

1 The Origins of Social Suffering

The concept of social suffering originates in the late eighteenth century. It first features as a point of reference in poetry documenting the transformation of country life in the early period of the Industrial Revolution.¹ In this context social suffering as either a manifest condition or a quality of experience is not taken up as a matter for formal analytical scrutiny; rather it is adopted as a point of reference for writers moved to document scenes of rural deprivation that make a mockery of romantic notions of the pastoral idyll. In his *Descriptive Sketches*, written in 1792–93 in recollection of a summer spent traveling around postrevolutionary France and the Swiss Alps, William Wordsworth refers to social suffering in a passage that records his encounter with destitute and sick peasants living in the forest along the banks of the upper reaches of the Rhine. He writes:

The indignant waters of the infant Rhine,
Hang o'er the abyss, whose else impervious gloom
His burning eyes with fearful light illumine.
The mind condemned, without reprieve, to go
O'er life's long deserts with its charge of woe,
With sad congratulation joins the train
Where beasts and men together o'er the plain

Move on a mighty caravan of pain:
 Hope, strength, and courage, social suffering brings,
 Freshening the wilderness with shades and springs.

In this instance, Wordsworth's encounter with social suffering draws him to reflect upon the stoic attitudes adopted by people struggling to survive in conditions of extreme adversity; and despite all he has seen, he draws hope for humanity and for himself from this. Commentators understand this poem to mark the early signs of a political awakening that led Wordsworth to an interest in the prospects for revolutionary social reform and also to the attempt to fashion his poetry as a means to raise the moral and material conditions of society as matters for public debate.²

The possibility of making reference to social suffering as a distinct form of moral experience signals a major revision in the terms of human understanding. It attests to the arrival of structures of feeling, intellectual convictions, and moral dispositions that are without precedent. Before the second half of the eighteenth century no reference is made to social consciousness *per se*, and there is no record of people moving to directly identify suffering as an intrinsic component of the social realm. The possibility of thinking about individuals as shaped by social worlds or as subject to social conditions was acquired through a large-scale transformation in popular attitudes and cultural worldviews. This involved a definitive break with traditional approaches to documenting and making sense of experiences of pain and misery. It involved a radical revision of the cultural frames of reference by which human suffering was cast as a problem for humanity.

The adoption of the concept of social suffering in writing and public debate signals the arrival of an approach to interpreting the meaning of human suffering as an explicitly *social* condition. Here the spectacle of human misery is taken as a cue to reflect critically upon prevailing social attitudes and social relations. Experiences of "fellow feeling" that take place through the witnessing of human affliction are understood to hold the potential to operate as a form of social disclosure. People's moral feelings about human suffering are taken as social bonds that imply an obligation to acknowledge, respond to, and care for the pain and distress of others. At the same time, however, it is clear that from this point on many questions remained with regard to how one should interpret, express, and manage these emotional ties, and for that matter, at its origins, the possibility of set-

ting the bounds for social responsibility or devising conceptually adequate terms for thinking about how this should take place courts much dispute.

The early realization of social suffering as a component of human experience is accompanied by a series of intellectual difficulties and moral tensions that are often allied to the conviction that there is no sufficient means to account for, or respond to, people's suffering. At the same time that certain types of pain and distress are experienced and/or represented for the first time as matters issuing a moral demand for *social* reform, there is little agreement as to how this should be interpreted, evaluated, and set into action. The concern to understand human suffering in social terms brings critical debate both to the moral meaning of suffering and to the category of "the social." In this context, the forms of consciousness acquired by the encounter with social suffering tend to be deeply troubled and perplexed. From the outset they involve people in a struggle to articulate the insight and in an agitated search for greater clarity of understanding.

When attending to problems of social suffering, social science is set to investigate forms of experience that are constituted by many complex exchanges between meaning, feeling, thought, and action. There are three analytical concerns that feature in the discussion that follows. The first of these aims to understand the cultural circumstances under which human suffering is encountered as a radical challenge to our cultural capacities for sense-making and as a torment that brings us under the compulsion to question how we should live and what we should do. This involves an effort to document the sociohistorical conditions under which individuals are most likely to relate to the spectacle of other people's suffering and/or interpret their own experience of affliction as matters for which there is a distinct deficit of moral meaning. The second attends to the social origins and dynamics of "moral individualism," the cultural disposition that Emile Durkheim identified as giving rise to "sympathy for all that is human" and "a broader pity for all sufferings."³ Here there is a particular concern to understand the part played by the experience of human suffering in the history of emotions and how, in turn, the response to human suffering is conditioned by social structures of feeling and behaviors that are always open to change. The third concern involves the possibility of understanding how these new problems and dimensions of human suffering are implicated in the generation of social consciousness and the moral impulse

to ameliorate the social conditions in which people are made to live. In this context, a focus is brought to occasions where individuals are moved by their encounters with suffering to think about themselves and others as intrinsically *social* beings and how by acting to change prevailing qualities of social experience and reform society, they might better care for those made subject to extreme conditions of suffering.

This chapter is organized around three short essays. Each is designed to advance distinct points of view on the putative origins, likely consequences, and supposed qualities of the social and cultural changes that first made possible the categorization of human experience in terms of social suffering. The first of these offers an explanation for the lost “art of suffering” and ventures to trace some of the ways in which this is implicated in the founding and development of modern humanitarianism. The second develops some of the interests raised in the first essay but with a greater focus on the extent to which transformations in the cultural portrayal and humanitarian response to suffering are coordinated by shifts in moral feeling. The third essay examines some of the ways in which moral feelings about human suffering came to be openly recognized as social bonds, and further, bonds that implied a responsibility to care for and to take actions to alleviate the suffering of others. In each instance, emphasis is placed upon the many difficulties of understanding and moral tensions that accompany these developments. We hold that many of these continue to infuse encounters with social suffering to this day.

We aim to draw readers into debate over the ways in which the documentation of human experience as social suffering bears testimony to a series of revolutionary transformations in popular beliefs about the moral meaning of pain, the causes of human misery, and how we should care for the afflictions of others. We contend that, at its origins, the conjunction of “the social” with “suffering” marks a radical recasting of popular conceptions of the relationship between God and society, and in particular, a considerable waning of belief in so-called special providence (the conviction that God is inclined to regularly intervene in extraordinary ways in people’s lives). In this setting, “the social” as a distinct realm of moral experience and action is rendered conscionable as the scale and frequency of experiences of human suffering serve to make providentialism appear both morally objectionable and intellectually implausible. Somewhat ironically, the ground is

cleared for understanding human life in social terms as an unintended consequence of a strong commitment to providentialism; it is conceived under the burden of pain and distress encountered through many sustained and frustrated attempts to marry belief with experience. Here we also work to highlight how this shift in theological understanding and allied dawning of social consciousness was augmented through the acquisition and cultivation of new forms of emotionality. In this context, “the social” is first encountered not only as a provocation to forge a more “secular” (or rather, imminently rational) meaning and response to experiences of pain and suffering but also as a matter that holds the potential to affect us morally. To fully appreciate the critical issues at stake in the categorization of human experience in terms of social suffering requires us to engage with the ongoing attempt to understand how these changes were first made possible, and further, how these continue to be realized, acknowledged, and made morally forceful in our lives today.

THE LOST “ART OF SUFFERING”

“The art of suffering” is a phrase first used by the Puritan divine Richard Baxter (1615–91) when advising fellow believers on how they should relate to the pains suffered at the hands of others.⁴ As a matter of Christian calling and duty, Baxter exhorts his readers to learn the “art of suffering.” On this understanding, all afflictions are sent by God either as punishment for sin or as tests designed to draw believers toward a closer relationship with him. All earthly events and the conditions set for human relationships are brought about by God’s will and shaped by his hand. Providence may work as much through the momentary discomforts of trivial incidents as through the trauma of great catastrophe; and for those practicing the “art of suffering,” all hardships and adversities must be patiently endured in the knowledge that God is at work in all things. Comfort is drawn from the knowledge that a divine purpose lies behind apparently random events of suffering, and under this conviction the Bible is consulted as an authoritative guide to the types of actions that should take place as a means to remedy the situation.

Surveys of Christian writings and sermons through the European Middle Ages and early modern period reveal a remarkable consensus of

opinion as to the meaning of human suffering. A considerable amount of dispute always surrounds the correct way to understand and interpret the mechanics of the interrelationship between God's will, human actions, and natural events, but there is no doubting the providential design of creation.⁵ The Bible teaches that suffering is not only sent by God as a punishment for wrongdoing, but also that it is used by him as a means to redeem his creation from sin. God can choose to make the sun stand still, and when angered, he sends earthquakes, floods, hails of fire and brimstone, famine, and epidemic disease to destroy populations. When working to chastise people for their sin, God might well contrive to set events in place so that societies are made subject to defeat in war and suffer enslavement under their enemies. In order to fulfill his greater purpose he even chooses to treat some people as "vessels of wrath fitted to destruction."⁶ Theologies of divine retribution are set alongside theologies of redemption that cast suffering as an instrument of sanctification (as supremely demonstrated in the sacrificial torture and death of Christ) and as an experience that is given to the saints, so that through their submission to God's will they may be commended to others as an example of faith. In the New Testament, Christians are advised to treat physical hardships and persecutions as blessings from God and to rejoice that he considers them worthy to partake in Christ's sufferings and, of course, to draw comfort from the knowledge that ultimately their reward will be in heaven.⁷

Marc Bloch maintains that such beliefs tended to give rise to forms of emotion and behavior that hardly enter into the motivations and experience of most modern people.⁸ The conviction that God was directly involved in all things made people "morbidly attentive" to his messages as revealed through natural signs and wonders. Comets, unusual colors and patterns in the sky, floods, and unnatural births were widely held to be warnings of judgments to come. It was widely thought that God's wrath was made manifest in storm damage, disastrous fires, failed harvests, and epidemic disease. Within this worldview, it was assumed that every pain and adversity that broke into the capricious flow of bodily experience was thoroughly invested with both moral and divine meaning. Frequent and persistent encounters with devastating outbreaks of disease, sudden and untimely deaths, and periods of famine were accompanied by many "despairs," "impulsive acts," and "sudden revulsions of feeling" as people

earnestly struggled to make sense of God's will and moral instruction.⁹ Similarly, Alexandra Walsham contends:

The struggle to discern some pattern behind one's violently swinging fortunes could induce an obsession, not to say neurosis, revolving around the unintelligibility of God's predestinarian scheme. Predicated upon a causal connection between affliction and guilt, this was a philosophy with a distinct tendency to deflate the self-esteem of the sufferer and foster a masochistic internalization of blame. When combined with the ingrained convictions about human depravity, a paranoid reading of providential events was liable to intensify mental stress over to a 'reprobate sense'. Direful apprehensions of divine victimization, whether in the guise of objectively verifiable experience or inner anguish and torment, encouraged an unhealthy degree of introspection.¹⁰

Such beliefs lent weight to the understanding that every calamity and misfortune that befell a person was a sign of his or her sinfulness or a direct result of the sins committed by persons within his or her family or community; and further, that God intended the person to "profit from affliction." For example, on the death of his infant son from diphtheria, Ralph Josselin (1616–83) was moved to reason that this was a punishment sent by God for his vanity as well as his tendency to spend too much time playing chess. He held that the pain of his grief was a call to repentance.¹¹ Some of the most devout Puritans were also inclined to express anxieties over not having been made to suffer enough. For example, insofar as affliction served to sanctify the believer, the English clergyman and theologian John Downname (1571–1652) proclaimed suffering to be a sign of God's "affection."¹² Similarly, there are records of the Church of Ireland archbishop, James Ussher (1581–1656), worrying over the possibility that God no longer loved him because he was not experiencing any obvious hardship or pressing matter of conscience.¹³ Accordingly, the elasticity of doctrines of providence was such that, in theory, a meaning could be found for every experience of suffering; and indeed, being made to suffer was taken by many as a necessary and even desirable part of their Christian calling.¹⁴

Historians note that it was particularly in societies where cultures of Protestantism took hold that doctrines of providence tended to have the greatest impact upon public and personal affairs.¹⁵ Generally speaking, it appears that in most cultures of medieval Christianity there was a greater

willingness to acknowledge the roles played by chance, accident, misfortune, and misadventure in human affairs than would have been possible in the later Middle Ages and early modern period.¹⁶ The more pronounced credulity bestowed upon popular accounts of miraculous prodigies and the firm subscription to the belief that divine providence is at work in every event and circumstance are components of a post-Reformation worldview. The volume of publications dedicated to explaining providential doctrines, the documentation of God's judgments through history, and the announcement of portentous signs and wonders testifies to the extent to which the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries mark the high point of Christian providentialism.¹⁷

Walsham holds that the Protestant preoccupation with providence was a direct result of theological convictions that placed heavy emphasis on doctrines of predestination and the attainment of salvation through the exclusive act of God's grace. On this account, the effort to discern "dispensations of providence" was fueled by anxieties experienced in connection with the "enigma of predestination."¹⁸ The concern to elaborate and refine an understanding of how God worked out his purposes through nature, history, and bodily process grew along with the extent to which an "uncompromising insistence" was placed upon the need for each individual to examine his conscience, motivations, and actions in light of biblical teachings on the means to, and anticipated fruits of, salvation.¹⁹

A number of writers also underline the extent to which popular enthusiasm for providentialism intensified during periods of social unrest and political instability.²⁰ As far as England is concerned, the English Civil War and Interregnum (1642–60) stand out as the period when the currency of providential thought was inflated to the extreme.²¹ Never before or since has the Bible, and particularly Old Testament sections detailing God's miraculous and cataclysmic interventions throughout the history of Israel, been so passionately studied as a source of inspiration and authority in political and military affairs.²² At this time parliamentary speeches and political discourse in general took the form of theological exposition. Blair Worden notes that "Cromwell did not merely invoke providence as a sanction of his rule" but that "he lectured parliament at length about the workings of providence on his soul."²³ On all sides of the conflict, biblical prophecies, histories, commandments, and teachings were taken as the primary

means to justify legal decisions and the infliction of violence on others. They were also the main point of reference when it came to interpreting political events, the experience of military campaigns, and the shifting fortunes of competing religious and social factions. The overall effect was “the engulfment of providence in factional strife and sectarian struggle” to a point where its credibility was undermined.²⁴

At least as far as Britain is concerned, by the end of the 1650s providence was being made subject to a sustained crisis of legitimacy. As Christopher Hill notes, to many, “the infinity of reversal and changes” that followed the outbreak of the English Civil War made abundantly clear that providential theory was by no means sufficiently equipped to cast light on God’s purposes.²⁵ Not only had it been repeatedly exposed as an unreliable and confused guide to understanding the world, but having experienced so many crushing disappointments and humiliating failures of judgment, many were now inclined to identify the bold assuredness with which they once presumed to know the will of God as a cause of civil strife. For example, the onetime “enthusiast,” Richard Baxter, now cautioned against biblical literalism and blamed “the misunderstanding of providence” for the ways in which his friend Major General Berry was seduced by Cromwell into the vanity of believing that God had called him to take up arms so as to “look after the government of the land.”²⁶ Indeed, Hill notes that Baxter grew to be wary of religious fanaticism for the extent to which it had all too often proven itself to be a spur to bloody rebellion against civility and the law.²⁷

During the second half of the seventeenth century providentialism underwent a rapid process of “cultural marginalization” and, generally speaking, was no longer considered to have a legitimate role in mainstream intellectual and political affairs.²⁸ In educated circles it became increasingly unfashionable to explain natural events as God’s interventions in history or portentous signs of his impending judgment; natural philosophy had ascendancy over providential piety.²⁹ As far as most of those connected to the work of government were concerned, prolonged experiences of civil unrest as well as many wars of religion and bloody persecutions across Europe made all too clear the propensity for providentialism to breed ideological fanaticism and violent intent.³⁰ In part the official dismissal of providentialism is explained as a result of the ways in which it was forcefully exposed as a source of unmitigated intellectual disagreement and violent

social conflict.³¹ There is also no doubt that its intellectual appeal was eroded as a consequence of concerted political campaigns to stigmatize providential claims as forms of superstition that marked people as “lower class,” “uneducated,” and prone to “fanaticism.”³² In addition to this, Keith Thomas contends that insofar as the large majority of people tended to be cast by the evidence of their material poverty and many bodily afflictions as living under the heavy hand of God’s judgment, once the enthusiasm for providentialism was drained from elite and upwardly mobile social groups, it was never likely to be sustained among the mass ranks of the poor. For most of those living under extreme conditions of material poverty there was never much comfort or consolation to be drawn from the charge to learn the “art of suffering.” In conclusion Thomas writes:

It was a gloomy philosophy, teaching men how to suffer, and stressing the impenetrability of God’s will. At its most optimistic it promised that those who bore patiently with the evils of this world would have a chance of being rewarded in the next. But, as a contemporary remarked, ‘the poor man lies under a great temptation to doubt of God’s providence and care’. It is not surprising that many should have turned away to non-religious modes of thought which offered a more direct prospect of relief and a more immediate explanation of why it was that some men prospered while others literally perished by the wayside.³³

It is important to understand, however, that by no means did the cultural marginalization of providentialism in intellectual and public life lead to it being wholly renounced as a popular way to account for suffering.³⁴ For the following two hundred years or so, and particularly in the aftermath of large-scale disasters or outbreaks of epidemic disease, providentialism continued to be adopted by many people as an explanatory theory for misfortune, though in societies undergoing rapid experiences of industrialization it is possible to trace a marked decline in its cultural appeal through the second half of the nineteenth century.³⁵ It may still be possible to find committed Christians who venture to make sense of worldly events in terms of the workings of providence; however, it is generally held that, following the many events of mass violence and atrocity that took place through the twentieth century, it would never enter the minds of most people to identify God as the immediate cause of a person’s suffering, or for that matter, to express enthusiasm for the sanctifying power of personal affliction.

In an extensive survey of sermons and Christian writings through the seventeenth century, Ann Thompson charts a major transformation in cultural attitudes toward suffering. It appears that by the turn of the eighteenth century the Puritan art of suffering was largely abandoned in favor of an approach that stressed the extent to which God's ways are beyond human understanding. At least in the writings of church leaders, human suffering was no longer taken as the cue for an anguished search for the wickedness that had angered God to the point where he moves against his people. From this point on, it was far more commonplace for the experience of suffering to be regarded as a matter for which no satisfactory explanation can be found in this world. On Thompson's account, "the fear of freedom which builds up in the spaces created by the loss of confidence in the revealed (the written) will of God is alleviated by unquestioning submission to the secret will of God."³⁶ Similarly, Hill notes that in many Christian writings there was a discernible shift away from using the Bible as a guide to the political actions that might realize his kingdom on earth toward an emphasis on the comfort to be drawn from the promise that this will be delivered to the faithful in the world to come.³⁷

The struggle to reevaluate received tradition brought debate to the possibility that, up to that point, most theologians had seriously misunderstood the character of God and his relationship to humanity. Some commentators are now inclined to identify the second half of the seventeenth century with the introduction of a new theological emphasis on the extent to which God feels sympathy for those in affliction, and even suffers along with them. For example, Jennifer Herdt notes that at this time the Cambridge Platonist Ralph Cudworth (1617–88) set in motion a theological movement that by the second half of the twentieth century was embraced by many Christian scholars as providing a more morally palatable account of the divine character.³⁸ Here an emphasis was brought to the extent to which, by the example of his incarnation in the figure of Christ, God has solidarity with those who suffer and demonstrates an overwhelming disposition to relate to people with compassion.

Herdt is further inclined to identify this rejection of the immaterial, supremely transcendent, and impassible God of received tradition as a cultural shift that advanced new forces of secularization. The unintended consequence of attempting to "humanize" the Christian God was to portray him as less equipped to offer an immediate explanation for why suffering

takes place or as exercising direct control over the conditions under which people are made to exist. Herdt argues that the vision of God as living alongside and suffering with us serves to compromise the possibility of understanding him as existing over and acting above us. Paradoxically, while transforming God into a personable being who has solidarity with those who suffer, his presence as a being who exercises supreme powers of control and judgment over a person's fate is diminished. All at once, God is made more responsive to and yet less responsible for the brute facts of lived experience. On these grounds, Herdt contends that the works of Cudworth and other Latitudinarian divines mark a transitional phase in Western intellectual culture that made it increasingly possible for people to regard the transcendent God of providence as practically remote and functionally detached from public secular affairs. She holds that by promoting a new image of God as sympathetically oriented to those who suffer, they made it considerably easier for more atheistic representatives of the culture of Enlightenment to treat as intellectually implausible the idea of God as the orchestrator of a great chain of being, or at least to regard this as giving rise to a worldview that is deserving of moral contempt.³⁹

For example, in his poem criticizing Alexander Pope's maxim, "whatever is, is right," written in the aftermath of the Lisbon earthquake of 1755, which is estimated to have killed as many as one hundred thousand people, Voltaire urges us to question the goodness and to doubt the powers of any God who would create a world in which such events are possible or desirable by design. In one particularly angry passage he writes:

Approach in crowds, and meditate a while
 Yon shattered walls, and view each ruined pile.
 Women and children heaped up mountain high,
 Limbs crushed which under ponderous marble lie;
 Wretches mangled, torn, and panting for breath,
 Buried beneath their sinking roofs expire,
 And end their wretched lives in torments dire.
 Say, when you hear their piteous, half-formed cries,
 Or from their ashes see the smoke arise,
 Say, will you then eternal laws maintain,
 Which God to cruelties like these constrain?
 Whilst you these facts replete with horror view,
 Will you maintain death to their crimes was due?

And can you then impute a sinful deed
 To babes who on their mother's bosom's bleed?
 Was then more vice in fallen Lisbon found,
 Than Paris, where voluptuous joys abound?
 Was less debauchery to London known,
 Where opulence luxurious holds her throne?
 Earth Lisbon swallows; the light sons of France
 Protract the feast, or lead the sprightly dance.
 Spectators who undaunted courage show,
 While you behold your dying brethren's woe;
 With stoical tranquillity of mind
 You seek the causes of these ills to find;
 But when like us Fate's rigours you have felt,
 Become humane, like us you'll learn to melt.⁴⁰

Similarly, in *Candide*,⁴¹ it seems that Voltaire has resolved that all he need do is appeal to the evidence of multiple extreme, apparently random, and evidently purposeless experiences of human suffering to convince his readers that the metaphysical "optimism" of Leibniz, as caricatured in the figure of Dr. Pangloss, is both morally bankrupt and irredeemably vexed. Here the conclusion that we should work at cultivating our own garden rather than wait for God to restore some lost state of Eden is arrived at by Candide and his companions through their painful resignation to the evident fact that most are not born to an easy life and that, such as it is, existence is made "bearable" only by human effort.⁴² Indeed, Peter Gay contends that the writing of this morality tale served as a spur for Voltaire's conversion into "an aggressive social reformer."⁴³ On many accounts, as traditional Christian doctrines of divine providence were rendered more implausible and morally suspect, more were persuaded to the view that no good or sufficient reason could be found for human suffering. It became increasingly difficult to understand how extreme experiences of pain were related to God's interventions in people's lives. Yet here it is important to understand that for many of those who were most forthright in their denunciation of providence, it was far better to resign oneself to this great difficulty of understanding than to endure the apparent cruelty and evident irrationality of a doctrine that charged people with the task of learning the "art of suffering." Some, and sometimes many, were moved to devote themselves to a new image of God as sympathetically oriented to, but ultimately less responsible for, the suffering

of humanity. Others, no doubt far fewer, were cautioned by the writings of figures such as Pierre Bayle (1647–1706) to conclude that it was better to test the probity of moral action by “the passions in the heart” than by “knowledge of a God” and, further, to share Bayle’s conviction that it was better to respond to the problem of suffering with a radical questioning of the world than to seek solace in the assurances of providence.⁴⁴

The condition and experience of social suffering became conscionable as a pressing human concern only where the workings of providence became radically questionable or otherwise fell into disrepute. Where social suffering features as a scholarly point of reference through the course of the nineteenth century, for the most part, both theists and atheists are united in the view that adverse social conditions and painful qualities of social experience should be met with concerted efforts at social reform and, indeed, in “the moral sense of responsibility or conscience” that they should move to “save human life” and “assuage pain.”⁴⁵ In this regard, social suffering is as much an immediate problem for clergymen and theologians as it is for social scientists and political theorists.⁴⁶

Through a protracted experience of intellectual frustration and moral anguish over the workings of providence that frequently reached critical proportions, by the second half of the nineteenth century most held that it was no longer possible to see the hand of God at work in suffering. To many by the turn of the eighteenth century it was already clear that, while we might draw some comfort from the thought that God shares in our suffering, we should not take human affliction as a matter fit for his purpose; and in this regard there was divine sanction behind the urgency to engage with the task of thinking how social worlds can be made more bearable. Some had no need for studied reflection on the character of God in order to find the inspiration to channel their energies in this direction, particularly insofar as they were already enveloped by a newfound passion to protest against the suffering of humanity.

BY FORCE OF FELLOW FEELING

The eighteenth century witnessed a revolution in the emotional constitution of humanity and a radical transformation of subjectivity. In particular,

from 1750 on the common cultural experience and account of life is distinguished by a new sensibility concerned to express and respond to moral feelings about human and animal suffering.⁴⁷ By the turn of the nineteenth century, it seems that majority opinion holds that much that takes place in the experience of pain is wholly undesirable, and insofar as it is technically possible to eliminate the suffering of pain, its occurrence is morally unacceptable. The spectacle of human suffering is increasingly met with an attitude of revulsion and is depicted as a matter to which one should respond with moral outrage.⁴⁸ From this time on it is often the case that the distress people experience when confronted with the sight of suffering is taken as an expression of natural instinct.

Cultural historians and historical anthropologists now contend that, while frequently explained as facets of “common sense” or “human nature,” these emotional dispositions and cultural attitudes are peculiarly modern traits. It is also suggested that they are among the components of modern identity that are most poorly understood and which all too often remain beyond the purview of critical self-reflection. Throughout history and across cultures there are considerable variations in the social conventions that govern the expression of emotion as well as marked contrasts in the cultural meanings bestowed upon particular types of emotional experience. In many instances it appears that societies comprise distinct “structures of feeling” that are quite different from those met under conditions of Western modernity.⁴⁹

For example, Esther Cohen notes that during the European Middle Ages the widespread understanding that physical pain was “a function of the soul” was accompanied by expressive norms that involved social sanctions upon facial or bodily contortions, groaning, and crying,⁵⁰ for it was widely held that these visibly betrayed the extent to which a person was living under the heavy hand of God’s judgment. There are many records of Christian martyrs appearing to be largely unaffected by physical tortures; or at least that is how they are portrayed within the conventions of medieval art. It is only those damned to hell who are depicted as suffering, their bodies contorted and their faces anguished.⁵¹ Cohen maintains that such was the association of pain with mortal sin that it was only in the context of ritual visits to confessional shrines that some ventured to make a public display of their feelings about the physical torments they suffered.

Forms of emotional expression both reflect and constitute the moral experience of culture and society. As we work to understand the ways in which people relate to their feelings we are also brought to reflect upon the habits of thought, custom, and practice by which they conduct and evaluate their relationships to self and others. Each society involves its members in a cultural training of emotions, and within this, some emotions are valued while others are discouraged and even condemned. “Feeling rules” express the social dynamics of power relations and serve to delineate shifting landscapes of social opportunity and moral responsibility.⁵² On this view, the sudden “flowering of sentimentalism” that takes place through the eighteenth century not only marks the introduction of a new “emotional regime” in civil affairs but also designates the arrival of distinctively new forms of sociality and moral conduct.⁵³

Considerable dispute surrounds the possibility of arriving at a satisfactory explanation for how this was made possible. In part this is due to the problem of assessing the relative degree to which moral feelings are moderated, modified, or reformed as the result of processes of intellectual and public debate. It is certainly the case that many presume to explain changes in feeling as the product of transformations governed by the relative standing of cultural ideas. In particular, it is often assumed that the heightened value that is placed on expressions of fellow feeling in eighteenth-century society has its origins in a theological movement that was subsequently adopted by philosophers of the Enlightenment as part of a new ethics of human civility.

Intellectual historians tend to locate the origins of the English “cult of sensibility” in the ideological campaigns mounted by Cambridge Platonists and Latitudinarian divines in opposition to the doctrines of Calvinism and the political philosophy of Thomas Hobbes. Convention holds that in the period of the restoration of the English monarchy (1660–ca. 1700), philosophical theologians such as Henry More (1614–87), Ralph Cudworth (1617–88), Benjamin Wichcote (1609–83), Samuel Parker (1640–88), John Tillotson (1630–94), Gilbert Burnet (1643–1715), Richard Cumberland (1631–1718), and Samuel Clarke (1675–1729) moved to emphasize the positive role played by passion and affection in people’s capacities for moral action and Christian understanding. Their views are explained by one of their followers, Joseph Glanvill (1636–80), as follows:

[Their aim was] to assert and vindicate the Divine Goodness and love of Men in its freedom and extent, against those Doctrines, that made his love, fondness; and his justice, cruelty, and represented God, as the Eternal Hater of the far greatest part of his reasonable creatures, and the designer of their ruin, for their exaltation of mere power, and arbitrary will. . . . They showed continually how impossible it was the infinite goodness should design or delight in the misery of his creatures. . . . Their main design was to make Men good, not notional, and knowing; and therefore, though they concealed no practical verities that were proper or seasonable, yet they were sparing in their speculations.⁵⁴

Here the virtues of “universal charity and union”⁵⁵ were privileged above any doctrinal matter that gave rise to sectarian prejudice. Fellow feeling was encouraged as a means to vanquish the pain of factional strife and internecine dispute. Accordingly, when tracing the “genealogy of the man of feeling,” some are inclined to regard this as the product of an ideological movement that, at its origins, was largely inspired by a reading of Christian theology that brought emphasis to humanitarian concerns.

From here it is argued that in the first half of the eighteenth century Latitudinarian fellow feeling underwent a process of secularization and naturalization. Philosophers such as Anthony Ashley-Cooper, third earl of Shaftsbury (1671–1713), and Francis Hutcheson (1694–1746) are commonly identified as the progenitors of the notion that humanity is distinguished by an instinctive capacity for moral feeling. They by no means shared the same understanding of how sympathy works or how bonds of fellow feeling are forged and sustained, yet both cleared the way for the “sense of common rights of mankind” or impulse toward “benevolence” to be treated as the elemental grounds for human sociability.⁵⁶

Through the second half of the eighteenth century it became increasingly common for social commentators to recognize fellow feeling as an influence upon the course of legal and political affairs and, indeed, to declare this an essential component of civic virtue. Most notably, in the doctrines of civic humanism developed by members of the Scottish Enlightenment “moral sense” is treated as a social disposition that, when properly nurtured, might be relied upon as a means to constrain selfishness and cruelty. In this respect, Thomas Paine is already writing within a tradition of received wisdom when he holds human sympathy to be among the components of “common sense” without which “we should be incapable for discharging in the social duties

of life.”⁵⁷ Similarly, when Thomas Jefferson takes it as self-evident that we possess a “moral instinct” that prompts us “irresistibly to feel and to succor” the distress of others, he is voicing a point of view that was already widely shared across learned society.⁵⁸

Perhaps it was because of such positive appraisals of human sympathy that increasing numbers of people were inclined to identify themselves as cultured by humane feelings. Indeed, it is argued that through the second half of the eighteenth and first half of the nineteenth century, the popular enthusiasm for sentimental literature was in part due to the extent to which people understood that they should actively cultivate the moral feelings that inspire benevolent social actions.⁵⁹ On the other hand, it might well be the case that a considerable part of the cultural turn toward sentimentality was fueled by the discovery of feelings that created a shared hunger for new terms of social understanding. Insofar as reason operates as a “slave of the passions,” we might well turn the intellectual history of sympathy on its head.

An alternative view holds that we should not so much understand the discovery of fellow feeling as the ancillary accompaniment to debates over the moral ideals we should live by; but rather, we should dwell upon the extent to which it was primarily due to the dispersal and intensity of newly acquired qualities of emotion that moved people to reformulate their ideas about human nature and the goals of politics. Thomas notes that prior to any considered ethical reformulation of attitudes toward the cruel treatment of animals there were many outbreaks of “spontaneous tender-heartedness.” The philosophical support for animal rights followed in the wake of people first being moved by compassionate feelings to alleviate the unnecessary suffering of pets and farm animals.⁶⁰ From the beginning of the seventeenth century, and with increasing frequency through the second half of the eighteenth century, there are reports of people being overtaken by sympathetic feelings that at first were as much a surprise to them as to others.

This is particularly noticeable in relation to the initiation of campaigns to abolish the use of torture in criminal proceedings. From the early seventeenth century there are records of crowds subverting convention and reacting with outbursts of sympathy to the spectacle of public execution.⁶¹ Lynn Hunt, however, argues that the 1760s are distinguished by a marked increase

in the discovery of feelings for the humanity of those subjected to cruel punishments. She notes that even though Voltaire was moved in 1762–63 to protest against the trial of Jean Calas on the grounds that it took place as an act of religious bigotry, by 1766 his principal concerns had shifted to the morally outrageous ways in which the court had attempted to use the method of “breaking on the wheel” to make Calas confess to the murder of his son. Where previously such forms of torture “had long seemed acceptable to him,” ultimately, it was due to a sudden upwelling of “natural compassion” that Voltaire was brought under the compulsion to change his views.⁶² Similarly, Randall McGowen notes that overwhelmingly it was the case that those campaigning against public floggings and spectacles of execution in the early nineteenth century did so by sheer strength of moral feeling.⁶³ Early humanitarian reformers had little need for elaborate arguments based on reasoned principle; rather, it was generally held that by direct appeal to the “sympathies of mankind,” criminal law would be exposed as unjust and inhumane.

Where social theorists venture to account for this seemingly spontaneous acquisition of human sympathy, they either point to the increased integration of people within a more rationally disciplined process of “civilization” or, alternatively, claim that a sympathetic social orientation was the accompaniment to a new experience of individualization made possible by the rise of modern capitalism. Many are inclined to follow Norbert Elias in identifying the upwelling of sympathy as the corollary to a “civilizing process” that eventually succeeded in socializing people into restraining lewd and aggressive impulses. On Elias’s account, the emotional makeup of large sections of Western European societies was transformed as the culture of manners that comprised medieval courtly society was gradually elaborated, adapted to, and incorporated in the construction of a new public culture of civility in the eighteenth century.⁶⁴ Drawing on a Freudian model of the human psyche, human sentimentality is explained as the by-product of sublimated feelings that are rooted in the renunciation of instinctual gratifications. The flight from the spectacle of suffering and the desire to eliminate the distress of pain are understood to result from a wider state-coordinated movement to instill a social psychology of rational order and control in society. Moreover, in looking for evidence to support this view, it is certainly the case that many of those protesting against the

public use of torture were as much appalled by the moral degeneracy of drunken mobs that drew pleasure from the sight of cruelty as they were moved by compassion for the suffering of prisoners.⁶⁵

Within an Elisian framework of analysis, attention might also be drawn to the ways in which the “civilizing process” was augmented by, and conducive to, the development of early modern capitalism, though some are inclined to attribute much more to capitalism here. For example, Natan Sznajder maintains that “by defining a universal field of others with whom contracts and exchanges can be made, market perspectives extend the sphere of moral concern as well, however unintentionally.”⁶⁶ Similarly, Thomas Haskell argues that the involvement of people in market relations encouraged the reconfiguration of the bounds of moral responsibility so that they were more likely to take an interest in the needs of strangers as well as to revise their understandings of causal attribution.⁶⁷ On this account, it was only under the individualizing force of the capitalist marketplace that it became possible for people to extend shared notions of sympathy to the human condition as such.

G. J. Barker-Benfield further underlines the extent to which the “culture of sensibility” grew along with the living standards of a new middle class.⁶⁸ He argues that it was generally among relatively affluent families recently freed from traditional experiences of physical hardship and social misery that a humanitarian outlook tended to be extended to society at large. Along with many other historians of this period, Barker-Benfield also notes that, aside from experiencing any seemingly “natural” upwelling of human sensibility, a large segment of the eighteenth-century middle class took an active interest in “sentimentalism” as a form of mass entertainment. The rapid creation of a new market for sentimental literature, theater, and concerts testifies to the extent to which a capitalist industry stood to gain from the cultural manufacture of fellow feeling. It was quickly realised that many would pay to partake in the pleasure of tears. For this reason Colin Campbell is inclined to argue that, from its origins, the capitalist “spirit of modern consumerism” has always devoted a considerable amount of energy to the cultural appropriation of humanitarian sensibility, for this has proven to be a highly effective means to accrue profit.⁶⁹

When reflecting on the ways in which religious rituals and cultural pursuits might be used to court states of feeling, some historians now argue

that any structural account of the rise of humanitarian sensibility needs to be carefully moderated by an acknowledgment of the ways in which individuals consciously involve themselves in the cultural production and reproduction of emotions. From this perspective, a simple “hydraulic” conception of emotion as propounded by Elias falls considerably short of conveying the extent to which human passions are functionally interrelated with exercises of moral judgment and cultural taste.⁷⁰ At the same time that it is clear that people acquire emotional states through being made subject to many external pressures and constraints on their lives, it is also the case that many take thoughtful actions so as to produce emotions for themselves and to affect others. For this reason Reddy advises that we attend to the ways in which individuals are always to be found working to “navigate” their feelings via the creation of social spaces and cultural artifacts that either increase or diminish the possibility of entering into various forms of emotional experience.⁷¹ On this account, the history of emotions is best explained in terms of the rise and fall of multiple “emotional regimes” in which relative degrees of “emotional suffering” or opportunities for “emotional refuge” have important roles to play within the varieties of emotional life that constitute societies. He also urges social scientists and historians to study records of emotional language and emotional claims on the understanding that, as much as any other considerations, these exemplify the force and experience of power relations within and between societies. While still acknowledging the potential for emotional conditions to be structured by the disciplinary cultures and regimes of state civility or the rise of modern capitalism, Reddy argues that understanding the emotional force of social life requires that we also attend to the ways in which individuals consciously work to fashion symbolic forms of culture as a means to gain entry into states of emotion. He holds that individuals and communities are party to the emotive ordering of their social relationships and that emotions are a necessary part of the cultural currency of movements for social change.

In light of these arguments we might reflect on the extent to which the creation of concepts such as social suffering not only document the arrival of a new compassionate orientation toward human affliction but also serve as part of the process whereby such fellow feeling is culturally constituted. There is no doubt that it is frequently the case that references to social

suffering occur in the context of emotively laden discourse on experiences of misery and pain; or rather, the term is often used to draw attention to circumstances in which people are emotionally preoccupied by adverse social conditions. At the very least, social suffering is always recognized as a form of experience that is liable to involve people in negative emotions; and very often it serves to inspire an impassioned plea for the social alleviation of the conditions under which people are made to suffer.

THE BOUNDS OF SOCIAL SYMPATHY

The word *social* derives from the Latin *socius*, meaning “companion” or “partner.” A new understanding of human sociality is acquired during the eighteenth century. Here references to “social” aspects of life are accompanied by inquiries into the character of moral conscience and the potential for human beings to think and act for the good of others. Social questions are adapted to, and brought within, a new domain of literary and scholarly debate. These are chiefly concerned with understanding the substance of the moral bonds that unite us, and how moral dispositions are expressed through our attitudes and behaviors. Social life is emphatically portrayed as *moral experience*; and it is further assumed that by moral feeling we stand to acquire a vital part of our knowledge of society. On these grounds, it is widely accepted that social dispositions are manifested in the moral outrage experienced in the face of human suffering and that when touched by the miseries of others we are made consciously alert to social bonds. At its origins, the critical impulse that brings debate to the human social condition as such is allied to the conviction that social life is animated by our capacity to sympathize morally with the suffering of others.

This direct association of social life with moral experience also tends to court a great deal of critical and political debate. From the outset, many scholars are inclined to doubt the power of fellow feeling to deliver adequate social understanding, and certainly, there is always a considerable amount of opposition to the view that by force of moral sympathy people can be motivated to think and act on behalf of the welfare of others. In spite of being alert to the fact that we have a propensity to be moved by social sympathy, many are inclined to dwell upon the difficulty of bringing

this to bear on the exercise of moral judgment. For this reason, Sean Gaston argues that one might well characterize the eighteenth century as “a century of extended mourning for the loss of fellow feeling”;⁷² for even among those setting out to extol and defend the “enlightenment of sympathy,” there is a tendency to draw critical attention to its evident weaknesses and excesses.⁷³ Many express a deep ambivalence with regard to the extent to which this operates for the overall benefit of society. At this time social life is often portrayed as inherently inconstant, unstable, and precarious. It may well consist in our sympathetic and sentimental attachments to others; but for this very reason, we are often advised that there may be good cause to worry about the degree to which our social capacities are left morally stunted and underdeveloped.

At the level of philosophical discourse Francis Hutcheson is the first to make direct reference to the phenomenon of “social sympathy,”⁷⁴ though he is not so much concerned to analyze the character of social life as to refute the propositions and arguments raised by Bernard Mandeville (1670–1733) in *The Fable of the Bees* (1723). Mandeville famously argues that human beings are fundamentally selfish. He further claims that those who advocate benevolence as a public virtue, or consider it possible for people to selflessly devote themselves to the care of others, are either ignorant of their true condition or deluded by hypocrisy.⁷⁵ By contrast, Hutcheson aims to develop a more elaborate conception of human beings as possessing “sociable instincts,” “benevolent impulses,” and a “moral sense.”⁷⁶ Here “moral sense” refers to an instinctive capacity to experience and respond to moral events and situations, but it does not provide us with ideas as to what is morally desirable or good. Moral ideas are acquired through our experience of society and culture, and in this regard, it is unlikely that there will ever be complete agreement as to what constitutes appropriate moral action. Hutcheson is merely concerned to defend the possibility that human beings can be motivated by benevolence to act for the good of society and that we possess the potential to discern the moral good “without regard to self-interest.”⁷⁷

David Hume (1711–76), in *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739–40), provides the first analytically refined study of “sympathy” as a social virtue. Having accepted that humans possess a sympathetic disposition that on occasion gives rise to fellow feeling, he aims in this work to make clear the ways in which sympathy serves to produce society.⁷⁸ Hume further

considers the possibility that it is by the power of our sympathetic attachments to others that social solidarities are forged and maintained. He moves from an account of sympathy as a mechanism for sharing in the “passions” of others to consider the possible ways in which it also serves to fashion “an extensive concern for society”;⁷⁹ however, in noting “the partiality of our affections,” he also starts to question the extent to which our social sympathies can serve as an adequate guide to the exercise of moral judgment in social affairs. It appears to Hume, “[I]n the original frame of our mind, our strongest attention is confined to ourselves; our next is extended to our relations and acquaintances; and it is only the weakest which reaches to strangers and indifferent persons. This partiality, then, and unequal affection, must not only have an influence on our behaviour and conduct in society, but even on our ideas of vice and virtue; so as to make us regard any remarkable transgression of such a degree of partiality, either by too great an enlargement, or contraction of the affections, as vicious and immoral.”⁸⁰ Indeed, it seems that in the years between writing his *Treatise* and the publication of *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (1751), Hume was increasingly inclined to dwell upon the limitations and inconsistencies of sympathy when brought to arenas of moral decision, particularly insofar as these concern the overall welfare of society. Although considerable dispute still surrounds the correct way to interpret Hume’s account of sympathy, commentators note that, while retaining an understanding of sympathy as a forceful component of human sociability, in later works he appears more reluctant to invest it with the potential to corral moral opinion for the social good.⁸¹ In this respect, Hume is more prepared to argue for the importance of allowing a social intercourse on “utility” to serve as the primary means to decide what constitutes morally appropriate behavior with regard to the general social interest.⁸²

In *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) Adam Smith returns to the concerns raised by Hume’s *Treatise* but develops a more sophisticated account of the role played by a social imagination in the conversion of sympathy to moral sentiment. A number of commentators are still inclined to treat this as offering some of the subtlest reflections on how people are liable to apply and moderate their feelings in the context of moral judgment.⁸³ On Smith’s account, we are endowed both with an imaginative capacity to empathize with the painful predicaments of others and with an ability to

imagine how others standing at a distance might expect us to behave. He portrays people as always caught up in a complex struggle to moderate their sympathy so as to identify with the needs of individuals in suffering and at the same time have this conform to prevailing opinion on what constitutes morally appropriate feeling and behavior. Social behavior is portrayed as akin to a dramatic public performance; and in this we always act as though under surveillance.⁸⁴ All at once, in the exercise of fellow feeling we also imagine ourselves in the position of being the spectator of our conduct. Smith observes:

We suppose ourselves the spectators of our own behaviour, and endeavour to imagine what effect it would, in this light produce upon us. This is the only looking-glass by which we can, in some measure, with the eyes of other people, scrutinize the propriety of our own conduct. If in this view it pleases us, we are tolerably satisfied. We can be more indifferent about the applause, and, in some measure, despise the censure of the world; secure that, however, misunderstood and misrepresented, we are the natural and proper objects of appropriation. On the contrary, if we are doubtful about it, we are often, upon that very account, more anxious to gain their appropriation, and, provided we have not already, as they say, shaken hands with infamy, we are altogether distracted at the thoughts of their censure, which then strikes us with double severity.⁸⁵

This emphasis on the extent to which moral sentiments and social behaviors are conditioned by anxieties relating to the thought of how we appear to others leads Smith to note a number of ways in which human sympathies are liable to appear strained, fickle, and fleeting. While remaining committed to the view that fellow feeling for the misery of others is an elemental component of our capacity to embrace principles of social justice, he devotes a considerable portion of his thesis to listing common tendencies and behaviors that betray the weaknesses of social sympathy.

Smith shares Hume's concerns about the partiality of our affections and claims that while it is naturally the case that our strongest sympathies are directed toward family members and friends, we also tend to be more benevolently disposed toward the rich and powerful than those living in wretched conditions of poverty. He notes that most of the subjects of tragic and romantic stories belong to the most prosperous and highest-ranking segments of society and on this evidence contends that "the grief that we

[feel] for their distress, the joy which we feel for their prosperity, seem to combine together in enhancing that partial admiration which we naturally conceive both for the station and the character.”⁸⁶ In the final analysis, when advocating the cultivation of a stoical “self-command” as a means to curb the excesses and inconstancies of our passions, Smith appears to operate with a highly skeptical regard for the ways in which sympathy promotes social virtue. Indeed, insofar as his thesis culminates in advice on how to regulate and chasten our passions and feelings, it seems that he does not believe that our “sociability” works in the best interests of society.⁸⁷

Through the second half of the eighteenth century “social sympathy” is the object of an unprecedented amount of moral controversy and political dispute. The “cool” considerations of moral philosophy are transformed into “heated” matters of public debate. While philosophers such as Hume and Smith quietly worried about the extent to which the “partiality” of our affections might detract from our abilities to think and act for the welfare of strangers, by the 1790s it is commonplace for critics to vociferously complain about the social damage caused by the popular indulgence of morbid sensibility.⁸⁸ At least as far as Britain is concerned, the tenor of debate moves from a concern to understand the conditions under which moral sympathy serves to produce the good society to the conviction that by the cultivation of sentimental feelings people may acquire immoral attitudes and engage in acts of political violence.

The 1780s witnessed a hostile literary response to the popularity of sentimental novels.⁸⁹ Here “sentimental” values were condemned on both moral and political grounds. Essayists such as Henry Mackenzie (1745–1831) campaigned against the ways in which the “enthusiasm” for sentimentalism among the “the young and the indolent” contributed to their moral degeneracy by encouraging an “alliance with voluptuousness and vice.”⁹⁰ On Mackenzie’s account, it was now all too clear that in their reading of novels many were inclined to separate conscience from feeling so as to enjoy the latter without any “incitement to virtue.” Such arguments were also repeated by those advancing disparaging views of women and feminine culture. For example, Richard Cumberland argued that one of the serious failings of Samuel Richardson’s *Clarissa* (1748) lies in the extent to which it serves to “lead young female readers into affectation and false character.”⁹¹ Indeed, for this reason, some early campaigners for women’s

rights moved to distance themselves from any association with the enthusiasm for sentimentalism. Most notably, Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–97) expressed grave concerns about the extent to which the portrayal of sentimentalism as “feminine” was used to promote an ideologically motivated conception of women as irrational and incapable of participating in reasoned dispute.⁹²

By 1790 a large number of British journalists and social commentators had joined in the public condemnation of the incitement of moral feeling for social concerns. There is no doubt, however, that the French Revolution of 1789 and subsequent years of war between Britain and France (1793–1815) served to greatly consolidate this critical movement. Through the 1790s there was a marked flight from the advocacy of sentimentality as a virtue, especially in matters of political and philosophical deliberation.⁹³ Many held that the French Revolution had grown out of a culture of “unregulated sentimentality” that was subsequently exploited by Robespierre to initiate the Reign of Terror.⁹⁴ In this regard, when almost two hundred years later Hannah Arendt portrays “the passion of compassion” as “the driving force of revolutionaries” and warns her readers about the propensity for “boundless” sentiments to create an “emotion-laden insensitivity to reality,” she is advancing a point of view that by the turn of the nineteenth century had already settled into political orthodoxy.⁹⁵

The critical debates that were first raised in connection with “social sympathy” might serve as civic virtue were extremely moderate when compared to those provoked by later encounters with sentimentality as an inherently volatile force. The association of the “cult of sensibility” with revolutionary violence seems to be the main cause for its subsequent erasure from ethical discourse and political philosophy. It is important to note, however, that while sentimentalism had fallen out of favor in many literary and intellectual circles, this did not mark the demise of sentimental feeling or the waning powers of social sympathy in lived experience. Quite to the contrary; the problem with sensibility was that it had been revealed as all too inclined to provoke moral dispute, social disquiet, and political unrest.⁹⁶ By no means could “social sympathy” simply be dismissed as a social irrelevance or as holding only negligible human effects; rather, it had been revealed as holding the potential to command the course of events in public affairs. The understanding of humanity as comprising new social

attributes and sentiment-fired humanitarian concerns gave way to further anxieties about the virulence of moral feeling. It was primarily out of a fear that large numbers of people might be persuaded by sheer force of emotion to transgress the bounds of civil society that many sought to disparage the enlightenment of sympathy.

For this reason, early references to experiences of social suffering can be construed as issuing a provocation. Insofar as a motion is made toward our gut response to and moral feelings about the spectacle of human misery, writers such as William Wordsworth are deliberately evoking a popular enthusiasm for matters of social justice and human rights. Wordsworth at one point joins in the moral condemnation of the “degrading thirst after outrageous stimulation” that he witnesses in the popular enjoyment of sentimentalism, but he still works to evoke social sympathy for the plight of the destitute and poor.⁹⁷ Unlike many others, Wordsworth does not renounce the attempt to draw us by force of compassion to “the social question,” and in this regard, he is prepared to take a risk that Arendt deems both futile and dangerous. Wordsworth would yet have us listen to “the still, sad music of humanity,” for he considers it still possible to draw the wit and guile of a sympathetic enlightenment to the task of building more egalitarian and humane forms of society.⁹⁸ Here it is still very much the case that the quest for social understanding remains allied to a cultivation of moral sentiment and, further, to a passion for humanitarian social reform.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

By exploring the social and cultural conditions that first made social suffering a conscious concern, we are drawn into debates that, largely speaking, do not feature in mainstream accounts of the rise of social science. It is commonly held that the origins of Western social science lie in a critical response to the cultural and social upheavals wrought by processes of industrialization and the rise of the modern urban experience. With a focus brought to the origins of social suffering, however, attention is drawn to the extent to which the acquisition of social consciousness is rooted in a transformation of worldviews and moral sensibilities that began some time before the experience of the Industrial Revolution.

We hold that when accounting for the origins of social thought and the earliest articulations of a distinct politics of social life we should be especially concerned to acquaint ourselves with the intellectual culture of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and in particular, with the ways in which this documents and reflects changes in popular interpretations of, responses to, and feelings for human suffering. In order to gather an appreciation for the full scale and range of the issues at stake here we must (once again) work at understanding how the possibility of thinking about ourselves in social terms was made plausible and gathered legitimacy in relation to transformations in theological conviction. We must also cultivate a historical sensitivity to the ways in which our social constitution and the cultural awareness of ourselves as social beings are rooted in the acquisition of forms of moral experience and fellow feeling in which the spectacle of extreme human misery is met as an occasion for questioning the social responsibilities we bear to care for and alleviate the suffering of others.

A new humanitarian social imaginary is at work in the awakening of the impulse to make social life an object for rational inquiry and critical debate; and there is still much that remains to be explained here in terms of the sociological and historical account of its cultural formation, moral appeal, and political consequences. Some of these issues are explored in more detail in the chapters that follow. Our overriding interest, however, is the implications this holds for the practice of social inquiry. Indeed, we contend that in recognizing the extent to which social understanding is acquired and shaped through our moral feelings about human suffering, it is very likely that we shall be made to question the meaning and value of the “the social” anew and how this is rendered as an object for research.

With a focus brought to problems of social suffering, we are involved in a critical reappraisal of what passes for “social understanding.” In this perspective, social life is understood to take place in enactments of substantive human values and to consist in moral experience. By working to understand its constitution as such, those invested in social inquiry are set to attend to how and why social life matters so much *for people*. When documenting instances of social suffering, the problem of understanding how people are made to experience the social conditions they embody is an issue of paramount concern.

Here social research in practice operates from the recognition that social understanding is acquired and sustained through human empathy and moral encounter. This requires us to be involved in, and court connections to, real-life human-social concerns that are often highly distressing. It requires that we involve ourselves in many of the moral anxieties, intellectual tensions, and political conflicts that accompany such circumstances under the conviction that, thereby, it is made possible for us to acquire a better understanding of people in human-social terms. It is only when we venture into the fray of social life as moral experience that the possibility of social understanding is brought within our reach. In this regard, the practice of social research is inherently moral; it involves us in ties of social responsibility in which we bear a duty of care for others. It is also bound to be political. Where this is denied or hidden from view, it is not only the case that a veil is cast over the human experience of social life, but also that “the social” is obscured as a pressing human concern.

Such convictions and points of emphasis are bound to court dispute with much that presents itself as good “social science.” It is certainly the case, moreover, that they involve us in a radical questioning of the conventional ways in which the history of social inquiry is recorded, accounted for, and appraised. By setting problems of social suffering as a core concern for research, we are made to reflect on the ideological bearings of favored approaches to documenting and writing about social life. By bringing a focus to the harms done to people and the hurts we inflict on one another, it is very likely that we shall be made attentive to the extent to which social life takes place as an enactment of asymmetrical power relations; and here postures of value-neutrality and/or standpoints of “professional distance” are set to be exposed as more than mere instances of bad faith; they are also counted as potential forms of violence. In this regard, both in its history and in its contemporary developments, the conduct of social science is made an urgent matter for moral inquiry and political debate.