



Compassion

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April 6, 13, 20, 27
3 - 4:30 p.m

1

Course Plan and Outline

- April 6: Introduction: *The Three Mountains*. The Problem of defining compassion, love, and other emotions. The critique of compassion. Application: Intrusive Compassion.
- April 13: Compassion, mercy, forgiveness, and justice. Theological Implications. Social justice and distributive justice. Applications: racial justice, immigration, etc.
- April 20: How far does compassion extend? Cosmopolitan compassion and the expanding circle. Application: nonhuman animals.
- April 27: Problem: "compassion fatigue." Self-compassion. Stimulating compassion. Nature, Art, Literature, and Religion. Application: education/training for compassion.

2

Simone Weil: Compassion Annihilates

- “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.
 - Weil, *First and Last Notebooks: Supernatural Knowledge*



Simone Weil
1909-1943

3

Nussbaum: Belief Conditions of Compassion

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

Ways to be mistaken

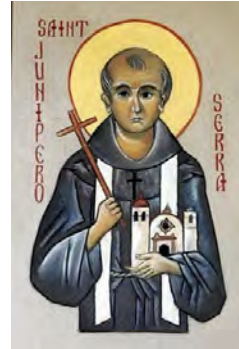
1. The other may not mind the suffering (Ex. when the other is not concerned)
2. The other may deserve it (Ex. when the other is justly punished)
3. The imagination of the other's suffering fails (Ex. when the social conditions are quite different)
4. You imagine yourself to be invulnerable (Ex. when you think yourself superior to the other)



4

Nussbaum: The Eudaimonistic Judgment

- "Implicit in the emotion (of compassion) is a conception of human flourishing and the major predicaments of human life, the best one the onlooker is able to form."
- BUT: challenge of relativism
 - Different people/cultures value different things
- Ex. The colonizer's "compassion" for indigenous people who lack education, religion, etc.
 - The Case of Junipero Serra



5

The Chaos of Compassion

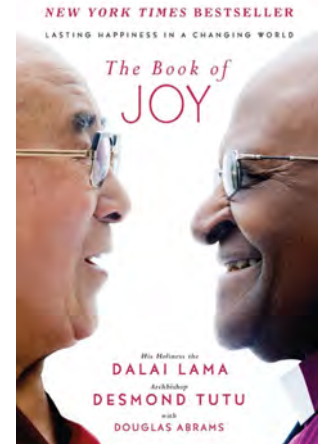
- There is chaos in compassion. Giving and receiving disrupts tranquil simplicity. Compassion is joyful and exuberant, painful and sad. In every open embrace there is a touch of anarchy.
- Compassion fails when this is forgotten, when the arms that embrace become chains that impose. When we dance, we risk spinning out of control. Compassion unfolds on the edge of disaster. It is overflowing abundance that causes us to bloom, flower, and fruit.



6

Desmond Tutu: Joy as Gift of Compassion

- God, who is forever pouring out God's whole being from all eternity, wants you to flourish. God wants you to be filled with joy and excitement and ever longing to be able to find what is so beautiful in God's creation: the compassion of so many, the caring, the sharing. And God says, Please, my child, help me. Help me to spread love and laughter and joy and compassion.
- And you know what, my child? As you do this—hey, presto—you discover joy. Joy, which you had not sought, comes as the gift, as almost the reward for this non-self-regarding caring for others.



7

Applications: Immigration and Racial Justice

- What does compassion teach us to do about immigrant children at the border?
- What does compassion teach us to do about racism, racial injustice, reconciliation, hate, violence police brutality and so on?



Oscar Alberto Martínez Ramírez and 2-year-old daughter, **Valeria**, died swimming across the Rio Grande, June 2019

George Floyd killed by police, May 2020

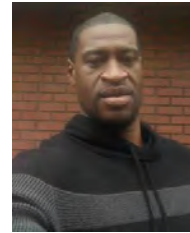


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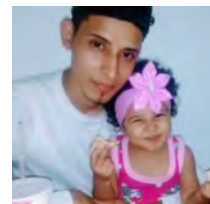
Compassion: From whom? For Whom? How much? And to what end?

- See/Feel the suffering of victims
 - Empathy
 - Bearing witness
 - Seeing and saying the names and lives of real persons
- Compassionate result?
 - Transformative action...
- BUT what can an individual do?

- Legal/Historical/Social/Objective Realities
 - Law and Order
 - Police power
 - Histories and systems
 - Individual response vs movements



George Floyd
1973 – 2020



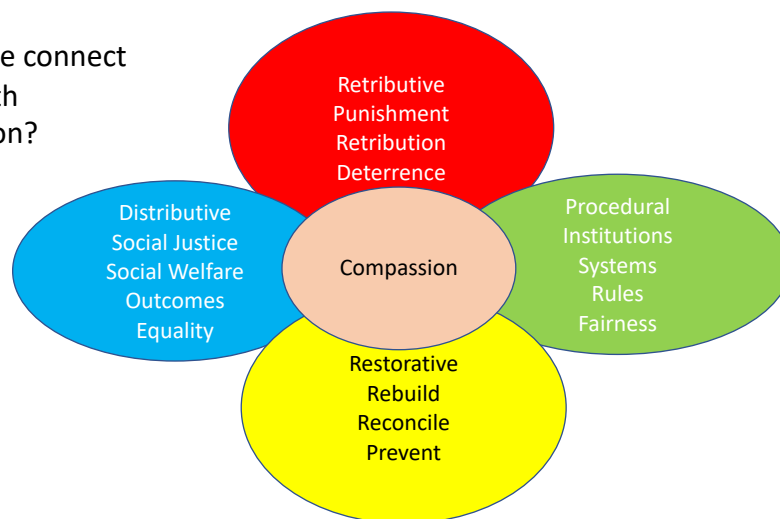
Oscar Alberto
Martínez Ramírez
25 years old

Valeria
23 months old

9

Justice: Equal for Equals Fairness, Impartiality, Objectivity, Neutrality, Dispassionate

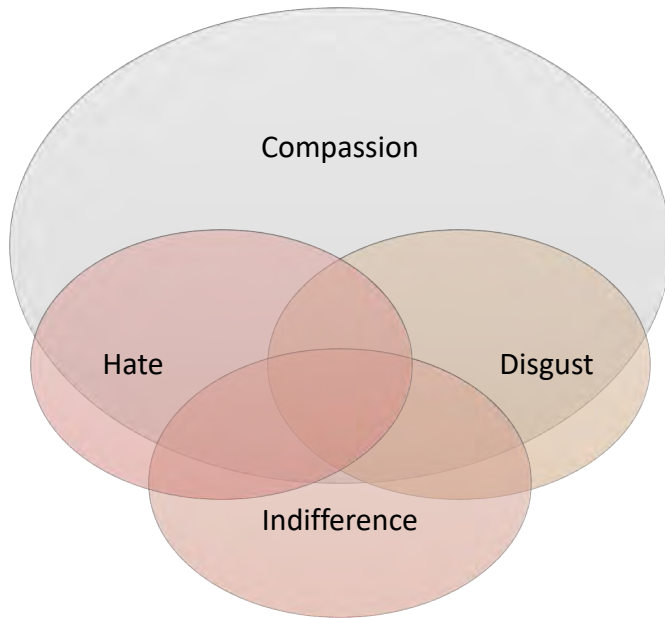
How do we connect
justice with
compassion?



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Compassion and its others

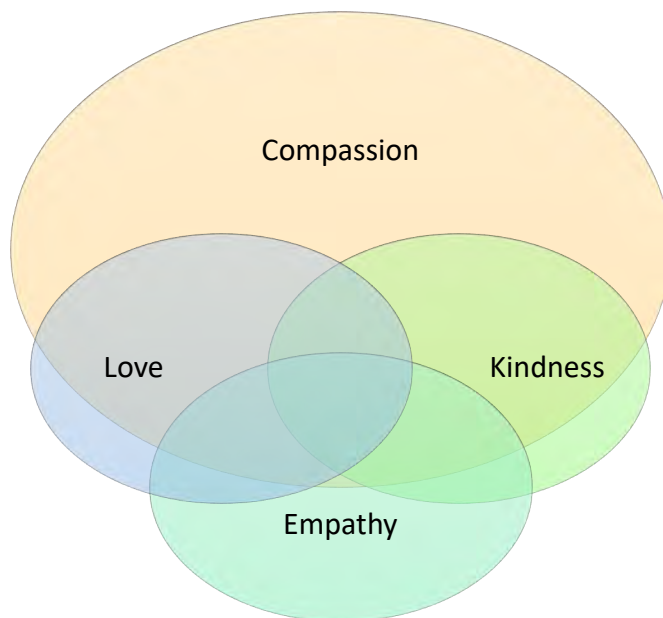
- Compassion: Warm Connection
- Disgust: Warm Disconnection
- Hate: Cold Connection
- Indifference: Cold Disconnection



11

Compassion and its brothers

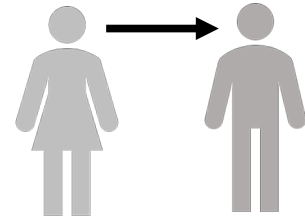
- Compassion: Emotional and Active
- Kindness: Unemotional and Active
- Love: Emotional and Receptive
- Empathy: Unemotional and Receptive



12

One (supposed) difference between empathy and compassion

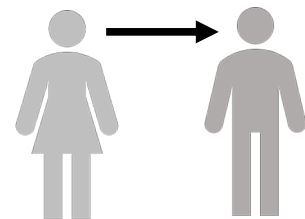
- Empathy is morally neutral
 - I understand what the other is experience
 - But I might ultimately approve it, disapprove it, ignore it
 - Understanding/Recognition/Seeing/Listening
 - Passive Receptivity
 - “Feeling with” the other (alongside them)
- Compassion is morally engaged
 - I suffer with the other
 - And I feel compelled to act to help
 - Caring/Sharing/Accompanying/Embracing
 - Active Interaction
 - “Feeling for” the other (or towards them)



13

Another distinction: the warm and the cool

- Compassion = Empathy plus Warmth
 - Warm-hearted Sympathy
- Empathy can be Cold/Chilly Recognition
- Michael Slote, *Moral Sentimentalism*
 - Virtuously feeling empathetic concern for other people involves feeling warmly toward them... empathy with such warmth involves warm feeling...
 - What the unvirtuous, morally bad, unempathetic person feels toward others may be indifference or may be malice, but both of those feelings contrast with warmth and show a lack or absence of warmth. Comparatively speaking, then, such people are cold (or cold-hearted or very cool) in their attitudes or feelings toward others people
 - And someone who empathetically registers that coldness will thus be chilled by the attitudes or desires of that morally bad person.



14

In Praise of *Sang-Froid* Pyrrho the Skeptic's Lack of Compassion

- He led a life consistent with this doctrine, going out of his way for nothing, taking no precaution, but facing all risks as they came, whether carts, precipices, dogs or what not...
- And once, when Anaxarchus fell into a slough, he passed by without giving him any help, and, while others blamed him, **Anaxarchus himself praised his indifference and *sang-froid*.**
 - Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*



Pyrrho of Elis
(360 – 270 BCE)

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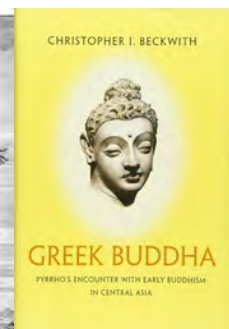
In Praise of *Sang-Froid*? Pyrrho the Skeptic's Lack of Compassion

He denied that anything was honorable or dishonorable, just or unjust... He held that there is nothing really existent, but custom and convention govern human action; for no single thing is in itself any more this than that.

- Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*
- Equanimity
- Indifference
- A-pathia and Eu-pathia



Pyrrho of Elis
(360 – 270 BCE)



16

Epictetus, *Handbook*

- When you see anyone weeping in grief because his son has gone abroad, or is dead, or because he has suffered in his affairs, be careful that the appearance may not misdirect you...
- As far as words go, however, don't reduce yourself to his level, and certainly do not moan with him. Do not moan inwardly either.



Epictetus
50-135 CE

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Seneca, *On Clemency*

- “[The wise man] will do willingly and highmindedly all that those who feel pity are wont to do; he will dry the tears of others, but will not mingle his own with them; he will stretch out his hand to the shipwrecked mariner, will offer hospitality to the exile, and alms to the needy — not in the offensive way in which most of those who wish to be thought tender-hearted fling their bounty to those whom they assist and shrink from their touch, but as one man would give another something out of the common stock — he will restore children to their weeping mothers, will loose the chains of the captive, release the gladiator from his bondage, and even bury the carcass of the criminal, but he will perform all this with a calm mind and unaltered expression of countenance.”



Seneca
4BCE – 65 CE

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Kant's Critique of Compassion Reason/Rules vs. Inclination

- For the inclinations change, they grow with the indulgence shown them, and always leave behind a still greater void than we had thought to fill. Hence they are always burdensome to a rational being, and, although he cannot lay them aside, they wrest from him the wish to be rid of them. Even an inclination to what is right (e.g., to beneficence), though it may much facilitate the efficacy of the moral maxims, cannot produce any. For in these all must be directed to the conception of the law as a determining principle, if the action is to contain morality and not merely legality. Inclination is blind and slavish, whether it be of a good sort or not, and, when morality is in question, reason must not play the part merely of guardian to inclination, but disregarding it altogether must attend simply to its own interest as pure practical reason.
 - *Critique of Practical Reason*



Kant
1724-1804

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Kant's Critique of Compassion

- This very feeling of compassion and tender sympathy, if it precedes the deliberation on the question of duty and becomes a determining principle, is even annoying to right thinking persons, brings their deliberate maxims into confusion, and makes them wish to be delivered from it and to be subject to lawgiving reason alone.
 - *Critique of Practical Reason*



20

Emptiness, Equanimity, and Indifference

- Heaven and Earth are impartial;
They see the ten thousand things as straw dogs.
The wise are impartial;
They see the people as straw dogs.
 - Tao Te Ching, #5
- This was the True Man of old: he was vast in his emptiness but not ostentatious... he seemed to prefer to cut himself off; bemused, he forgot what he was going to say
 - Chuang Tzu, “The Great and Venerable Teacher”



21

Equanimity and “Letting Things Be” (wu wei = non-doing...)

- Joy, anger, grief, delight, worry, regret, fickleness, inflexibility, modesty, willfulness, candor, insolence - music from empty holes, mushrooms springing up in dampness, day and night replacing each other before us, and no one knows where they sprout from.
Let it be! Let it be!
 - Chuang Tzu, “On Making All Things Equal”



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The Challenge: Warm Heart/Cool Head

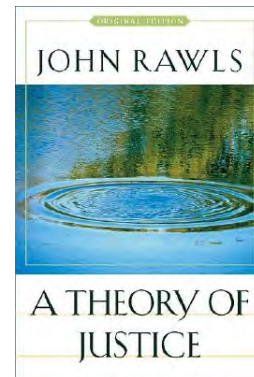
- Compassionate Equanimity
- Compassionate Justice
- Rational Care
- Reasonable Concern
- Rules with Feeling
- Emotion guided by Morality



23

Distributive Justice: John Rawls

- Thus suppose that the ideal observer is thought of as a perfectly sympathetic being. Then there is a natural derivation of the classical principle of utility along the following lines. An institution is right, let us say, if an ideally sympathetic and impartial spectator would approve of it more strongly than any other institution feasible in the circumstances.
- Men's natural capacity for sympathy suitably generalized provides the perspective from which they can reach an understanding on a common conception of justice.



John Rawls
1921-2002

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Nussbaum: On Rawls

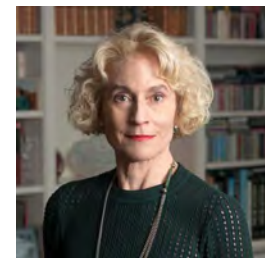
- Rawls prefers the combination of self-interest and ignorance to the combination of compassion and information.
- Rawls withholds the eudaimonistic judgment and tries to generate results out of the judgment of similar possibilities plus prudential self-concern by withholding information.
- In the classic cases of compassion, one is asked to imagine that the lot of the beggar might become one's own...
- BUT this involves judgments about human flourishing
- Rawls is aware that compassion gives few definite results without a normative theory (of human flourishing): with which people should one be concerned, and how much?



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Nussbaum: Shared Vulnerability

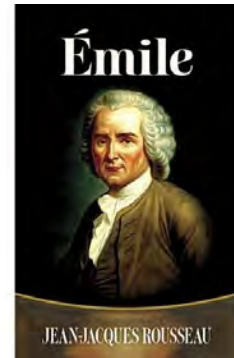
- The recognition of one's own related vulnerability is, then an important and frequently an indispensable epistemological requirement for compassion in human beings... It is most often on the basis of a sense of shared vulnerability to pain that we extend our sympathy.



26

The Problem of Understanding the Suffering of “The Other”

- Rousseau: “Why are kings without pity for their subjects? Because they count on never being human beings. Why are the rich so hard on the poor?”
- It is because they have no fear of being poor.” (*Emile*)



27

Rousseau: innate compassion

- The desire of self-preservation, tempers the ardor with which he pursues his own welfare, by an innate repugnance at seeing a fellow-creature suffer...
- I am speaking of compassion, which is a disposition suitable to creatures so weak and subject to so many evils as we certainly are: by so much the more universal and useful to mankind, as it comes before any kind of reflection; and at the same time so natural, that the very brutes themselves sometimes give evident proofs of it. Not to mention the tenderness of mothers for their offspring and the perils they encounter to save them from danger, it is well known that horses show a reluctance to trample on living bodies.

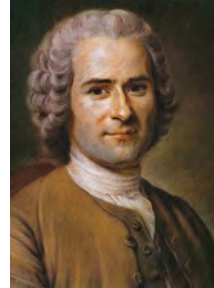


Jean-Jacques Rousseau
(1712-1778)

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Rousseau: innate compassion

- We do not hate the wicked merely because of the harm they do to ourselves, but because they are wicked. Not only do we wish to be happy ourselves, we wish others to be happy too, and if this happiness does not interfere with our own happiness, it increases it. In conclusion, whether we will or not, we pity the unfortunate; when we see their suffering we suffer too.
- It is then certain that compassion is a natural feeling, which, by moderating the violence of love of self in each individual, contributes to the preservation of the whole species.



Jean-Jacques Rousseau
(1712-1778)

29

Gentle Virtues of Christianity

- But now put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and foul talk from your mouth...
- Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, **compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness, and patience, forbearing** one another and, if one has a complaint against another, **forgiving** each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.
- And above all these put on **love**, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.
- And let the **peace** of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body
 - Colossians 3:8, 3:12-15



30

The Theological Problem:

If God is not vulnerable—then how can he be compassionate?

- Theological Problem:
 - How can God have compassion if God does not suffer and die?
 - Christianity: God becomes man and suffers and dies...

- Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*

- An angel cannot hate, perhaps cannot love, either. I often ask myself—is it possible to love everybody? Indeed it is not; it is not in nature. Abstract love of humanity is nearly always love of self.

31

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>

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Simone Weil

In an “afflicted world” compassion brings God to life

- True compassion is a voluntary, consented equivalent of affliction.... Compassion consists in paying attention to an afflicted man and identifying oneself with him in thought. It then follows that one feeds him automatically if he is hungry, just as one feeds oneself.
- The only soul that can fix its attention upon affliction is one that has been killed by a true contact with the true God (it makes no difference if, through an error of language, it believes itself to be atheist.)
- God is absent from the world, except in the existence in this world of those in whom His love is alive. Therefore they ought to be present in the world through compassion. Their compassion is the visible presence of God here below.
- Compassion itself is the effect and sign of being united to God by love



Simone Weil
1909-1943

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Simone Weil

In an “afflicted world” compassion brings God to life

- Compassion is what spans this abyss which creation has opened between God and the creature.
- It is the rainbow.
- Compassion should have the same dimension as the act of creation. It cannot exclude a single creature.
- Every movement of pure compassion in a soul is a new descent of Christ upon earth to be crucified. Souls which are absorbed in God without feeling compassion for human misery are still climbing and have not reached the stage of descending again (even though they apply themselves to good works).



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Simone Weil

In an “afflicted world” compassion brings God to life

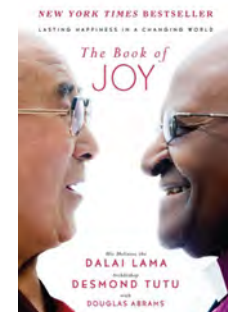
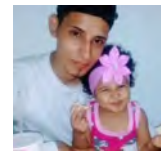
- Praise God and compassion for creatures... A creature cannot legitimately be the object of any love except compassion. Nor can God be the object of any love other than praise. Our misery is the praise of His glory.
- Compassion for every creature, because it is far from the Good. Infinitely far. Abandoned.
- God is absent from the world, except in the existence in this world of those in whom His love is alive. Therefore they ought to be present in the world through compassion. Their compassion is the visible presence of God here below.



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Conclusions

- Compassion as affliction
- Compassion as chaotic and joyful
- Compassion and/or justice
- Compassion vs. Stoic/Skeptical/Taoist Equanimity
- Compassion as a problem/puzzle/task
- How do we weave together a warm heart and cool head?
- What does compassion teach us?
- What does Compassion impel us to do?



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