation; but once the variability of sympathy concerning the explanation of the phenomena of compassion has been accepted - and Hume will insist on the continuation of the third book when he resumes the well-known passage of Lucretius's of those who witness safely the shipwreck from the beach - it is very probable that Hutcheson has turned his criticism upside down; by analogy, sympathy will be equally changeable in the case of moral evaluation, but then the stability of our esteem and moral approval will not be explained. If sympathy varies, then our approval must also change. But our approval does not change and the argument is already suggested in point 2b.3 of the appendix to the 1738 edition of *Inquiry of Virtue*.

## 5. Hume's answer

Before retracing Hume's complex answer, it is fair to note that his first move is to reject the objection to the sender: after reiterating that "The approbation of moral qualities most certainly is not deriv'd from reason, or any comparison of ideas; but proceeds entirely from a moral taste, and from

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<sup>25</sup> D. Hume, *Treatise*, cit., Book II, part II, sect. VII, p. 370.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.* and, for Campbell, cf. L. Turco, *Sympathy and moral sense*, cit., pp. 94-95.

certain sentiments of pleasure or disgust, which arise upon the contemplation and viewing of particular qualities or characters. "<sup>27</sup>, he states

[...] nor can I feel the same lively pleasure from the virtues of a person, who liv'd in Greece two thousand years ago, that I feel from the virtues of a familiar friend and acquaintance. Yet I do not say, that I esteem the one more than the other: And therefore, if the variation of the sentiment, without a variation of the esteem, be an objection, it must have equal force against every other system, as against that of sympathy<sup>28</sup>.

Where the strength of this reply lies entirely in the premise - the dependence of moral approval not on reason, but on moral taste and certain feelings of pleasure or repugnance - and in the fact that the objection, if it is valid, is valid against every other system, that is the system that Hume considers a competitor of his own, Hutcheson's system of *moral sense*. Almost at the end of his section Hume reaffirms this perspective:

There have been many systems of morality advanc'd by philosophers in all ages; but if they are strictly examin'd, they may be reduc'd to two, which alone merit our attention. Moral good and evil are certainly distinguish'd by our sentiments, not by reason : But these sentiments may arise either from the mere species or appearance of characters and passions, or from reflexions on their tendency to the happiness of mankind, and of particular persons<sup>29</sup>.

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<sup>27</sup> D. Hume, *Treatise*, cit., Book III, part III, sect. I, p. 581. "Moral taste" is an expression that Hume uses only in this circumstance.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 589.

Here without any possibility of doubt his "explication of the moral sense"<sup>30</sup> through sympathy - as an imaginary substitution of place and reflection on the consequences in terms of pleasure and aversion produced by characters and passions - is contrasted with the immediacy of Hutcheson's *moral sense*, which arouses feelings of condemnation or approval at the mere sight of the inclinations of oneself or of others.

It is now appropriate to briefly recall Hume's arguments in response to the first objection: our situation with respect to people and things is constantly fluctuating and therefore it is necessary to acquire a general and stable point of view; the variability of feelings of approval and blame as a function of closeness or distance (which is as spatial as an affective distance) requires, regardless of the present disposition of our mind, of correcting our feelings, or at least our language, according to experience, neglecting our interest, resorting to a calm determination of the passions that is based on a distant view or reflection, and this optimal distance is reached in the end by sympathy with those who deal with the person considered. This is far from being as lively as when our or our friends' interests are at stake, nor does it have the same influence on our hatred and love. It is hard to argue that Hume has effectively solved the difficulty: the strengths of his response are the distance and above all the consideration of those who deal with the person considered<sup>31</sup>.

There is also a new topic in the section that serves to reinforce of Hume's position: it is related to the virtues that serve to promote not the interest of society, but the interest of the person who owns it. These are the virtues of magnanimity and natural abilities. They are impervious to the *moral sense* of Hutcheson; I could not appreciate their utility

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<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 588; the expression "moral sense" is used only here and in the title of section II, part I of the book on the morality of the *Treatise*.

<sup>31</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 581-84.

without sympathising with the interest of those who possess them<sup>32</sup>. When Hume will have indicated the four principles of moral approval, the utility to oneself or to others, pleasure for oneself or for others - at the end of the section – he can only observe:

One may, perhaps, be surpriz'd, that amidst all these interests and pleasures, we shou'd forget our own, which touch us so nearly on every other occasion. But we shall easily satisfy ourselves on this head, when we consider, that every particular person's pleasure and interest being different, 'tis impossible men cou'd ever agree in their sentiments and judgments, unless they chose some common point of view, from which they might survey their object, and which might cause it to appear the same to all of them. Now, in judging of characters, the only interest or pleasure, which appears the same to every spectator, is that of the person himself, whose character is examin'd; or that of persons, who have a connexion with him<sup>33</sup>.

The connection of this conclusion with the first objection that Hume proposes to himself is therefore evident. Moral approval depends on sympathy as an imaginary substitution of place, but since sympathy is inherently changeable on the basis of the distance of objects, while the estimate does not change,

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<sup>32</sup> See *ibid.*, sect. IV, pp. 606-14; the point is emphasized by Hume also in the conclusion of the Book on Morals. In his *Inquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*, (Section VI, Part I) - when Hume completed the work of simplifying his theory by sacrificing the mechanisms of sympathy to the criteria of utility and pleasure - after the celebration of useful virtues to those who possess them he observes conclusively that it is impossible to reduce them to self-love, while the theorists of selfishness can always quibble on the virtues useful to others. Only our non-indifference to the happiness and unhappiness of others allows us to appreciate the former virtues. In this way sympathy not only eliminates moral sense from the scene, but Hume can show off more altruism than Hutcheson, who had restricted the scope of virtues to those useful to the community.

<sup>33</sup> *34 Ibid.*, sect. I, p. 591.

it is necessary to make the observer's point of view stable and identical, which is possible by neglecting one's own interest in view of that of the persons who are object of the observation. In Butler's language we could say that Hume's sympathy is not only "our substituting others for ourselves" but also "our substituting ourselves for others", a substitution of place and, at the same time, an emotional shift. But without even exaggerating in this direction: if someone wanted to find a contradiction between the "limited generosity" that Hume places at the origin of justice and this "extensive sympathy", Hume warns that "Sentiments must touch the heart, to make them control our passions; But they need not extend beyond the imagination, to make them influence our taste"<sup>34</sup>.

## 6. Concluding remarks

It is therefore fully documented that the second objection that Hume proposes against his system of sympathy is an objection made by Hutcheson. It is possible - I add - that, if not the entire section on the chastity and modesty of women, then at least the observation that even "bachelors, however debauched, cannot chuse but be shock'd with any instance of lewdness or impudence in women" has been suggested by Hutcheson's observation of the impossibility, as males, of sympathizing with Lucretia?<sup>35</sup>. Finally, it is very likely

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<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 586.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, Book III, Part II, sect. XII, p. 572. A. Smith, who treasured Hume's and Campbell's observations on the imaginary and unreal character of sympathetic participation, will argue that we can also sympathize with pregnant women (see *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, cit. Part VII, sect. III, chapt. I, 49). This observation concludes an argument against the selfish interpretation of sympathy, a clear sign that Smith is well aware of Campbell's text and of Hutcheson's objection regarding Lucretia, but Smith uses Hutcheson's objection not to deny the sympathetic origin of moral approval, but to support, against Campbell, that the imaginary exchange of place requires the identification with the people involved in the situation.

that the first objection derives from Hutcheson's criticism. The variability of sympathy without varying the approval requires a fixed and general point of view; this is not achieved without considering the interest of the protagonist or of the people who deal with him and consequently without neglecting our own interest.

The reconstruction may seem complex and twisted, having to retrace a backward terrain, from the letters of Hume and from the pages of the *Treatise* to Hutcheson's polemic against the theorists of sympathy. We have also seen that Butler's critical reflections against Hobbes involve uncertainties and inconsistencies. The argument with which Hutcheson tries to refute the explanation of Campbell's moral approval is just as contorted. His argument by analogy is extremely elusive and develops in fact not by comparing similar cases, but by comparing opposite ones: in short, in the case of Hobbes, sympathy does not change, but compassion varies; in the case of Campbell esteem does not change, but sympathy varies in itself, or either because it is impossible to make the replacement or because it is impossible to see the advantage of anyone.

But is it so important to establish whether the objections that Hume proposes against sympathy are objections made by Hutcheson? I think so, at least for those who have a historical interest in philosophical theories, are curious about the way they arise and in which they evolve, have regard for the distinctions between the protagonists of the moral debate in the eighteenth century Britain, believe that the philological examination of texts lead to less arbitrary interpretations. In this particular circumstance it allows us not only to recognise the competitive character, once again, of the system of Hume's sympathy with Hutcheson's theory of *moral sense*, but also the variable character of our moral sentiments alongside the variability of sympathy, to the point at treating the resemblance of our feelings of moral approval as very

inexplicable: "There is something very inexplicable in this variation of our feelings; but 'tis what we have experience of with regard to all our passions and sentiments"<sup>36</sup>. The peculiarity of our moral feelings is not less variable and is not of a different nature than that of our feelings of anger or envy. One could not imagine a more complete naturalization of ethics and a more complete elimination of *moral sense*.

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<sup>36</sup> *Treatise*, cit., Book III, Part III, sect. V, p. 617.

