Sympathy in a Pandemic, or the Correspondence of Human Souls

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On May 26, 2020, the iconic German theater company Berliner Ensemble tweeted a photo of their house seating arrangement for the 2020-2021 theatrical season with the tweet "new reality: this is what it will look like in the Big House next season."[1] The photo showed part of the main auditorium with every other row removed, with two seats removed between each seat or seat pairs. The 128-year-old theater at Schiffbauerdamm's regular seating capacity of 700 reduced to 200, the difference in ticket pricing to be hopefully made up in government arts support. Other potential changes include plays with no intermission, though spectators would be permitted to get up to use the restroom at any time during the performance, to avoid long lines during a collective break. After the tweet went viral, currently with over 3,000 "likes," and the photo shared across media outlets, artistic director Oliver Reese assured the public that the changed seating and other alternate measures were temporary, as a means of allowing live theater to be flexible in its response to the continuing public health crisis.

The fact that the company is the Berliner Ensemble makes the announcement momentous in more ways than one. The Berliner Ensemble was founded by Bertolt Brecht, arguably the most important theater theorist and practitioner of the twentieth century, whose epic theater is predicated on a performance theory that requires the audience to never forget that they are watching a performance, that we are watching a representation not reality itself. In some ways, Brecht would love this change: the coronavirus has forced us to confront our assumptions about

how theater is supposed to work, the assumptions that allow us to "lose ourselves" in the play and ignore the circumstances surrounding the production.

We are now challenged with re-imagining the relationship between physical bodies in theatrical spaces in the most drastic way since arguably the nineteenth-century, when the lights were darkened in the house and hid the spectators from each other through the bright lights on stage. The effect of "forgetting" that was desired for stage realism and rejected by Brecht was impossible for the eighteenth-century theater, where actors and spectators were equally visible, especially before David Garrick ended the practice of seating patrons onstage in the 1760s. The early eighteenth century's self-conscious spectatorship helps account for the importance of the theater for the Enlightenment theorization of sympathy. Theater was used both as a metaphor for explaining the workings of sympathy, a key rhetorical move for Adam Smith, and also as a space where sympathetic exchange frequently occurred, bringing spectators into the state that Lord Kames called "ideal presence" that facilitated the process of shared feeling.

Spectators are once again visible, if only metaphorically at this moment. Here, David Hume describes the effect of the live performance experience:

A man who enters the theatre, is immediately struck with the view of so great a multitude, participating of one common amusement; and experiences, from their very aspect, a superior sensibility or disposition of being affected with every sentiment, which he shares with his fellow-creatures.

He observes the actors to be animated by the appearance of a full audience, and raised to a degree of enthusiasm, which they cannot command in any solitary or calm moment.

Every movement of the theatre, by a skilful [sic] poet, is communicated, as it were by magic, to the spectators; who weep, tremble, resent, rejoice, and are inflamed with all the variety of passions, which actuate the several personages of the drama.

Where any event crosses our wishes, and interrupts the happiness of the favourite characters, we feel a sensible anxiety and concern. But where their sufferings proceed from the treachery, cruelty of an enemy, our breasts are affected with the liveliest resentments against the author of these calamities.[2]

The man's observations of the actors and spectators becomes a "we," emphasizing what Jean Marsden describes as the "mutuality of theatrical experience."[3] The poet needs the actors to enliven the passions, the actors are animated by the spectators, and the spectators share each other's feelings to heighten their emotional experience. But the passive voice leaves the agency around this spread of emotion vague. How is the movement communicated? How are the passions inflaming us? What is affecting our breasts? In Hume's conception of sympathy, emotion spreads between individuals like a virus, becoming all the stronger in the theater as so many bodies come together.

Humean sympathy has been described as a contagion, in contrast to Smith's sympathetic projection, and this metaphor given new urgency in the COVID-19 era.[4] The spread of Humean sympathy is like viruses first detectable by its symptoms, which are "converted into an impression" by the sympathizer, producing in them "an equal emotion, as any original affection."[5] Any attempt at controlling this process is futile: "When by my will alone I can stop the blood, as it runs with impetuosity along its canals, then may I hope to change the course of my sentiments and passions."[6] Like the airborne coronavirus, when another man approaches he

"diffuses on me all his opinions," and no matter how slight this contact may be, "it is seldom so weak as not to disturb the easy course of my thought."[7]

Hume's sympathy showed the porousness of our bodies about a hundred and fifty years before the discovery of viruses. Depending on your frame of mind, it is either situational irony or poetic justice that in this current moment, where isolationist and far-right ideologies have infiltrated governments in the US, UK, Italy, Turkey, Hungary, and others, a virus has reminded us of the fragility of bodies and of the inadequacy of national borders in a truly global culture. Even as many reactionaries have doubled-down on these imaginative but politically powerful boundaries, COVID-19 has shown how the globalization and migration genies cannot be put back into their lamps. In my scholarship, I argue that Britain's growing imperial power in the eighteenth century gave sympathy in the theater an ambivalent value: what does sharing our feelings mean when our contact with strangers is expanding?

While the pandemic has revealed the large-scale failures of various governments and the eradication of the social safety net in the United States and elsewhere, the virus spreads on a smaller scale: from person to person, through our relationships with family, friends, acquaintances, and strangers. I think of how for Hume sympathy comes from the "close and intimate…correspondence of human souls."[8] This communicative disease shows we cannot choose to be isolated individuals; our bodies connect us to one another whether we like it or not. The picture of the Schiffbauerdamm's spaced-out seats paradoxically didn't emphasize for me an increased distance between spectators necessitated by the threat of viral contagion. Hume turned to drama to think about sympathy because the performance is both live and communal. That part of the experience hasn't changed since the eighteenth-century, and while modern epidemiology

has changed our understanding of the risks of spectatorship, Hume's sympathy offers us an older

model for the possibilities of fellow-feeling while participating in theater.

NOTES

[1] Berliner Ensemble (@blnensemble, "neue Realität: so wird es ab nächster Spielzeit im Großen Haus aussehen. #BEsonders2021," Twitter, 26 May 2020, 7:06 a.m. https://twitter.com/blnensemble/status/1265283083944824835?s=20

[2] David Hume, *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. Tom L. Beauchamp (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 39.

[3] Jean Marsden, *Theatres of Feeling: Affect, Performance, and the Eighteenth-Century Stage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 26.

[4] Samuel Fleischacker, "Sympathy in Hume and Smith: A Contrast, Critique, and Reconstruction," in *Intersubjectivity and Objectivity in Adam Smith and Edmund Husserl*, ed. Christel Fricke and Dagfinn Føllesdal (Heusenstamm: Ontos, 2012), 273-311.

[5] Hume, *A Treatise on Human Nature*, ed. L.A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 317.

[6] Hume, "The Epicurean," in *Essays: Moral, Political, and Literary*, ed. Eugene F. Miller (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1985) 140.

[7] Hume, *Treatise,* 592.

[8] Ibid.