



POLITICS & POETICS
A Journal for Humane Philosophy

Supplement

Compassion and Moral Philosophy

Author: Samuel Hughes

Article ID: 839548

Article publication date: April 2018

Article version: 1.0

Appears in *Politics & Poetics* - A Journal for Humane Philosophy
ISSN: 2543-666X

Part of Issue on

Compassion & Community
(2017 - 2018)

Politics & Poetics is a peer-reviewed journal of the humanities with a focus on philosophy, seeking to contribute to a reconciliation of political and literary discourses. It offers a forum for discussion for the human person as both a political and a literary animal.

For submissions and enquiries please contact editor@politicsandpoetics.co.uk.

www.politicsandpoetics.co.uk

Compassion and Moral Philosophy

Samuel Hughes
University of Cambridge

Abstract. Compassion's role in Western moral philosophy has been a relatively marginal one. In this paper, I try to understand why that might be. I argue that although compassionate actions are often morally obligatory, that is true largely because they are also respectful and empathetic actions: the actions that compassion motivates over and above those that respect and empathy motivate are not typically obligatory. This makes compassion's significance for a tradition concerned principally with the study of interpersonal obligation relatively marginal. I then go on to suggest an alternative account of compassion's ethical importance, suggesting that it might form an important part of certain ideals for the development of the self.

Compassion has played a central role in many religious traditions and is often thought to be an important emotion in everyday life. Its role in moral philosophy has tended to be less conspicuous, however, at least in the Western tradition.¹ This paper is in part an attempt to explain this. I begin in Section I by trying to get some idea of what compassion is, critically reviewing some canonical accounts and examining what we might wish to take with them. In Section II I examine compassion's relationship to empathy and respect, arguing that at least in its paradigmatic form, compassion seems to entail them. I go on in Section III to argue that although compassionate actions are often morally obligatory, their obligatoriness is largely derivative of their being coextensive with the actions that empathy and respect dispose us to perform, and that it is usually false that actions that compassion disposes us to perform over and above these are obligatory: this, I suggest, may explain the relative lack of interest in compassion in Western ethics. In Section IV I sketch an alternative account of why compassion might be ethically and religiously significant, lying not in its role in explaining our

¹ I am grateful to William Jefferson and Stefan Riedener for conversations on this and on related areas, and to the participants at the Dalai Lama Centre's 2014 Conference 'The Ethics of Compassion' at Blackfriars Hall, Oxford for their comments.

interpersonal duties, but in the role in can play in certain ideals for the development of the self.

A methodological point before we begin. I take it that the aim here is to better understand a phenomenon that we normally call ‘compassion’, by which I mean something like learning about its important characteristics, what distinguishes it from other phenomena, and so on. But that does not necessarily mean that the object of our interest coincides exactly with the phenomena that we denote when we use the word ‘compassion’. It might mean this: there are happy cases in which it turns out that our words have clearly distinguished meanings, and that those meanings map neatly onto the important divisions that exist in the phenomena that we are interested in. But this is not usually how things turn out: often, it emerges that the interesting distinctions in the phenomena have not already been made in our language, or that we use several words with different connotations but the same referent.

In this particular case, we have a further reason to suppose that our existing usage might be less than completely tidy, which is that ‘compassion’ belongs to a cluster of words, including also ‘sympathy’, ‘pity’ and ‘empathy’, which seem to overlap in their uses, and which seem to have shifted and exchanged meanings over time. ‘Compassion’ and ‘pity’ have gone through periods of being used synonymously in English; today I think ‘pity’ tends to connote more of a status inequality between subject and object. ‘Sympathy’ has sometimes been used to refer to what we now denote by ‘empathy’; ‘empathy’ was introduced into English in the early twentieth century as a rendering of the German technical term *Einfühlung*. But we still use the word ‘sympathy’, sometimes to mean ‘tentative agreement’, as in ‘I am sympathetic to that view’, and sometimes something like compassion, as in ‘he was sympathetic, but unable to help’. I know that similar disorder reigns in German and French. The upshot of this is that we should be careful about the word ‘compassion’, and expect to find that it might have some varied and confusing uses; we must be careful to sift through these linguistic problems to find the real distinctions in the world that they sometimes obscure.

I.

With this thought in mind, we may turn to considering some prominent accounts of what compassion is, starting with David Hume.² Hume’s general story about what he calls ‘sympathy’ runs as follows. First, we

² David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, eds. David Norton and Mary Norton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007 [1738]), esp. II.ii.7.

witness someone's outward appearance and situation, and form an idea, on the basis of that, of what he is experiencing. If we see a man looking proudly upon his new house, we form an idea of his feeling of pride. Then, because the man is at least somewhat similar to oneself, this idea becomes associated with one's impression of oneself, and one actually experiences that man's pride as a real emotion, more or less as if it were one's own. Compassion is just a special case of sympathy, where the person one is attending to is in a situation associated with suffering. One sees someone in a situation in which one would expect him to suffer; one forms an idea of his suffering, and because of his similarities to oneself, one experiences his suffering as if one were in the same situation oneself. Usually the emotion will lose some force in this process of transition, so the subject of compassion will not feel as much pain as the object. Sometimes, however, this is not so, or is even reversed. For example, if one sees someone in a disastrous situation of which he or she is unaware, then one's imagination will still leap to the idea of the suffering that one associates with this predicament; one will then feel compassion, even if the object of one's compassion never actually suffers at all.

Hume's account has been influential, and often remains so. And it is clear enough that something like the phenomenon he describes is a real one, whether or not we accept the details of Hume's philosophy of mind: if one is interacting with people who are happy, sad, anxious, and so on, one often starts feeling similarly, by a sort of contagion.³ But it is equally clear that this is not the only thing that is referred to as 'compassion'. The crudest way of showing this is to consider the fact that we can feel compassion for people suffering from kinds of pain that are completely different from the sort of pain we experience in feeling compassion.⁴ Feeling compassion for someone with terrible pains in his stomach no doubt involves a kind of distress, but it is certainly not constituted by having an attenuated version of his or her stomach ache. But on Hume's account, the suffering one feels is of exactly the same kind as the suffering that the object of one's compassion feels, varying only in intensity. So Hume's account of compassion must at best be an account of some cases of compassion; the others must involve something different.

What *is* going on, then, if one feels compassion for someone with a stomach ache? It seems that this distress is intentional. For a mental state

³ The details of this process have been the object of substantial interest in contemporary psychology and elsewhere. For a review, see Elaine Hatfield et al., 'New Perspectives on Emotional Contagion: A Review of Classic and Recent Research on Facial Mimicry and Contagion', *Interpersona* 8:2 (2014): 159-179.

⁴ I am indebted here to Stephen Priest, 'Compassion', unpublished manuscript.

to be intentional is for it to have an object—that is, for it to be of something, for something, about something and so on. A feeling of dizziness, say, is not intentional—one does not feel dizzy about anything. Jealousy or admiration, by contrast, are intentional—one cannot admire intransitively. There is clearly an important phenomenon involving a painful emotion whose object is a suffering creature, on account of that creature’s suffering; this is clearly at least one of the main things we refer to when we talk about ‘compassion’. Having this mental state seems to imply being motivated to alleviate the other’s suffering. If one catches an unpleasant emotion by Humean contagion, there does not seem to be any reason why one might not just feel annoyed and try to avoid the suffering person until the unpleasant emotion goes away. On the other hand, if one feels distressed for someone on account of his or her suffering, then that plausibly has an intrinsic relationship to being motivated to try and help him or her.

Here, then, we have one of the cases that I warned of in my introduction: two feelings, both quite real, which are not clearly distinguished in ordinary usage. To my mind, however, the intentional kind of compassion is more likely to be what we refer to when we ordinarily use the word. It is also the more philosophically interesting emotion. So I propose in what follows to semi-stipulatively use the word ‘compassion’ to refer only to the intentional emotion, and to refer to Hume’s version of compassion as ‘emotional contagion’.

I am also going to draw a verbal distinction between compassion and compassionate action. By ‘compassionate action’ I understand that actions that the feeling of compassion disposes us to perform. There might be some cases in which we use the word ‘compassion’ to denote these actions directly: we use formulations like ‘an act of compassion’, suggesting that the act itself constitutes compassion, rather than merely being caused by and expressing it. In what follows, I am not going to speak this way: I will use the word ‘compassion’ solely for the emotion itself, and not for the associated actions. This is solely in the interests of clarity, and no important substantive questions are begged thereby.⁵

So, we have the beginnings of an account of at least of the phenomena that we denote with the word ‘compassion’: compassion is a feeling of distress for a suffering creature, on account of that creature’s suffering.

⁵ In particular, distinguishing compassion from compassionate action is consistent with the prevalent theories of mind according to which the presence of the compassion implies the presence of a disposition to act compassionately. Someone cannot be an architect unless he or she has a disposition to design buildings, but that does not mean that we cannot distinguish architects from the activity of designing buildings.

Some philosophers have thought that compassion is much more specific than this. The most famous is Aristotle, whose position has recently been prominently defended in a modified form by Martha Nussbaum.⁶ Aristotle thought that, for someone's suffering to be the object of our compassion, it must be both undeserved and also of a kind of suffering that we might expect to undergo ourselves.⁷ Again, this has been influential, and is sometimes treated as a platitude. But as a number of recent commentators, notably Roger Crisp, have argued, it is unclear why we should think that these really are requirements.⁸ Consider first deservedness. Crisp gives the example of prison visitors, some of whom believe that those whom they help deserve their punishments, but who still feel compassion for them. Another conspicuous example is the Christian God, whom Christians believe to have compassion on sinners, despite his knowing their suffering to be deserved. Neither the prison visitors nor the Christians seem to be claiming something unintelligible. Indeed to my mind such outstanding examples are unnecessary: most of us have had experiences of something like this, if generally in attenuated forms. To be sure, we may be less likely to feel compassion for those we consider blameworthy, but it does not appear to be impossible.

Aristotle claimed that the distress we feel for the suffering of the guilty is not really compassion, but another emotion, *philanthropon*. Nussbaum has made a similar suggestion. At this point I think we must be careful, and remember again the other part of my warning in the introduction. It is always possible to divide a phenomenon in two stipulatively: we could create a new concept of compassion felt for people who happen to be wearing brown jumpers, or compassion felt on nights with full moons. One could even stipulate that one was only going to use the word 'compassion' to describe this phenomenon, and invent a new word to denote the other mental states thereby excluded. But although there is a perfectly real difference between pain felt for suffering people who happen to be wearing brown jumpers and pain felt for all other suffering people, it is not the kind of feature in virtue of which we normally individuate kinds of emotion.

⁶ Aristotle, *On Rhetoric: A Theory of Civil Discourse*, 2nd edn., ed. George A. Kennedy (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2006), 2.8. Martha C. Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), esp. ch. 6.

⁷ The Greek is *eleos*, traditionally 'pity', now often translated as 'compassion'. No status inequality seems to be implied.

⁸ Roger Crisp, 'Compassion and Beyond', *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 11:3 (2008): 233-247; see also John Deigh, 'Nussbaum's Account of Compassion', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 68:2 (2004): 465-472.

What is the kind of feature in virtue of which kinds of emotion are individuated? The answer is complex, but a central part of it is generally agreed to be that we individuate kinds of emotion on the basis of the evaluative features that they involve predicating of their object: what it is to be angry is, partly, to judge the object to have wronged one; what it is to be afraid is, partly, to judge the object to be dangerous to one; and so on.⁹ Although we might sometimes both judge that someone's jumper is brown and feel compassion for that person, the judgement about the jumper is no part of the judgement that makes up compassion: the jumper judgement could be removed and the compassion would be unaffected. It follows that, so far as this criterion is concerned, we should not claim that compassion and *philanthropon* are different emotions unless it can be shown that compassion for innocent people is *not* like this: unless, that is, it can be shown that when I feel compassion for an innocent person, that compassion involves judging that person to be innocently suffering as opposed to merely being suffering, and that it would *necessarily* be extinguished if I learnt that the person was actually guilty. This is not apparent to us pretheoretically—we use the same word for both states—and so far as I can see, Aristotle and Nussbaum give us no reason to suppose that pretheoretical appearances are misleading. So it looks as though the feature that compassion involves attributing to its object really is just suffering, including in cases in which the particular object is innocent. Given the absence of any other obvious distinction between the distress we feel for innocent and guilty sufferers, it thus seems that we lack reason to distinguish two kinds of emotion. And if compassion is, after all, just one emotion, it would be bizarre and misleading to use the word 'compassion' to denote only some instances of it.

Similar considerations apply to Aristotle's second condition, that compassion can only be felt for sufferings that one might expect to suffer from oneself. Again, there seem to be abundant counterexamples to this. Some come from religious traditions. In the Mahayana Buddhist tradition, for instance, a bodhisattva is a person who has permanently freed him or herself from the illusion and desire that are the source of suffering, but remains in the realm of illusion to help other beings, out of compassion for them. If Aristotle were right, Buddhists would be confused here: these emotions would actually be impossible. Or consider a counterexample from ordinary life: it seems that people who are

⁹ Those who take exception with the word 'judge' here may substitute 'perceive to be', 'see as' etc.

themselves in the late stages of terminal illness, and can reasonably expect never to feel again most of the kinds of suffering that they observe in others, can still feel compassion.¹⁰ But this is inconsistent with Aristotle's account. Of course, Aristotle could just stipulate that 'compassion' for suffering that we could not experience ourselves is something different, but again I think we would need some good reasons to use our words in this revisionary way.

All this is of course consistent with the claim that we are more likely to feel compassion for those whose sufferings we could experience ourselves. This claim is, indeed, clearly true, as was the claim that it is easier to feel compassion for the innocent. But as restrictions on what compassion actually *is*, Aristotle's proposals do not look promising. Of course it does not follow from this that there are no such restrictions that might work better. But I hope that what I have said brings out some of the challenges for such approaches. In any case, I am going to assume *arguendo* for the rest of this paper that the only thing that is required for one to feel compassion for someone is that one believes that that he or she has suffered, is suffering, or will suffer.¹¹

II.

I now want to turn to something I think sheds some more light on the nature of compassion, which is thinking about its relationship to the ideas of respect and empathy.¹² Consider first respect. I will not try to give a complete definition of respect, which would be difficult, but speaking roughly we may say that to respect another person means believing that the other person matters and that there are ways of treating the other person that are appropriate and inappropriate because of this, and then acting accordingly. Does compassion require this? It might seem obvious that it does, but in fact this point is a little more complicated. There does seem to be an emotion that people sometimes feel that involves feeling distressed about the suffering of another person whilst completely ignoring the person him or herself. This is a common stereotype about Victorian charity – that it frequently involved a way of viewing people in which they were reduced to their suffering, with that in them which was more and greater than their victimhood being ignored. We might wonder

¹⁰ This is Roger Crisp's example in his 'Compassion and Beyond', 237-238.

¹¹ 'Suffering' here should be understood broadly, as 'what is bad for a person'; it is possible to feel compassion for people who have been denied happiness, even if they are not positively in pain. Cf. Crisp, 'Compassion', 237.

¹² For a particularly useful discussion of some of the themes in this section, see Stephen Darwall, 'Empathy, Sympathy, Care', *Philosophical Studies* 89:2/3 (1998): 261-282.

if this attitude is also found sometimes in the feelings that Westerners have about African children today.

I think it is inarguable that something like this attitude exists, although there are clearly some complexities about what it means to reduce a person to his suffering that we cannot go into now. The question for us is: is this an instance of compassion? Elizabeth Anderson, in a famous paper, distinguished pity and compassion, and claimed that pity is patronizing and expressive of a lack of respect for the other, whereas compassion is respectful, and accordingly much more likely to be morally appropriate.¹³ If this is interpreted as a characterization of ordinary usage, I suspect it is not quite right: my impression is that people sometimes use 'pity' to denote responses to people that involve respect and are not patronizing, and 'compassion' to denote responses that do not and are. But perhaps our sense is that the paradigmatic form of compassion is a non-patronizing one. At any rate, I think that using the terms the way that Anderson does is helpful even if it is slightly stipulative, and that it would be a valuable clarification in our use of English to restrict the word 'compassion' to respectful responses. This is what I will do for the remainder of this paper.

The second related concept I want to think about is empathy. Empathy is philosophically quite complicated. It seems to have multiple forms, including something like Humean contagion and then forms of projection, in which one works out how the other is feeling by imagining oneself in his position.¹⁴ I am interested principally in a third kind of empathy, which involves something like understanding another person's state of mind, not by actually having copies of his or her emotions and thoughts, but through imaginatively reconstructing them: one entertains the state that one takes the object to be in without actually being in that state oneself. I pass over the difficult questions about what exactly is involved in this, on the assumption that everyone agrees that something like it is possible.¹⁵ The first question I want to ask is whether compassion presupposes this. I think the situation here is rather similar to that with respect. There does seem to be a mental state in which one is upset about the suffering of another without having any imaginative sense at all about what that suffering involves. One is still upset *that* the other person is suffering. Some sentimental emotions might be like this,

¹³ Elizabeth Anderson, 'What is the Point of Equality?', *Ethics* 109:2 (1999): 287-337, at 306-307.

¹⁴ For the former see Hume, *Treatise*, Book II generally; for the latter, see e.g. Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, eds. D. Raphael and A. Macfie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976 [1759]).

¹⁵ For those who are interested in a more detailed account, see Roger Scruton, *Art and Imagination* (London: Routledge, 1974).

in which one does not really pay faithful attention to the object, but just indulges one's emotions of distress about him. But I think there are also quite common unsentimental emotions that fit this description. Many people may be extremely upset about the inner suffering of the people they spend their lives with, although the nature of that suffering is a complete mystery to them. We may think of soldiers returning from war and undergoing kinds of suffering that those who love them can never understand, although they may still be intensely concerned about them.

As in the case of empathy, I don't think that ordinary usage is completely clear about whether to use the word 'compassion' here. But at least a paradigmatic form of compassion does involve having an imaginative sense of the other person's suffering. It seems a little awkward to call distress about a suffering that one knows to exist but finds completely opaque, 'compassion'. At any rate, I think it is worth distinguishing a core phenomenon of compassion stipulatively, which does presuppose empathy, just as it involves respect.

III.

There is plenty more to be said about the nature of compassion, but I hope that I have said enough to identify an important core phenomenon. This is, to summarize, a kind of distress felt for a suffering creature on account of its suffering, where this distress presupposes a kind of respect for that person, and also a kind of imaginative understanding of his or her suffering. I now want to try to say something about how we might evaluate this phenomenon. There are many different questions we might ask about compassion's moral significance. For example, there is a difference between asking whether compassion, the feeling itself, is good, and asking whether compassionate actions, meaning the actions typically motivated by the feeling, are good. There is a difference between asking whether we are obligated to act out of compassion and asking whether the actions that we would perform, were we compassionate, are obligatory actions. And there is a difference between the feeling of compassion's being cognitively warranted, instrumentally useful and intrinsically good. These distinctions could be multiplied indefinitely, and obviously we cannot address all of them now. I want to start, however, with one question that has especially preoccupied Western ethics, namely that regarding our duties: do we have a duty to others to act compassionately towards them, where acting compassionately is defined as performing those actions that the emotion of compassion disposes one to perform? Clearly, if the answer to this is *yes*, this will create some strong reasons to

cultivate the feeling of compassion, since the feeling of compassion by definition motivates us to act compassionately. But there might be other reasons that we should or should not cultivate the feeling of compassion, as indeed I shall later argue.

Our question then, is: do we have a duty to others to act compassionately towards them? It might seem obvious that the answer to this question is *yes*, on the basis of the characterization of compassion given above. For to act compassionately towards another is, presumably, to try to alleviate his or her suffering, and moreover, to do so in a manner consistent with respect and imaginative understanding of him or her, and this, surely, is obligatory. It seems to me, however, that much of the attraction of compassionate action is derivative of the attraction of respectful and empathetic action: in particular, I think that the actions that a compassionate person would perform over and above those that a respectful and empathetic person would perform are seldom or never obligatory, and may even sometimes be wrong.

One reason that we might believe these claims becomes clear from considering the phenomenon of secondary traumatic fatigue, commonly known as ‘compassion fatigue’, in the medical profession.¹⁶ It is well-documented that many nurses, especially younger and less experienced ones, experience intensely distressing compassion for their patients. This can also compromise their ability to help the people they are feeling compassion for, partly because it can impair professional judgement and impartiality, and partly because it can lead to their ‘burning out’ from emotional strain and exhaustion.¹⁷ Because of this, and also simply in order to make nurses’ work less distressing for them, efforts are often made to help nurses to achieve a kind of distance or detachment from the situation of their patients. In some cases this seems to be a matter of finding ways of coping with distress without eliminating it, but in other cases it is clearly a matter of becoming less emotionally involved in one’s patients’ suffering, and actually feeling less distress about it.¹⁸ This does not mean, however, that nurses are professionally encouraged not to imaginatively understand their patients’ situation, still less that they are encouraged not to respect their patients. The ideal is, rather, that one

¹⁶ The literature is considerable. See C. Beck, ‘Secondary Traumatic Stress in Nurses: A Systematic Review’, *Archives of Psychiatric Nursing* 25:1 (2011): 1–10 for an introduction. I am grateful to participants at the Dalai Lama Centre’s 2014 Conference ‘The Ethics of Compassion’ for discussion of this point, especially to those who worked in the medical profession themselves.

¹⁷ Cf. e.g. P. Meadors and A. Lamson, ‘Compassion fatigue and secondary traumatization: Provider self-care on intensive care units for children. *Journal of Pediatric Health Care* 22 (2008): 24–34.

¹⁸ For some helpful details here, see esp. M. T. Rourke, ‘Compassion fatigue in pediatric palliative care providers’, *Pediatric Clinics of North America* 54 (2007): 631–644.

understands one's patients distress, and that one is conscious of the moral importance of one's patients and of one's obligation to assist them, but that at the same time one can remain personally calm and undistressed.

To assess my claims, we must now compare the actions of a nurse who feels a great deal of compassion to those of a nurse who is respectful and empathetic, but does not become distressed about his or her patients. The former might have certain advantages: perhaps that nurse would be motivated to do still more for his or her patients, or would be able to form different and valuable kinds of relationship with them. But it is unclear that any of those actions are morally obligatory: indeed, it seems unjust to claim that the second nurse is wronging his or her patients. At the same time, if compassion has a tendency to lead to impaired judgement and psychological exhaustion, it might be that some of the actions of the compassionate nurse were much less desirable, and might even be morally wrong.

This case is in some respects quite a special one: compassion fatigue is much less likely to be a problem for people who are constantly exposed to suffering in the way that nurses are. But the other feature of the situation noted here—the fact that it is hard to find an action that (a) the compassionate nurse would perform, (b) the merely respectful and empathetic nurse would not perform and (3) is morally obligatory—seems to generalize: it is hard to find such examples in life generally, and not just in such professional contexts. For this reason, I think we are justified in concluding that although compassionate action is often obligatory, its obligatoriness is normally derivative of the obligatoriness of respectful and empathetic action, and not of what compassion adds to those.

It seems to me that the foregoing might be the beginnings of an explanation of why compassion has not greatly interested thinkers in the tradition of modern Western ethics. Speaking very generally, it may be said that the modern philosophical tradition in the West places duties that we have to others at the centre of the study of ethics: it is centrally concerned with why we should care about others rather than only ourselves, and what form those obligations to others take. If, as I have suggested, compassionate action is rarely obligatory in itself, then it might come as no surprise that compassion has been relatively little studied. Compassion might be compared here to respect: respectful action is frequently thought to be obligatory, and respect has a correspondingly central place in the tradition.

IV.

We might have, then, an explanation for why compassion has not been so prominent in moral philosophy. But what has been said so far might make compassion's religious significance still more surprising: why have religions taken such an interest in compassion, if it does not have much significance in determining the character of our duties?

One reason might be that compassion is a useful motivational aid.¹⁹ Supposing we have a duty of respect to alleviate the suffering of others, but that respect is a weak and ineffective motive. If that were right, then it might be worth cultivating feelings of compassion in order to make ourselves motivated to perform actions, our reason for which is that they are respectful, not that they are compassionate. Compare: some people think that children should be encouraged to compete about their academic results, in order that they achieve better. Nobody believes that feelings of competitiveness could be the final justification for children working hard in school, but they think it is worth cultivating this feeling in order to motivate children to work hard, the real justification of which being something like the importance of transmitting knowledge or the instrumental benefits to the child.²⁰

I think that compassion probably does sometimes help to motivate us to perform actions that are independently obligatory, but I am not going to focus on that role here. One reason for this is that how useful it is as a motivational aid is an empirical question to whose solution a philosopher can add little. A second reason is that there are cases in which compassion still has *something* impressive about it, even though its motivational value is clearly negative: one example of this is the cases mentioned above in which compassion burnout impairs the ability of medical professionals to discharge their responsibilities. And most significantly, an account of compassion's value in terms of its motivational use does not seem to capture the tone of religious interest in compassion—it attributes to compassion only an instrumental value, and does not explain why compassion might be held to be an elevated or a beautiful emotion.

So I should like to close this paper by adumbrating a quite different proposal about compassion's ethical significance, namely, that compassion is significant as an element of one ideal of the developed self.

¹⁹ Kant thought something like this. See the 'Metaphysics of Morals' in *Practical Philosophy*, ed. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

²⁰ Cf. Crisp, 'Compassion and Beyond'.

To bring out what I mean by this, I would first highlight some characteristics of compassion. As we have seen, compassion is a feeling; it follows from this that it is partly involuntary – although we can try to habituate compassion in ourselves, and try to think of people in ways that create this feeling, the feeling itself is involuntary, and can sometimes come upon us completely unexpectedly. This feeling is in some sense deeply focussed upon another person, involves essentially a kind of concern for that person. If one genuinely feels compassion for someone, then it is necessarily true that that person matters to you, in a certain sense. Finally, consider that although compassion is painful, it also involves a kind of overcoming of the division between one's own interests and those of others.²¹ Though feeling compassion is in a certain sense a cost to one, once one feels it, one desires the good of another even at some cost to oneself. These observations go some way to explaining why it is that many people are afraid of feeling compassion, including people who may not be afraid of physical pain: compassion involves a kind of involuntary caring for another person, and in a certain sense a surrender of self.

The personal ideal I am thinking of, then, would be a more complete devotion of the self to the value of others than is realized merely in fulfilling one's interpersonal duties. More particularly, the ideal is that one not only cares for others in one's thoughts and with one's will, but cultivates the subordination of one's involuntary emotions to the significance of another's suffering. I am reminded in this connection of Friedrich Schiller's essay, 'On Grace and Dignity'.²² Schiller was responding to the Critical philosophy of Kant, for which he had much admiration, but which he believed to be incomplete. Kant, as Schiller interpreted him, concentrated solely on respect for others by one's reason, and regarded the feelings as something merely to be overcome.²³ To be sure, Schiller agreed, we must sometimes overcome our desires out of regard for others. But there is also a more perfect condition, which Schiller described as a condition of grace, in which consideration for others has penetrated our emotions and desires too, and in which our whole natures are thus configured by that concern. In this ideal condition, Schiller claimed, one was in harmony with oneself, or, to put

²¹ This point is complicated by the existence of compassion with which one does not identify. This is an interesting issue, but I set it aside for present purposes.

²² Friedrich Schiller, 'Über Anmut und Würde' in *Sämtliche Werke, V: Erzählungen und Theoretische Schriften*, ed. Wolfgang Riedel (München: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 2004 [1793]).

²³ 'Grace and Dignity' antedates the *Metaphysics of Morals*, in which Kant took a more accommodating view of emotion than he had done in his earlier published work.

the same point in different terms, one's self was in harmony with the moral law. I conjecture that compassion might be a part of something like this ideal: not an ideal of interpersonal conduct, but rather of a perfected self; perhaps it is this that explains the significance of compassion in many religious traditions.

I want now to draw out one last characteristic of compassion. This is the intimate connection that it has with a kind of love, namely what in the European tradition is called *agape*, the selfless giving love that does not demand the other give him or herself to one in return.²⁴ In fact, the above observations about compassion – that it is a feeling focussed on another person, related to a sense of the importance of that person, and partly dissolving the division between one's own interests and his – could all be made of *agape* also, in view of which we might even wonder if compassion is in fact a manifestation of *agape*, or at any rate very closely related to it. To develop this thought in any detail is impossible here, but I think it might heighten our sense of how acutely significant this way of relating to others is for the development of our own selves.

So, to conclude. My suggestion has been that if we seek to understand the importance of compassion by finding it some role in the schema of interpersonal duties with which analytical moral philosophers are mostly concerned, we are likely to be frustrated. Compassion may have some marginal roles here, but none that will justify the great significance it has widely been held to have. I have suggested that we might understand it in a very different way. What compassion adds to respectful and empathetic action is not primarily a motivation to perform obligatory acts, but something like an ideal configuration of the whole self, such that one's involuntary emotions as well as one's rational will are responsive to the importance of another's suffering.

²⁴ For some starting points on this theme, see C.S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1960), ch. 6 and Pope Benedict XVI's encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est*.