

The Political Significance of Compassion

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This PhD research project on the political significance of compassion, and more specifically the way in which compassion can be mobilised to found a sense of collective purpose in society by drawing on the moral sensibilities in the broader culture, derives from a longstanding interrogation about how to deal with, and overcome, division and the negation of a shared humanity that flows from the construction of otherness and essentialized identities. Having experienced the wars in ex-Yugoslavia and witnessed the de-humanization of the Other that was both their cause and consequence, the project slowly matured to work out a political-philosophical framework that would move from abstract cosmopolitanism - which asserts common humanity, shared destiny and equal moral worth, but often tragically fails to generate adhesion - towards a sensitive understanding of these ethical and existential truths capable of being mobilized to effectuate social change.

Starting from Adam Smith's insights in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* on the inherent sensibility of people to the "fortunes of others", and building on Martha C. Nussbaum's work on emotions (Nussbaum, 2001), this research aims to show how compassion - the faculty to imaginatively dwell, experience and feel with others - can serve as a foundation for a universalistic understanding of civil and political society tending towards the normative frontier of human solidarity. This presents serious difficulties inasmuch as compassion is often loosely (mis)understood as coterminous with pity, empathy, mercy or charity, a blending of meanings that obscures its distinctiveness as a concept and its power as a building block for the political-philosophical aim of living the good life, with and for others, under just institutions (Ricoeur, 1990). Compassion, etymologically derived from the Hebrew *rahamin* (the trembling womb of a birthing mother), and the Latin *com passio* (to suffer or experience with) flows from the human condition in its dual dimension as a social condition (human beings are social beings inextricably bound to the fate of others) and an existential condition (we are all individually confronted, if to different degrees, to suffering, and universally to death).

Compassion is thus prior to morals and ethics, for which it forms the foundation. It constitutes the inner core of moral motivation and gives the impulse to selfless action, to the movement towards others that properly defines solidarity. As Schopenhauer stresses, the moral value of an action flows precisely from compassion, the compassionate self feeling with the other, whose suffering is felt as one's own. The only genuinely moral act is the one that flows from compassion (Schopenhauer, 2000).

This sets compassion apart from empathy and tolerance, the first of which implies identification with others' emotions, the second the acceptance of difference for the sake of social and political peace and stability. While unquestionably important in societies inevitably segmented into different communities, tolerance cannot found a positive project aiming for the good life. Compassionate co-experiencing and co-suffering, by way of contrast, presupposes a sense of shared humanity, of being-with-others, and therefore contains the seeds of what I shall call a sensitive cosmopolitan project.

Compassion and the political

There has been little work done on the application of compassion to public and societal issues, and more generally to politics. Most of the work focusing on compassion has been in religion and psychology, with scant attention paid to its wider socio-political implications. One of the reasons for this is that dominant understandings of politics are founded on positivist readings of instrumental rationality, dismissing emotion and subjectivity in favour of a distant objectified gaze or, in the case of political realists, asserting the insuperability of conflict based on contradictory interests. Yet even a sceptic such as Hannah Arendt, who understandably feared the intrusion and the instrumenting of emotion in mass politics, recognized the still greater life-threatening danger of the bureaucratic rationality that accompanied the totalitarian violence of the twentieth century. This ambivalence raises the question of the proper place of emotion in politics (and the classes of emotion that we are dealing with).

This thesis aims to disentangle compassion from the plural emotions and commotions of the public and private spheres and give it political content by arguing that it founds moral reasoning and a sense of social responsibility that aims for the common good. By its very ubiquitousness and immediacy as a lived universal experience (as Smith notes “*even the greatest ruffian, the most hardened violator of the laws of society, is not altogether without it*”), compassion opens a pathway to breaking out of the Hobbesian assumption of competitive and clashing self-interests, and moving towards a collective project of living with and for others that starts from the foundational assumption that human beings are ends not means (Kant), and consciously asserts and acts on the harmony of interests (Amartya Sen, among others, has drawn on Smith in this regard in his own work on human capacity building).

The problem here, as with cosmopolitan theory more generally, is that the ability to imaginatively dwell in and be with others is limited by various socially constructed segmentations that cannot be overcome simply by abstract theorizing. The most immediate issue is that compassion and effective solidarity tend to dissipate with distance (constructed alienness due to representations of difference). Rousseau noted that kings do not feel compassion for their subjects since they do not experience the common conditions of their lives. Even if there is an abstract understanding of the equal worth of all human beings, derived from the moral teachings of the major religions and secular philosophies that assert such equality, that abstract understanding of shared humanity does not translate readily into compassion or indeed altruism towards others: the intensity of compassion weakens as one moves from family to community, from community to the *imagined community* of the nation (Anderson), and thence to humanity as a whole. It is for that reason that Kwame Anthony Appiah suggests a partial cosmopolitanism that takes these “social facts” into account yet strives towards the normative frontier (Appiah, 2007). Compassion and solidarity, as seen tragically in the current migratory crisis in Europe, most often stop abruptly at national borders.

Therefore, my research aim is to rigorously found the argument that the care of “distant” human beings is paramount, taking compassion out of its individual context and expanding it to a broader social context. I will argue that compassion is a proper concern of the public realm, of politics, and that it can be mobilized to found a common project (in contrast to a minimalist ethics of tolerance, which may make social life tolerable but does not make it good).

The politics of compassion is premised on a moral cosmopolitanism that allows for difference but asserts the prior conditions of commonality and universal needs. Constructing a politics of compassion for the good life also, of course, requires just institutions. Compassion is not a substitute for justice. Its relationship to justice is of a complementary nature, as are justice and beneficence in Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. As Smith writes: "*Beneficence is always free, it cannot be extorted by force*". It may be wanting, in his words, or in insufficient supply, but when it is present it is a free and positive affirmation of the common good. The law, founded on coercive power, protects specified and delimited rights (freedoms and limits to freedoms), and justice dictates (in the ideal) the equality of all before the law. The two become articulated in the process of building a citizenship that upholds just institutions normatively geared towards the common good (solidarity).

This implies an active and purposeful mobilization of compassion and making it into a political and social concept, not remitting it to those rare moments of moral shock that briefly unify society when an unexpected event generates sufficient moral indignation to move people into collective action (for instance mass terrorist incidents or the televised deaths of immigrants off the shores of Europe).

Compassion implies tapping into the sympathetic and imaginative consciousness of people and giving life to the ethical principles that derive from the common destiny. Co-experiencing and co-suffering then is transfigured into a positive project: not merely offering assistance or alleviating suffering but acting to construct a living together that makes us live lives "we have reason to value" (Sen, 2000), thereby sustaining social cohesion through active involvement in the promotion of the collective and individual good. Compassion can in this sense serve to revitalize the commitment to fairness and equality.

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