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Compassion as a Public Vice

Nathan Helms & Joseph Simmons

A Brief History of Compassion

Classical philosophers regarded compassion sceptically, at least if we understand ‘compassion’ as roughly synonymous with ‘pity’. First, compassion is particular. If Peter gives vast sums to assuage the distant poor of Calcutta or Lagos, his charity might warm our hearts less than Paul, who brings soup to the homeless man outside our window. The beggar at hand draws our compassion more easily, for the palpability of his suffering is at least partly a product of its proximity. Pity, like the other emotions, loves the concrete, not the abstract. It is thus no surprise that the champion of the forms spurns it. The concrete is *particular*, and the particular is the enemy of the just. The ‘first and chief injunction’ given to the rulers of Plato’s Callipolis is that they must sort every child into a class fitting his capacities and character without making exceptions for their own offspring: ‘They shall by no means give way to pity in their treatment of them, but shall assign to each the status due to his nature and thrust them out among the artisans or the farmers’.¹ A just republic requires that citizens elevate universal goods like the good of the city over particular ones like the good of one’s children.

Particularizing emotions are as bad for the psyche as they are for the city. After all, compassion is a passion, and passions are the enemy of reason. Virtue demands that sorrow be moderated and borne manfully. Of course it cannot be purged completely, and when poets mount the sorrows of others, even Plato’s virtuous man is tempted to accede to his ‘natural hunger and desire to relieve [his] sorrow by weeping and lamentation, and that feeling which is kept under control in our own calamities ... [for] the better nature in each of us, not having been sufficiently trained by reason or habit, allows the sympathetic element

¹ Plato, *Republic*. Trans. Paul Shorey. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969), 415c.

to break loose because the sorrow is another's'.² Once the emotion of pity has been 'fed fat', it is not so easily restrained, and the temptation to self-pity becomes very difficult to resist. For the Greeks, pity is never far from self-pity, for all pity seeks *resemblance*. We pity the beggar who looks like our grandfather, partly because he looks like our *own grandfather*. Likewise, the child with Leukaemia gives such pangs to the Leukaemia survivor because he has the survivor's own disease. Our pity, says Aristotle, is attracted by those who resemble us, and by those misfortunes that resemble our own.³

Aristotle's account, while disavowing Plato's pitting of reason and passion against one another, agrees with his insistence on affective moderation and the dangers of self-pity. The Philosopher defends the tragic poets, not by justifying a susceptibility to pity, but by saying that their works do not in fact have the effect Plato alleges, being dramatic imitations of actions that 'which through pity [*eleos*] and fear [*phobos*] effect the proper purgation [*catharsis*] of these emotions'.⁴ The notoriously obscure term 'catharsis' has traditionally been translated 'purgation': we must experience pity in the theatre so that we can discharge an unfortunate affective build-up and get on with our hopefully pitiless lives.

Our attitudes have changed, and the obvious explanation lies in the Incarnation. Or so we suppose. This is not to say that Christianity makes a clear, unequivocal repudiation of the classical view. The God of Christianity so loved the world that he gave his only Son---not so unlike the Guardians of Callipolis. We, in turn, are invited to witness the spectacle of the cross, take up our own crosses, that is, suffer alongside the suffering we see, and be transformed through that suffering---not so unlike Aristotle's catharsis. Through all this, compassion's indiscriminate nature remains under suspicion; Christian sources ranging from Dante to C.S. Lewis argue that pity is inappropriate for the damned, much to Nietzsche's glee.

Nevertheless, under Christianity something important changed. The Christian God allows us to suffer for our own sake, and suffers-with us for the same reason. It would be misleading to argue that Christianity, recognizing the inevitability of suffering, seeks to make it meaningful rather than eliminate it. The cup of suffering is a medicine to be administered by God, who alone knows when and where it is

² *ibid.* 606b

³ Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, trans. J. H. Freese (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1926), II.viii.13.

⁴ Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. S. H. Butcher (NY: Macmillan, 1902), 1449b21-28.

appropriate. Christians may ask, alongside Christ, that suffering might be banished unless and only unless it figures into God's plan. The beatitudes show that the theological virtue of charity is paradigmatically one of relieving others' suffering. Still, there remains at the center of the Gospel the injunction to imitate Christ's gratuitous and mysteriously efficacious suffering with us, a suffering-with which is unmistakably (and etymologically) compassion. The kinds of pain the beatitudes call Christians to address are the very same kinds early Christians endured for the sake of the Gospel---and we suppose, that they might suffer alongside God and man for the sake of the kingdom to come. My suffering, when related in the proper way through Christ's suffering to your suffering, becomes not just something to be endured, but something to be embraced as furthering the Kingdom: in certain cases, at least, when you suffer, I *ought* therefore, not just to suffer (which to be sure would be mere sadomasochism), but more precisely to suffer-with you.

We will not devote any more space to arguing that compassion (or rather, *private* compassion) is fundamental to Christianity, not because the question is uninteresting, but because our own view is already so widely held. Nor need we devote any space at all to arguing that private compassion is held in the highest esteem by the post-Christian elements of Western Civilization. More germane is the question of whether compassion has been publicized by modernity, or whether the modern emphasis on public compassion was already present in Christianity.

On our view, the transformative character of suffering, and the correspondingly transformative character of compassion as suffering-with, was replaced by the early modern drive to eliminate suffering altogether. The transition should not be surprising. On the Christian picture, not all suffering is valuable. Rather, only suffering in service of the kingdom of God has value. When heaven is no longer acknowledged, *all* suffering lacks value except suffering in the service of preventing further suffering. Compassion becomes rationalized, which is not to say reasonable; rather, it becomes instrumentalized in the pursuit of a stipulated goal of minimizing suffering. The modern project initiated by Bacon and Machiavelli was partly a return to the Classical emphasis on reason, but instead of elevating reason above the passions, it sought to turn reason to the service of the passions. Reason, argued Hume, says not a word about whether we ought to prefer the toothache of a solitary Chinaman over the destruction of the whole world. Reason

is the servant of the passions and cannot tell us which we ought to privilege. Despite Kant's attempt to return reason to the throne it occupied in Athens, the view Hume condensed so pithily prevailed.

Something of the Christian view, then, was preserved---for the early modern saint is still called to sacrifice himself for the sake of his brother. Nothing of the classical view, on the other hand, remained. Plato and Aristotle limited compassion because they feared its power over us. A Christian view stripped of the God who allows suffering in the world (presumably for good reason) will brook no limitations whatsoever on compassion, except perhaps those of prudence, so long as the compassion is efficacious. Aristotle's argument about the theatre purging our passions is precisely reversed, as Jean-Jacques Rousseau attacks the theatre for eliciting, not true compassion, but only 'A fleeting and vain emotion which lasts no longer than the illusion that produced it ... which has never produced the slightest act of humanity'⁵ 'Unfortunate people in person', Rousseau argues, 'would require attention from us, relief, consolation, and work, which would involve us in their pains and would require at least the sacrifice of our indolence, from all of which we are quite content to be exempt'.⁶ Passions become real and brute facts that exert a normative force over those who witness them, a normative force communicated through the special passion of compassion.

The nineteenth century brought renewed debate, some of which continues today. Consequentialists see the minimization of suffering as one of the two ethically worthy aims of moral action (the other being the maximization of pleasure). Some of their opponents (feminist ethicists, say) hold that our intuitions show that compassion ought not be so radically universalized, for, 'intuitively', we know that we owe more e.g. to our own children than to strangers. They agree with Plato that reason and a parent's feeling of love for her children are in conflict, but disagree about which ought to win out. Notwithstanding the Effective Altruist movement and others like it, consequentialists seem to be losing this argument. When we today speak of compassionate individuals or governments, we do not merely mean individuals or governments who act compassionately, but seem rather to require something of the milk of human kindness. For example, politicians (and the nations they direct) are as frequently criticized for their callous

⁵ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Politics and the Arts: Letter to M. D'Alembert on Spectacles*, trans. Allan Bloom. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1968), 24.

⁶ J. J. Rousseau, 'Letter to M. D'Alembert', 25.

attitudes as for their cruel policies. This insistence on what we might call ‘affective altruism’ requires that the minimization of suffering must be prompted and guided by sentiment in order to count as virtuous.

Affective altruism, like its effective doppelganger, reaches beyond the private. This explains why we want our governments and corporations to be compassionate---why BP, to take a recent case, expressed so much regret over the Deep Horizons oil spill. It was not enough for the firm to pay; it (and not just its personnel considered as private citizens) had to be sorry. Contemporary governments issue so many apologies it is unnecessary to give examples. Governments, like firms, churches, nations, clubs, and political parties are corporate persons. Today we require that these corporate persons demonstrate compassion, just as we require compassion of the more familiar kind of person, the kind reading this essay.

Pity, Pain, and Bodies

This requirement is, however, nonsensical. Corporations cannot have compassion, pity, or any other interpersonal feeling. We have so far avoided saying much about the difference between pity and compassion. For one, over-attention to the distinction frustrates attempts to trace a conversation from Plato to the present day. For another, the difference looks obscure. To our minds, this is because it is not the difference between two different emotions, but between an emotion before and after theorization. This, at least, is how we will use the terms.

Pity is a feeling we all have, and compassion, ‘suffering-with’, is an explanation we come up with for what is going on when we feel it. (Schadenfreude is a rival interpretation of that feeling, one which takes it to be, not a suffering-with, but a strange kind of joy in the face of suffering.) It will be helpful at this point to reach back to Aristotle, who shows us the emotion in a moment of primordial theorization. While we could read this definition as a piece of ethnography, showing how a Greek of the fourth century BC understood his feelings, we can also read it as philosophical anthropology, finding in it (and in its palimpsest relation to our present-day ideas about pity) an outline of the logical structure of this category of emotion:

Let pity [eleos] then be [1] a kind of pain [2] excited by the sight of evil, deadly or painful, [3] which befalls one who does not deserve it; [4] an evil which one might expect to come upon himself or one of his friends, [5] and when it seems near.⁷

⁷ Aristotle, ‘Rhetoric’, II.viii.2 (bracketed numbers our own insertion).

The first and second of these points, of course, we already knew: pity is a painful response to the sight of pain. The third is more interesting; it introduces a normativity, which we had supposed absent from the classical accounts. Even Aristotle, however, recognizes that pity *feels* normative; it functions as an affective spur to address a perceived injustice. He insists, in response to this normative feeling, that it must be regulated by virtue: the virtuous man will recognize who does and who does not deserve to suffer, while the unvirtuous will pity all sufferers indiscriminately. We may disagree with this norm, and wish to substitute for it Christian mercy, rationalist humanitarianism, or some other option, but we cannot simply refrain from interpreting our affections. Even Plato's insistence that we squelch them is itself a way of responding to them.

The fourth point in Aristotle's definition acknowledges some sort of relationship between the one who suffers in the first place, and the one who suffers in response. Aristotle seems to suggest that the relation is something like, 'there but for the grace of God go I', depending on an analogy between pithier and pitied. With the inclusion of 'friends', Aristotle not only widens the net of pity, he also suggests something about the connection it recognizes, for, as he repeatedly observes, a friend 'is a second self'.⁸ He also reiterates pity's normativity, for we ought to be friends only with those who are virtuous, which is to say, those who do not deserve to suffer. Pity responds to the suffering of those who are not yet actually another self (that is, a suffering friend), but are at least potentially such, through similarity either to oneself, or to one's friends. This account is one possibility for explaining the connection between sufferer and sufferer-with, but there are, of course, others: Christianity emphasizes seeing Christ 'in' the one who suffers (and Christ, being God, is nearer to me than I am to myself), while humanism identifies the common factor as merely the ability to suffer at all (and even brings non-human animals into pity's domain). The variety of possibilities suggests, again, that no particular beliefs about the common factor between oneself and the object of one's pity are required. But, again, the feeling of pity seems to call for the postulation of some relation of commonality, which we find significant, in part, because it obliges us in certain ways.

The fifth point is the most open-ended: the suffering witnessed must seem 'near'. Aristotle goes on to say that the feeling of nearness can be

⁸ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1934), 9.ix.

enhanced by ‘gestures, voice, dress, and dramatic action generally [...] for they make the evil appear close at hand, setting it before our eyes as either future or past’.⁹ It must be present to perception, here and now, and if it is not so present, it must be *made* present through dramatic re- or pre-enactment. In other words, though spatial and temporal proximity certainly help bring it about, the nearness itself is neither spatial nor temporal, but affective: to feel pity, we must encounter suffering in such a way that we move from perception of suffering to inchoate sense of a normative relationship, not through an inference, but immediately. Nearness comes first: we respond to suffering near us as if it were happening within us. Then, on reflection, we conclude that---since the suffering was not, after all, actually within us---it exerted a claim over us on the basis of some relation between us and it. Nearness has to do with space and time because it has to do with the physical body, and our perplexing status as rational animals: the suffering matters to us because, while it was not in our body, we experience it bodily nonetheless; we see that it is in a body, even if not ours.

So: can corporations feel pity? Can they have normative feelings in response to the appearance of suffering befalling a potential friend? We answer no. Not because there exists no such thing as a corporate person, though to be sure, if corporate persons did not exist, but were only legal fictions, it would make no sense to demand of them compassion, because it would make no sense to demand of them anything. This point is overlooked surprisingly often; those who howl most loudly for corporate acts of self-abnegation also insist most vociferously that the persons who are to self-abnegate already do not even exist. But when a corporate spokesman announces his corporation's regret at what has transpired, he is not speaking in the first-person-singular (he may be a PR-man hired only yesterday), and neither is he making an observation about the group of persons who comprise the corporation (a poll showing that most members of the corporate body do not, in fact, admit any guilt in the matter, would not prove his statement to be false). He is speaking in his role as corporate spokesman. If we reject this expression of corporate regret on the grounds that the corporation does not exist and so could not have done the thing in question, we may be left with no one else to hold accountable, since corporate actions are often actions which no individual person could possibly have intended or foreseen. If we do not attribute the actions to the corporation, we

⁹ Aristotle, ‘Rhetoric’, II.viii.14.

must consider them not to be actions at all, but only the unintended consequences of a myriad of different human beings acting, compassionately or not, in their own independent private affairs. If compassion is to be a *public* virtue, therefore, we must suppose that there in fact exist such things as corporate persons, which possess agency in some sense.

Nor do we deny to corporate persons compassion because we deny to them affective states in general. To the contrary, we believe it makes sense to predicate of corporate persons emotions like desire and fear, though of course these predicates are applied only analogously (we are not so bold as to suggest that corporations possess what the philosophers call *qualia*). It may even make sense to say that corporations suffer: a firm suffers when it diminishes in value; a government suffers when it diminishes in power. It makes perfect sense for a corporate spokesman to say 'We fear X', 'We hope that Y'. Corporate persons have assets, and interests, and we can talk about them suffering harm.

We argue, however, that it does not make sense for a corporate person to express compassion, pity, or even Schadenfreude. The limitation here is not a deficiency, and certainly not something we should try to remedy, but only a consequence of the kind of thing that a corporation is. One says, colloquially, that corporate persons are 'heartless' and 'faceless', and though these are meant as terms of disapprobation, we think they capture something simply true, by definition and constitution. Corporate persons are doubly impassive: they neither feel in response to other's feelings, nor express any such feelings for others' benefit. The former we associate with their immortality, the latter with their incorporeality. To be sure, 'gesture, voice, dress, and dramatic action' attempt to convince us otherwise, by showing us what purports to be the corporate heart (pain threatening its being) and the corporate face (pain written on its body). But so too are playwrights almost able to bring us to pity and to feel pitied by persons entirely fictional. We recognize both types of display as empty theatre.

Our inability to be honestly moved by such displays, save in cases where we mistake the actors for the characters they play, or the spokesmen for their corporations, suggests that we cannot feel compassion for corporate persons. It suggests also, however, the less obvious corollary, that they cannot feel compassion for us. Compassion requires a feeling of kinship, a recognition of the potential-friend relation, and if we do not believe that corporate persons stand in that

relation to us, there seems little reason to believe that we stand in that relation to them---friendship is, after all, reciprocal. To think otherwise is to make the mistake of King Lear, as Stanley Cavell discusses it in his essay 'The Avoidance of Love'. Lear imagines that he can ask *in persona regis* for the love of his human daughters, but the pomp and circumstance of his request can only call forth an equally inhuman response. Cordelia does not refuse to speak of her love for her father, but rather *cannot* speak in her own voice, having been cast in the role of corporate spokeswoman for the Princess of England.

We must distinguish here: when Princess does address King, the result is inhuman, but not impersonal, and not necessarily lacking in compassion. It would not be entirely implausible to think that corporate persons could feel compassion for each other, since they are at least the same kind of thing. But what would be required for inter-corporate compassion to occur? One corporation would have to suffer merely upon learning that another corporation suffered, and this suffering would have to call for interpretation in terms of a normative relationship. We doubt that this could occur. It is true that one corporate person's suffering can cause another to suffer also; for example, the fall in stock price of one firm can cause a concomitant fall in another's, or, more generally, two corporate persons' intentions can become entangled such that the failures of one's projects also raise obstacles for another's. In an extreme version of such entanglement, one corporate person can intend another's success directly, such that the latter's failure just is the former's failure; for example, some state Utopia can intend the well-being of some other state Nichtsland, and so suffer proximately when Nichtsland suffers invasion, civil war, or whatever. But even here, the frustration of the former's intention occurs whether observed or not, and no *additional* suffering occurs when this frustration is noticed. Utopia therefore does not suffer from being fortuitously 'near' to a Nichtsland it considers akin to itself, but rather from the intentional entanglement. Any such elected affinity cannot demonstrate the possibility of corporate compassion, for pity is by nature unelected, something that happens to us that we have to deal with. For it even to be *possible* that Utopia suffers with Nichtsland, it must be *necessary* that Utopia feel something (however theorized) on learning of Nichtsland's suffering. Corporate lives would have to be constitutively interpersonal, such that each corporation was for every other at least a potential friend. Otherwise the most special corporate

relationship involves only entangled projects, not persons related and nearby.

In fact, however, corporations make no friends; they cannot even befriend themselves, because they do not exist for their own sake, as ends-in-themselves. This should not be misunderstood. A corporate person can certainly have as its end nothing more than the community of human persons whom it comprises, but this differs from the corporation taking *itself* as its end. When the corporation takes the community as its end, it takes as its end something, which, unlike itself, can neither take actions nor be held responsible for them. The community is not a person, but a (network of) relationship(s). While a corporate person could, we suppose, have as its end its own self-preservation, this would still be according to only a hypothetical, not a categorical, imperative, and would resemble less an *end-in-itself* than a perpetual-motion machine.

Corporate Masques

So, corporate persons are impatient of compassion (Schadenfreude, envy, deference) - still, one might doubt that pretending otherwise does much harm. We argue, however, that this theatre of corporate pity has deleterious consequences for all of us. Insistence on supposedly virtuous public displays of compassion blinds us to the need to cultivate that virtue in private.

We have argued thus far that corporate persons cannot act according to social passions. Human beings, however, indisputably can, and moreover can do so towards things that are neither other human beings, nor even other animals (however suspect we may find such behaviour). We can feel pity for a scarecrow we take to be a human in pain, and, what is different, we can feel pity for a doll we imagine to be human in pain. The pity we can feel for corporate persons is more like the latter, insofar as telling someone that a corporation is not the kind of thing towards which one can feel Schadenfreude is unlikely to dissuade anyone inclined towards such a feeling.

Putting on passionate masques with the corporate persons in our lives can be, to mix metaphors, a way of fiddling while Rome burns. Something like this is part of Augustine's argument against the Roman gods in *De Civitas Dei*. Augustine makes, first, the standard Platonic argument against the theatres, and, in particular, against the theatrical representations of the gods: they stir up passions, drown out reason, cloud the demands ethics places on our action. He complicates this

polemic, however, by insisting that these supposed gods were not amusing fictions, but rather lying demons. The same immaterial persons represented on the stage were active also in Roman history, and in that history perpetrated against one another the passions, which on the stage they suffered:

that no one might suppose, that in representing the gods as fighting with one another, the poets had slandered them, and imputed to them unworthy actions, the gods themselves, to complete the deception, confirmed the compositions of the poets by exhibiting their own battles to the eyes of men, not only through actions in the theatres, but in their own persons on the actual field.¹⁰

Now, Augustine emphasizes the identity of the crimes represented and the crimes perpetrated, and his rhetoric is more interested in demonstrating the heinousness of the crimes in question than explaining the metaphysical contours of demonic action. We can, however, find in his work the seed of a more precise account. It runs something like this. When we stage for ourselves scenes of corporate pity, we indulge our desire to feel strongly about the imagined feelings-about-feelings of persons whom we know can't feel anything in response. This doubly-recursive structure appeals to us because the recursion stops there, letting us escape for a moment the hall of infinite mirrors threatened by emotional encounters in real life (you feel, I feel that you feel, you feel that I feel that you feel, ...). But these feelings-about-feelings-about-feelings of ours are *not* directed towards persons who do not exist at all. They exist, and, just as importantly, the first-level feelings exist also, even if the second-level feelings do not. Though the corporate person cannot feel compassion, Schadenfreude, or anything at all for those human beings it sees suffer (because their suffering simply cannot be close to it in the relevant way), still, those human persons *do* suffer, and that suffering is necessary for the theatrical structure in question. The compassion found in the theatres depends on the suffering found on the battlefield.

This structure suggests two things, neither flattering, about the role corporate persons play in our piteous lives. First, we task corporate persons with encountering others' pain so that we can avoid doing so. This might succeed in avoiding discomfort, but it can do little else. As Augustine says of demons in another context, corporate persons are bad mediators. Though they are in one way like the people suffering far

¹⁰ Augustine. *The City of God*, trans. Marcus Dods. From *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series*, Vol. 2. Ed. Philip Schaff (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1887), II.25.

away, and in another like us, the commonalities are not of the sort that leads to a successful mediation. They are like the former only in that they are distant, and like the latter only in that they feel nothing in response to distant pain.

Second, the desire to see corporate persons as patient of compassion is self-perpetuating. That desire, by placing corporate persons in the role of mediator, grants them considerable power. Because corporate persons themselves have a desire to gain power, they have a consequent desire to ensure that their mediation continues to be required. So, far from having an incentive to respond compassionately to the pain around them (which they could not in any case do), they have an incentive to increase it, not from Schadenfreude, but from purely self-interested calculation. The resulting desire is held, to be sure, by not a single member of the corporate body---we have no interest in conspiracy theories. But the corporation has the desire nonetheless. This observation is far from novel; it's well understood how bureaucracy seeks always to expand its scope, even if no particular bureaucrat has any particularly ambitious intentions. We suggest here that the theatre of corporate passion is one causal channel by which this comes about.

Even if these suggestions are not accepted, however, the impossibility of corporate compassion bears significantly on our understanding of the source of ethical action, such that the pretence of its possibility will tend to confuse our ethical thinking. Rousseau recognized that theatrical experiences of compassion do not provoke action. But he then baselessly posited a distinction between this passion and the true pity, which, leading to virtuous action, is itself a virtue. It would be more reasonable to say that pity sometimes leads to virtuous action, and sometimes not. The same, of course, can be said of other feelings. While the virtuous man feels pity at the right time in the right way to the right extent, and so can take it as a more or less reliable guide to virtuous action, it is not the only nor even the most important such guide.

If we place compassion at the centre of the ethical life, then we exclude entirely the possibility that corporate persons can ever act ethically. We will either take corporate persons to be inherently evil, or will take ethics to be simply irrelevant for considerations of corporate action. The latter would be as pernicious as obviously false. The former might sound more high-minded, but in practice it has little more to recommend it, and indeed the relation between the two resembles the line Anscombe drew between pacifism and total war.

We should demand of corporations, not expressions of a pity they cannot coherently feel, but actions in accordance justice. Justice, being rational (a question, as Aristotle would have it, of finding the proper proportion), is available even to immaterial persons. We can even insist that, when corporate persons make errors of justice, they acknowledge these mistakes and promise to correct the injustice. Acts of contrition, however, will be entirely inappropriate.

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