

# Compassion: Ethics, Religion, and Philosophy



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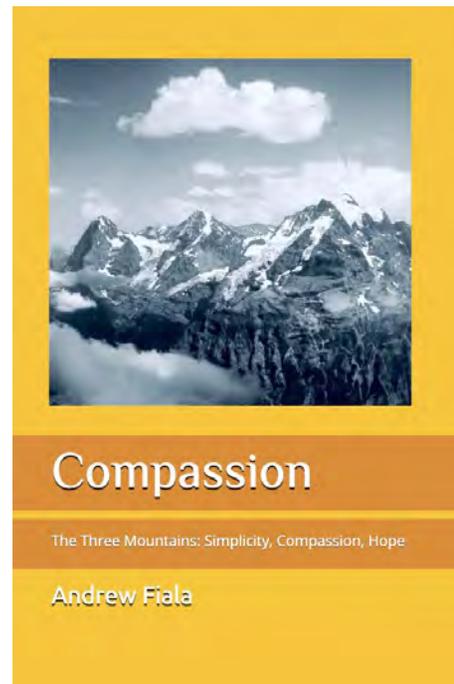
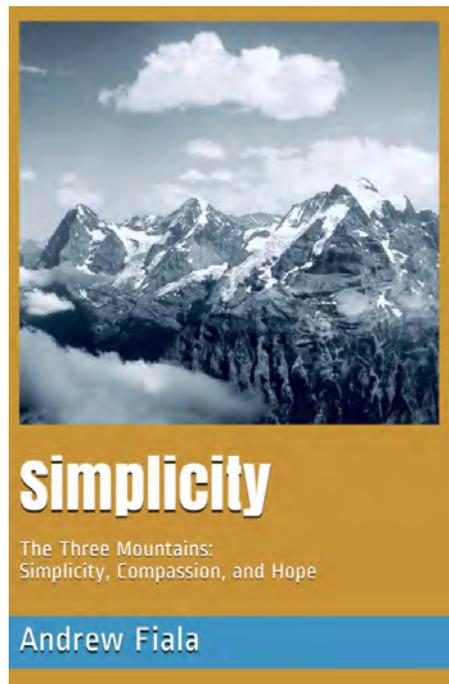
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## The Ethics Center

<http://www.fresnostate.edu/artshum/ethicscenter/>

- Facebook: @FresnoEthicsCenter
- Youtube Videos:  
<https://www.youtube.com/user/EthicsCenterFSU/videos>
- May 4, 5pm: Panel on Violence against Asian Americans
  - With the Institute for Media and Public Trust
  - Will hire a new student assistant

# The Three Mountains



There are three mountains:  
Simplicity, compassion, and hope.  
Explore them and you will live well.  
(Tao Te Ching, #67)

## *Simplicity*

Wander in simplicity and blend in with  
the vastness .

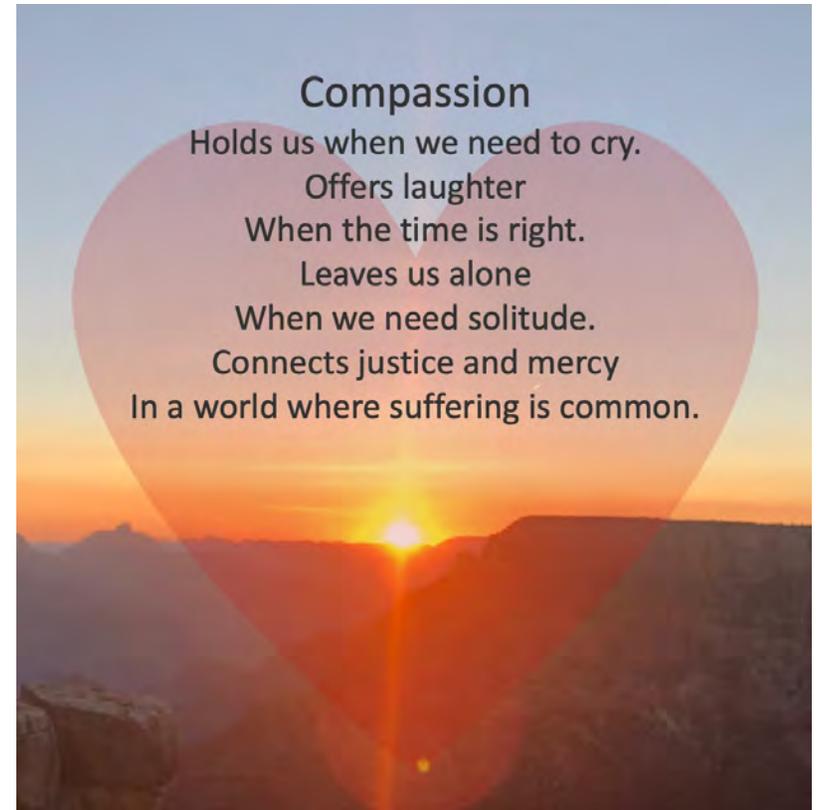
Chuang Tzu

## *Compassion*

The more you give, the more you have  
Lao Tzu

# Issues, Ideas, Concerns

- Difficulty of Defining Compassion
  - empathy, kindness, love, etc.
- Difficulty of compassion within Western Ethics
  - Vs. Justice/Duty
- Challenge/Problem of Negativity
  - Compassion as melancholic
- Challenge/Problem of Relativism
  - The *Eudaimonistic* Judgment and Intrusive Compassion
  - Rival Traditions of Compassion?
- Structural Compassion?
- Cosmopolitan Compassion?



# Fiala On Compassion: Fresno Bee, April 4, 2021

<https://www.fresnobee.com/living/liv-columns-blogs/andrew-fiala/article250369106.html>

- Compassion is celebrated by most of the world's moral traditions. Compassion is the source of human connection. Some think it even goes beyond that. Pope Francis once said that compassion is the language of God. But philosophers worry that compassion is too passive, subjective and melancholic.
- Melancholic compassion is only half of the story. Compassion is also at play in laughter and love-making. Compassion shares joy as well as tears.
- Compassion is only melancholic when it is confused with pity. Pity dwells in the negative. We don't pity people who are doing well. Pity is reserved for the suffering.
- The philosopher Immanuel Kant warned against pity. Compassionate pity can "infect" us with the suffering of others, he said. If I suffer because another person is suffering, the result is simply more suffering.

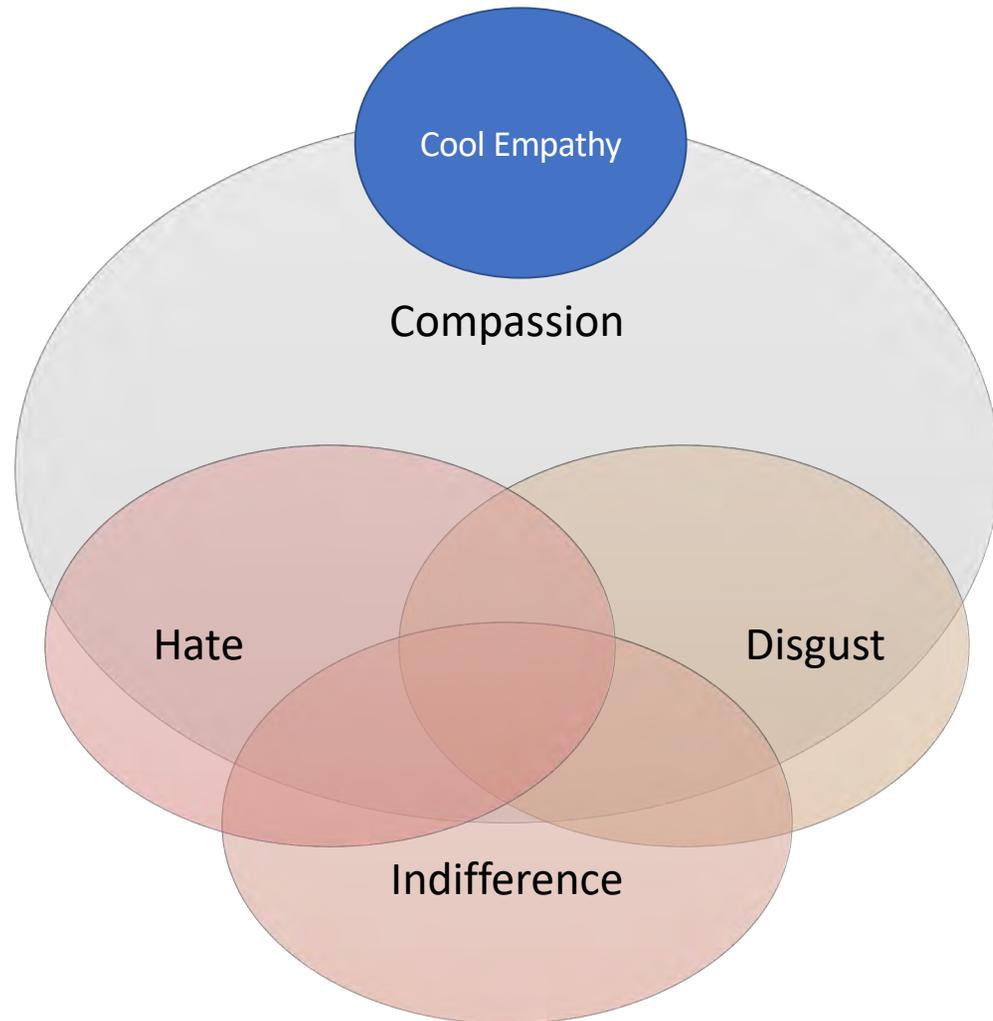
## Fiala On Compassion: Fresno Bee, April 4, 2021

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- A further problem occurs when compassion becomes intrusive. Sometimes we want companionship in our suffering. We cry better (and laugh better) in the company of friends. But sometimes, we simply want to be left alone.
- Of course, compassionate people understand all of this. Truly compassionate people have a knack for knowing what is needed. They hold us when we need to cry. They offer laughter when the time is right. They leave us alone when we need solitude. And they try to connect justice and mercy in a world where suffering is common.

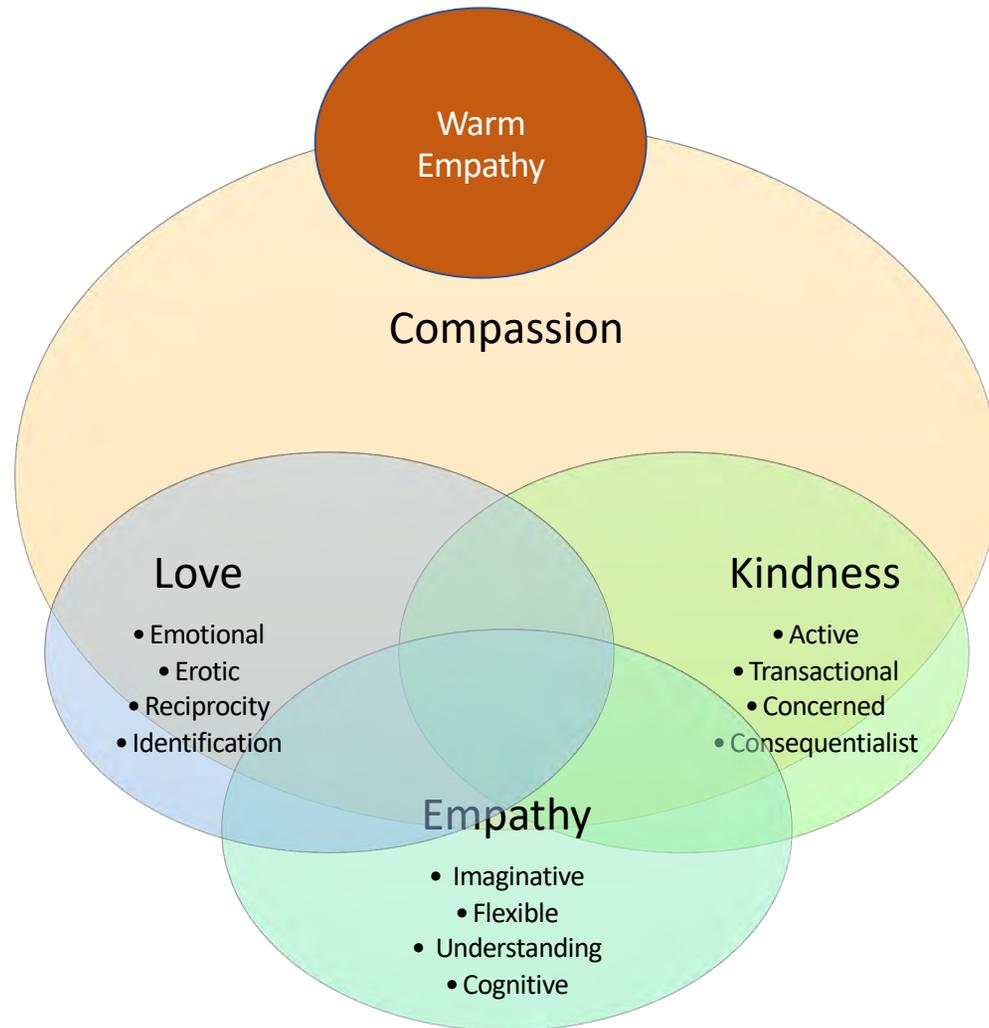
# Compassion and its others

- Drawing boundaries around the self
- Resisting broader social relation and identification
- Narrow self-other identification/relation = us v. them
- Malice/Repugnance
- Cold, Close-Minded, Apathetic, Bored, Disinterested



# Compassion and its brothers

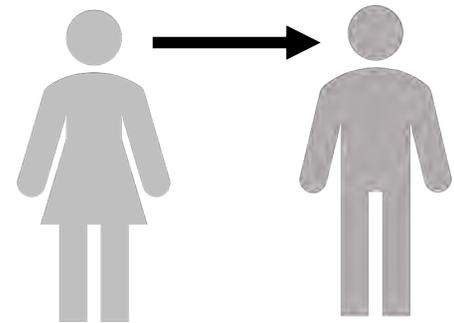
- Expanding the relational identity of the self
- Welcoming, Hospitable, Curious
- Open group identification = us and them
- Goodwill, Kindness
- Warm, Open-Minded, energetic, involved, imaginative



# One (supposed) difference between empathy and compassion

- Empathy is morally neutral

- I understand what the other is experience
- But I might ultimately approve it, disapprove it, ignore it
- Understanding/Recognition/Seeing/Listening
- Passive Receptivity
- “Feeling with” the other (alongside them)
- Seeing/Understanding



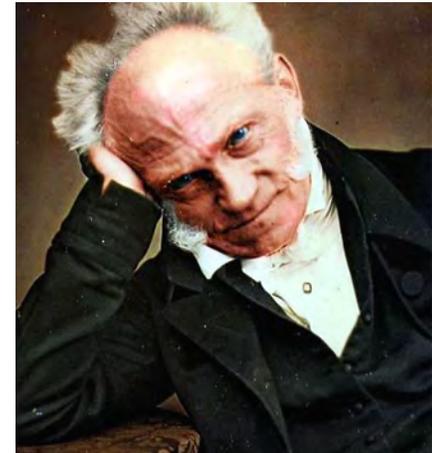
- Compassion is morally engaged

- I suffer with the other
- And I feel compelled to act to help
- Caring/Sharing/Accompanying/Embracing
- Active Interaction
- “Feeling for” the other (or towards them)
- Sympathetic/Responsive



# Schopenhauer: Metaphysical Mystery of Compassion (*The Basis of Morality*, 1840)

- The fundamental springs of all human conduct (v. Chapter V. of this Part), are three:
  - Egoism, Malice, Compassion.
- Kind acts?
  - To help oneself, to vex another, to help another
- My motive is egoistic as soon as it is anything other than the purely objective desire of simply knowing, without any ulterior purpose, that my neighbor is helped.
- To a certain extent I have become identified with the other, and consequently that the barrier between the ego and the non-ego is, for the moment, broken down.
- This process is, I repeat, **mysterious**. For it is one which Reason can give no direct account of, and its causes lie outside the field of experience.



**Arthur  
Schopenhauer  
1788-1869**

## Martha Nussbaum

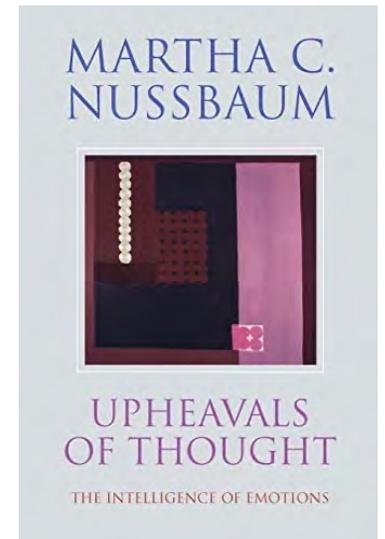
### Shared vulnerability within *Eudaimonistic Judgment*

1. You believe that the suffering of the other is serious and not trivial
2. You believe that the person does not deserve to suffer
3. You believe that you understand what their suffering is like
4. You believe that you can suffer as well

“Compassion is a painful emotion occasioned by the awareness of another person’s underserved misfortune.”



Martha Nussbaum  
(b. 1947)



Martha Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions*  
(Cambridge, 2001)

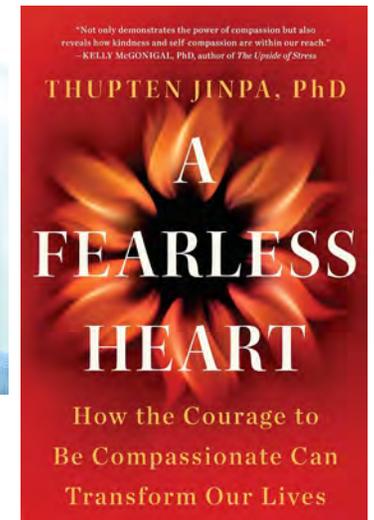
# Thupten Jinpa

## Compassion Energizes and Connects

- “When we feel kind and compassionate toward someone, when we are connected with another’s pains and needs, we feel most alive as human beings. We feel energized...”
- In the midst of compassion we are stripped of all the categories and labels that we have constructed about ourselves to individuate us from others, and our humanity is revealed.”
- “At its core, compassion is a response to the inevitable reality of our human condition—our experience of pain and sorrow.”



Thupten Jinpa  
(b. 1958)



*A Fearless Heart: How the Courage to Be Compassionate Can Transform Our Lives*  
(Penguin 2015)

# Dalai Lama

## Compassion is reasonable, universal altruism

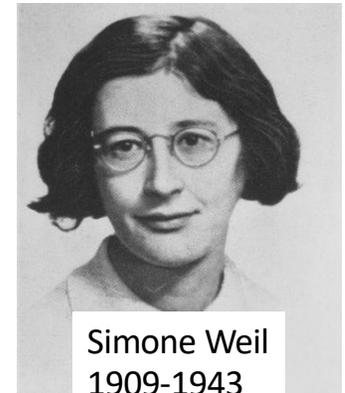
- True compassion is not just an emotional response but a firm commitment founded on reason.
- Whether people are beautiful and friendly or unattractive and disruptive, ultimately they are human beings, just like oneself. Like oneself, they want happiness and do not want suffering.
- Furthermore, their right to overcome suffering and be happy is equal to one's own. Now, when you recognize that all beings are equal in both their desire for happiness and their right to obtain it, you automatically feel empathy and closeness for them. Through accustoming your mind to this sense of universal altruism, you develop a feeling of responsibility for others: the wish to help them actively overcome their problems.

- <https://www.dalailama.com/messages/compassion-and-human-values/compassion>



# Simone Weil: Compassion Annihilates, Pulverizes and Connects us to God

- The suffering all over the world obsesses and overwhelms me to the point of annihilating my faculties.
  - Simone Weil, "Letter to Maurice Schumann, 1942", Simone Weil, *Seventy Letters*.
- Compassion is the recognition of one's own misery in another. Recognition of one's own misery in the affliction of someone else.
- Compassion alone makes it possible to contemplate affliction. Being pulverized by one's own affliction, one is unable to contemplate it; and someone else's affliction is only seen as affliction if one feels compassion for it.
- Compassion is what spans this abyss which creation has opened between God and the creature.
- It is the rainbow.



# Pope Francis:

Compassion is the Language of God

Indifference is the language of human beings

- Compassion allows you to see reality; compassion is like the lens of the heart: it allows us to take in and understand the true dimensions. In the Gospels, Jesus is often moved by compassion. And compassion is also the language of God.
- Our God is a God of compassion, and compassion - we can say - is the weakness of God, but also His strength.
- If compassion is the language of God, so often human language is that of indifference.

- <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope-francis/mass-casa-santa-marta/2019-09/pope-francis-homily-casa-santa-marta-compassion.html>



# A Distinction? Buddhist v. Christian

- Christian love mediated through God
  - Love God and your neighbor
  - Loving God through loving your neighbor
  - A gift of grace: from God
- Buddhist compassion achieved by recognition of common suffering
  - Emptiness and non-self—lead to compassion
  - Compassion leads to insight of emptiness and non-self
  - An insight/capacity developed through practice



NO SELF



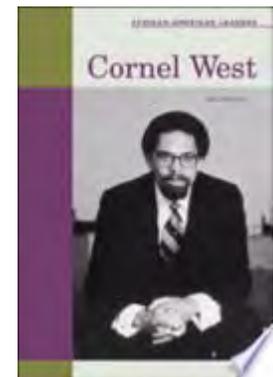
NO PROBLEM

# Cornel West: Socrates vs. Jesus Getting muddy

- Socrates didn't have as much compassion as he should have. He was arrogant. He never cries. He never sheds one tear. Jesus wept. That's a big difference. People who never cry never love deeply. Socrates lived too much in the mind. Questioning is very important, but you have to wed the spirituality of questioning with the spirituality of loving, and if they don't go hand in hand, you're missing something.
- We're all in the muck and mud together. We're all in the funk together.
  - Cornel West in Morrison, *Cornel West* (interviews)



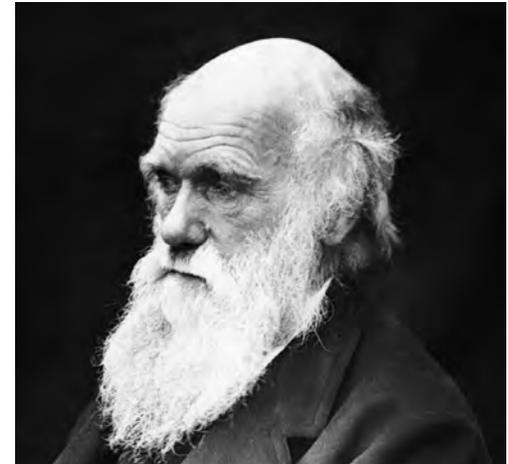
Cornel West  
b. 1953



## Evolution of Compassion

### Darwin on “Sympathy” (*Descent of Man 1871*)

- In however complex a manner this feeling may have originated, as it is one of high importance to all those animals which aid and defend one another, it will have been increased through natural selection; for those communities which included the greatest number of the most sympathetic members would flourish best, and rear the greatest number of offspring.



Charles Darwin  
1809-1882

# The Evolution of Compassion

- Compassion evolved as a distinct affective experience whose primary function is to facilitate cooperation and protection of the weak and those who suffer.
- Compassion emerged, this reasoning holds, as a distinct affective state and trait because it enhances the welfare of vulnerable offspring, because it is a desirable emotion or attribute in mate selection processes, and because it enables cooperative relations with non-kin.
  - Jennifer Goetz, et al. "Compassion: an evolutionary analysis and empirical review." *Psychological bulletin* (2010)



## Compassionate Brain?

One source: Oxytocin

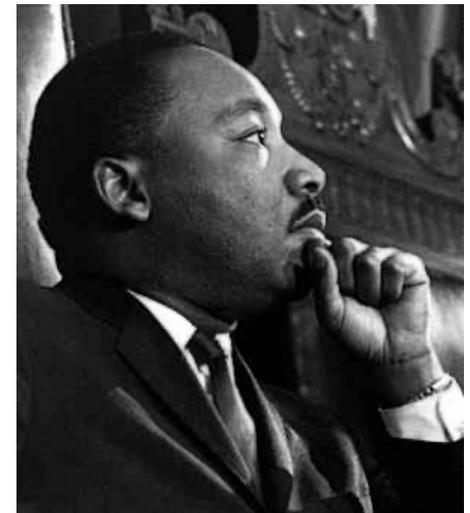
Released in breastfeeding, touch, tears, and laughter

Also released when we witness acts of compassion

SO: compassion is contagious

# MLK: Structural Interpretation of the Good Samaritan

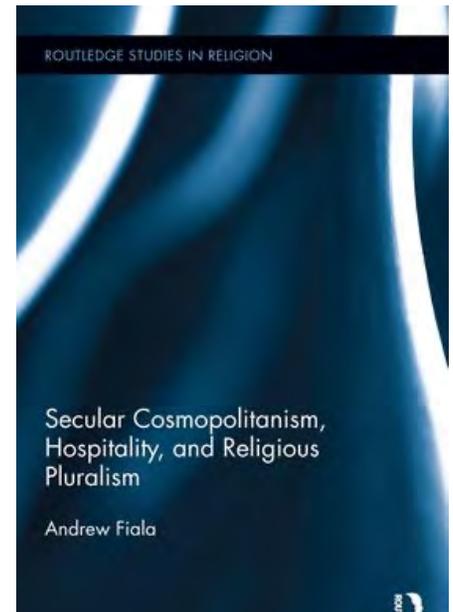
- On the one hand, we are called to play the Good Samaritan on life's roadside, but that will be only an initial act. One day we must come to see that the whole Jericho Road must be transformed so that men and women will not be constantly beaten and robbed as they make their journey on life's highway.
- True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar. It comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring.
- Here is the true meaning and value of compassion and nonviolence, when it helps us to see the enemy's point of view, to hear his questions, to know his assessment of ourselves. For from his view we may indeed see the basic weaknesses of our own condition, and if we are mature, we may learn and grow and profit from the wisdom of the brothers who are called the opposition.
  - Martin Luther King, Jr., "Beyond Vietnam" April 4, 1967



# Cosmopolitan Compassion

## Fiala, *Secular Cosmopolitanism*

- Cosmopolitanism is curious and compassionate: it inquires and engages, hoping to understand and embrace at least part of the amazing plurality of human experience.
- The imperative of hospitality is this: open your doors to strangers and welcome them into your home. Related to this is a close corollary: be a good guest. Good hosts and good guests are curious and compassionate without being critical. A cosmopolitan can be at home anywhere, provided she is curious, compassionate, and uncritical.



# Conclusions/Questions



- Problems defining compassion
  - Negative (melancholic) compassion vs. Compassionate abundance
  - Empathy/Indifference
- Multiple Sources with Conflicting Ideas
  - Christian vs. Buddhist
- Structural Issues
  - “compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar”
- How far should the circle of compassion extend?
  - Local vs. Cosmopolitan
  - Animals?
  - Enemies?

