1 Philosophies of Sympathy

Scholars have often emphasised the involvement of the discourses of sensibility and sentimental philanthropy with the realm of the political. As Markman Ellis argues, the sentimental novel was a means of moulding the emotions of the reader, as well as addressing urgent political issues of the time, such as social injustice and slavery. The sentimental novel’s articulation of such concerns was an attempt to reformulate social attitudes to inequality through the cultivation of humanitarianism and sensibility.¹

According to R.F. Brissenden, the French Revolution put into practice the humanitarian ideals grounded in the belief that man’s capacity to act morally is related to his physical and psychological responsiveness to the impulses around him, that is, his sensibility. A belief existed that if individuals could freely exercise their natural sensibilities, they would act in a philanthropic spirit. Such ideas, as Brissenden writes, could serve as the basis for the launch of the Revolution, a general plea for human rights, the movements for the elimination of torture, and the abolition of slavery.² However, such a belief in the ideology of sentimental philanthropy was shaken by the end of the century. This attitude is well illustrated by the attacks of the Anti-Jacobin, a Tory satirical review of the 1790s. George Canning, one of its authors, writes critically of the Goddess of Sensibility:

Mark her fair Votaries — Prodigal of Grief,
With cureless pangs, and woes that mock relief,
Droop in soft sorrow o’er a faded flow’r;
O’er a dead Jack-Ass pour the pearly show’r; —
But hear unmov’d of Loire’s ensanguin’d flood,
Chok’d up with slain; — of Lyons drench’d in blood;
Of crimes that blot the Age, the World with shame,
Foul crimes, but sicklied o’er with Freedom’s name [. . .]³
Canning’s untitled poem is published in the same issue of the *Anti-Jacobin* as Gillray’s famous caricature, ‘The New Morality’, which depicts the Goddess of Sensibility crying over a dead bird with a volume of Rousseau in her hand, while resting one foot on the decapitated head of Louis XVI.4

The multilayered flip side of human altruism was continuously critiqued and dissected throughout the eighteenth century, and the scepticism regarding the cult of sensibility was frequently targeted at its core values: benevolence, sympathy, pity, and similar forms of other-regarding sentiment. On the one hand, many accused philanthropic impulses of operating selectively, according to the dictates of one’s interests.5 In Marivaux’s novel *The Fortunate Peasant* (1735), for instance, the humanitarian acts of the ambitious protagonist, Jacob, are motivated by self-interest. He demonstrates sympathy in the presence of women who can help his career but heartlessly abandons Genevieve, the poor servant girl who would hinder his social advancement.6 The selective operation of sympathy became an urgent political issue after the French Revolution. The conservative attacks by Canning and Gillray imply that the values of sentimentalism allowed one to shed tears over the trivial whilst neglecting the larger, social tragedy brought about by the ideology of sensibility. Interestingly however, while the lack of sympathy was perceived as morally problematic, the excess of disinterested feeling was also seen as threatening to the integrity of self and society. Throughout the eighteenth century, a number of literary writers (including Sarah Fielding, Henry Mackenzie, Oliver Goldsmith and Mary Wollstonecraft) voiced concerns about the consequences of other-regarding feelings operating impulsively and irrespective of who their object really is. Excessive sympathy, they thought, could bring poverty and destruction to the man and woman of feeling. The study of sensibility in the field of medical science also reveals the ambivalent relationship between sensibility and moral feeling. Albrecht von Haller, the Swiss physiologist, defined the sensibility of the body in 1752 by dissecting and tormenting live animals, while claiming to feel for them the strongest compassion. Many puzzling instances of fellow-feeling in the period testify that the ethical foundations of sensibility were based on concepts and theories that were curiously Janus-faced. In the discourse of the benevolent, philanthropist ideology that sensibility builds upon, what makes it possible for such problems and dilemmas to emerge?

This chapter will explore how enlightenment concepts of sympathy evolved in a way that made it possible for such diverse and often-contradictory critiques to be voiced in the eighteenth century. The chapter deals with the two-sided, uncanny nature of sympathy by