

Pity and Compassion as Social Virtues

BRIAN CARR

Introduction

Pity and compassion are altruistic emotions. They are directed at the needs of others and have a *prima facie* case for the status of social virtues. I will look at the possible difference between them later, but for the moment a rough sketch of both pity and compassion might go like this. Firstly, they involve an appreciation of the suffering under which another labours; secondly, they involve a sympathetic reaction of distress on the part of the agent—the one who feels pity or compassion; and thirdly, they involve the agent's being moved if possible to help to alleviate that suffering. Our task will be to understand something of these cognitive, affective and volitional features which both pity and compassion manifest. And one of the most difficult aspects of this task, which renders it an exercise in moral psychology, is to make clear the manner in which both pity and compassion may properly be understood not only as human emotions but also as social virtues.

Aristotle discusses pity at some length in the *Rhetoric*, and in a recent paper entitled 'Compassion: the basic social emotion'¹ Martha Nussbaum develops an account of compassion which is based squarely on Aristotle's discussion of pity. A striking feature of Aristotle on pity is that he renders it a quite self-centred emotion, and I will argue that Nussbaum's reconstruction of his account as one of compassion manifests the same peculiar tendency. Since it is Nussbaum's main intention in that paper to argue that compassion is a basic social emotion—indeed, she makes a larger claim for it as 'the' basic social emotion—and to place it therefore in the social and moral sphere, it is important to try to understand what Nussbaum's account has overlooked. Compassion involves a consideration of other people's values, beliefs, needs and wants in terms of which their suffering can be understood and hence be shared. Compassion essentially takes us out of ourselves into the hearts and minds of other people, and functions thereby as an important social virtue.

¹ Martha Nussbaum, 'Compassion: the basic social emotion', *Social Philosophy and Policy*, vol. 13(1), 1996

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Aristotle's account of pity in the *Rhetoric*

The context in which pity is discussed in Book II of the *Rhetoric* provides little scope for treating it as a social virtue. As Aristotle explains in Chapter 1, his interest in pity and the other emotions is centred on the needs of the orator in swaying the response of his audience:

... since rhetoric exists to affect the giving of decisions—the hearers decide between one political speaker and another, and a legal verdict *is* a decision—the orator must not only try to make the argument of his speech demonstrative and worthy of belief; he must also make his own character look right and put his hearers, who are to decide, into the right frame of mind. (R.1377b20–25)²

Aristotle means by 'the right state of mind' whatever state is most conducive to achieving the *desired* decision—not, of course, the *right* decision. And of major importance here is the effect of the emotions in leading the audience towards this end:

When people are feeling friendly and placable, they think one sort of thing; when they are feeling angry or hostile, they think either something totally different or the same thing with a different intensity: when they feel friendly to the man who comes before them for judgment, they regard him as having done little wrong, if any; when they feel hostile, they take the opposite view. (R.1377b30–1378a3)

The orator must therefore have a grasp of the nature of the human emotions in order to be able to arouse them in his audience.

Aristotle's general plan in describing the emotions is well spelled out in terms of the example of anger:

We must arrange what we have to say about each of them under three heads. Take, for example, the emotion of anger: here we must discover (1) what the state of mind of angry people is, (2) who the people are with whom they usually get angry, and (3) on what grounds they get angry with them. It is not enough to know one or even two of these points; unless we know all three, we shall be unable to arouse anger in any one. (R.1378a23–28)

And following this plan he gives his summary account of anger as follows:

² All quotations from Aristotle's *Rhetoric* are taken from the translation by W. Rhys Roberts, which is included in *The Basic Works of Aristotle* edited by Richard McKeon, (New York: Random House, 1941).

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Anger may be defined as an impulse, accompanied by pain, to a conspicuous revenge for a conspicuous slight directed without justification towards what concerns oneself or towards what concerns one's friends. If this is the proper definition of anger, it must always be felt towards some particular individual, e.g. Cleon, and not 'man' in general. It must be felt because the other has done or intended to do something to him or one of his friends. It must always be attended by a certain pleasure—that which arises from the expectation of revenge. (R.1378a31–b2)

The 'state of mind' of the person who is angry seems to refer to the pain and pleasure, which we may call the *affective* dimension of anger. We can subsume under the heading of the *cognitive* dimension both the description of who the anger is directed at, and on what features of that person the anger is based. And under the *volitional* heading we can put the impulse to revenge.

It is worth noting a few points about Aristotle's depiction of anger here. Firstly it is not a prescriptive account of why and when we *should* get angry, but a descriptive one of why and when we *do* so. It is in that way merely an account of human psychology, a contribution to the natural history of man. The cases identified by Aristotle are not as a matter of fact the only cases of anger—what about anger directed at a country or its population indiscriminately, for example, or cases where there is no desire or no possibility of taking revenge? But we might allow that they are quite typical. Anger in these cases is directed at harm to ourselves or to our friends, and involves an impulse to return the harm together with the pleasure of anticipation of revenge.

The account can, moreover, be labelled an objective or (perhaps better) an intersubjective one. The description of the features which arouse our anger—part of the cognitive dimension as we have just called it—is limited to one of the actual harm, effected or intended, by those who call up our anger. Or rather, to the perceived harm, effected or intended; and a harm presumably perceived by the perpetrator, the recipient and the angered alike. There is a shared appreciation of the situation, in the same terms, which renders its description an objective or intersubjective one. All those engaging in the circumstances will see them in the same light.

A third quite striking feature is that anger is represented as a thoroughly self-centred emotion. I do not mean that Aristotle is speaking of anger directed at oneself—that is clearly quite possible, though Aristotle does not mention it—but that anger is directed at those who do harm to oneself; or, by a slight extension beyond the self, at those who do harm to one's friends. There is no mention of

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the anger we may feel at the harm done to someone outside of that extremely limited range of recipients, as when we might for example feel angry at the treatment of the Asians in Uganda by Idi Amin.

I have identified these three features of Aristotle's depiction of anger since they are clearly perceivable too in his depiction of pity. In Chapter 8 of Book II, he writes:

Pity may be defined as a feeling of pain caused by the sight of some evil, destructive or painful, which befalls one who does not deserve it, and which we might expect to befall ourselves or some friend of ours, and moreover to befall us soon. (R.1385b12–16)

We can consider this account under our headings of the affective, volitional and cognitive dimensions. As for the affective, Aristotle is less forthcoming than he had been about anger. All we are told is that pity is a feeling of pain, caused by the sight of some evil. The nature of this feeling—whether it is a physical or a mental one—would need, on a careful analysis, to be spelled out clearly. Saying that the pain is caused by the sight of evil also needs some careful revision if the pain is mental, since at the very least it would in that case have to be cognitively focused on the evil rather than simply 'caused' by it. Perhaps this is a harsh criticism given that Aristotle tells us quite a lot about the cognitive dimension as we shall see, but justified in terms of Aristotle's own attempt to consider the emotions under his three heads of 'state of mind, who and why', as we may call them. The state of mind at least is clearly underdescribed.

We might also note in passing that Aristotle could, by analogy with his treatment of anger, have included under 'state of mind' the pleasure we might feel in anticipation of helping the one who is suffering. But unfortunately Aristotle omits any account of the volitional dimension of pity, and without it—without, that is, some reference to the pitier being moved to help the one who is suffering—the account has overlooked a part of the altruism which marks off pity and compassion from other emotions such as envy, hatred, appetite and fear. This might be no more than an unfortunate oversight on Aristotle's part, and I do not want to rest my charge that he depicts pity as a self-centred emotion on this issue. On the contrary, my charge is focused squarely on his account of the cognitive dimension of pity, the 'who and why'.

The people who we feel pity for are identified as those who are close to us or who are in many ways like us. This is one clear respect in which for Aristotle the emotion of pity is quite self-centred:

The people we pity are: those whom we know, if only they are not

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very closely related to us—in that case we feel about them as if we were in danger ourselves. ... Again, we feel pity when the danger is near ourselves. Also we pity those who are like us in age, character, disposition, social standing, or birth; for in all these cases it appears more likely that the same misfortune may befall us also. Here we have to remember the general principle that what we fear for ourselves excites pity when it happens to others. (R.1386a17–28)

And he adds a nicely observed point which reflects our conceit (or at least the conceit of his audience):

Most piteous of all it is when the victims are persons of noble character: whenever they are so, our pity is especially excited, because their innocence, as well as the setting of their misfortunes before our eyes, makes their misfortunes seem close to ourselves. (R.1386b4–8)

The overall impression given by these passages is of an emotion which is fundamentally focused on the self. Again I do not mean that Aristotle is speaking of self-pity, any more than he was before of anger with oneself; in fact, he does not mention self-pity in this chapter of the *Rhetoric*. In a sense, though, pity is still self-centred in that it is only felt towards those who are close to us (but not too close) and those who we see as very much like ourselves. We do not, on this account, feel pity for example for the Asians in Idi Amin's Uganda, and we do not feel pity for the street beggar who we do not personally know.

This self-centred depiction of the emotion is continued in his treatment of the 'why', the features of a person's plight which arouse it. We saw in his definition of pity the clause 'some evil ... which we might expect to befall ourselves or some friend of ours'. Indeed, some of the evils that Aristotle lists are very much the sort of thing which few of us (or our friends) can be certain of avoiding:

All unpleasant and painful things excite pity if they tend to destroy and annihilate; and all such evils as are due to chance, if they are serious. The painful and destructive evils are: death in its various forms, bodily injuries and afflictions, old age, diseases, lack of food. The evils due to chance are: friendlessness, scarcity of friends ... deformity, weakness, mutilation (R.1386a4–12)

All these things, we all might easily fall prey to. Yet the loss of a kingdom or a war, if we are not kings or generals, lie outside the range of evils to which we are prey. The reduction of a very rich man to a state of being only comfortably off would not move us who

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are neither rich ourselves nor avaricious. These things, it would seem from Aristotle's account of the relevant evils, could not be features which arouse pity. On the other hand, on his account it would seem that kings, generals and rich men would naturally feel pity for those close to them who suffer such fates. What arouses pity is, for Aristotle, determined by what we are, and his account is therefore clearly one of a self-centred emotion.

I noted above three features of Aristotle's treatment of anger which I said were also conspicuous features of his treatment of pity. One feature was that it was not a prescriptive account but a descriptive one, a contribution to natural history, concerned with why and when we feel the emotion. This is clearly true too of the account of pity. Another feature was the self-centred depiction of the 'who and why', and this point has now been shown to be true of the account of pity. The cognitive dimension of the emotion of pity—who we pity, and why—is given in terms of a range of evils which would be recognizable to anyone who shared our perspective on life because they were 'like us'; the range of evils which arouse pity are those which might happen to us or to our friends. Not only is this the self-centred feature of the account of pity, it is also what renders that account an intersubjective one. The perceived evil will be perceived alike as an evil by the sufferer and by the pitier, a shared appreciation of the harm which again renders its description intersubjective.

Pity and virtue in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*

Aristotle does not, in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, consider pity to be a virtue. Rather, pity is an emotion³ along with a host of others: 'appetite, anger, fear ... envy, joy, friendly feeling, hatred ... and in general the feelings that are accompanied by pleasure or pain.' (N.E.1105b21) Virtues are 'states of character' (N.E.1106a11) which Aristotle distinguishes from the emotions on a number of grounds.

First he argues that 'we are not called good or bad on the grounds of our emotions, but are so called on the grounds of our virtues and our vices' (N.E.1105b29–31) by which we can take him to mean that a man is not called a good man or a bad man *simply* because he feels a particular emotion. His second argument is very close if not identical:

³ All quotations from Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* are taken from the translation by W. D. Ross, which is also included in *The Basic Works of Aristotle* edited by Richard McKeon. However, Ross translates the Greek *pathos* as 'passion', whereas Rhys Roberts translates it as 'emotion': for consistency I have replaced 'passion' by 'emotion' in the Ross translation.

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... because we are neither praised nor blamed for our emotions (for the man who feels fear or anger is not praised, nor is the man who simply feels anger blamed, but the man who feels it in a certain way), but for our virtues and our vices we *are* praised or blamed. (N.E.1105b31–1106a2)

Perhaps the difference between the two considerations Aristotle is offering lies in the first being concerned with judgments made about the character of the man, and the second being concerned with judgments made about the individual episode of feeling an emotion. Whether this is right or not, at least this second consideration has given a hint as to where virtue lies—it lies in the way in which an emotion is felt, not in the simple feeling of the emotion as such.

Another two arguments offered by Aristotle are again closely connected with each other, but now concern the kind of control we have or lack in regard to emotions and virtues. One concerns choice: ‘... we feel anger and fear without choice, but the virtues are modes of choice or involve choice.’ (N.E.1106a3–4) The other concerns dispositions of character:

Further, in respect of the emotions we are said to be moved, but in respect of the virtues and the vices we are said not to be moved but to be disposed in a particular way. (N.E.1106a4–6)

As with the first two arguments we see here a contrast between character, whereby a good man is disposed towards certain emotions in certain circumstances, and the individual emotion which takes hold at a moment.

A virtue, then, is for Aristotle a disposition of character, and Aristotle is quite ready to give a general characterization of virtues in terms of a mean between excess and deficiency:

... it is this [moral virtue] that is concerned with emotions and actions, and in these there is excess, defect, and the intermediate. For instance, both fear and confidence and appetite and anger and pity and in general pleasure and pain may be felt both too much and too little, and in both cases not well; but to feel them at the right times, with reference to the right objects, towards the right people, with the right motive, and in the right way, is what is both intermediate and best, and this is characteristic of virtue. (N.E.1106b15–24)

This ‘doctrine of the mean’ suggests then that the only connection between pity and virtue is that a man exhibits a virtuous character in as much as he feels pity at the right times, with reference to the

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right objects, towards the right people, with the right motive, and in the right way. And Aristotle does not venture to suggest how a man who pities might hit this mark.

If we tried to build on this thesis, putting in the missing pieces to produce an account of pity as a virtue, we would I think be confounded by the self-centred depiction Aristotle has given of the emotion. If pity is to be considered as a virtue we would need to recover the altruistic dimension that considerations of 'evils which might happen to me and mine' have eliminated. Of course, in Aristotle's terms the man who pities is focusing on a harm that has happened to someone else, so an element of altruism in the simple sense of other-relatedness is still there: yet that is true also of the man who envies or despises. And of course the man who pities is moved in normal circumstances to aid the one who is suffering—though this was overlooked by Aristotle—but it is Aristotle's severe limitation of the range of the potential recipients of that aid that constitutes the elimination of a serious altruism.

In an interesting acknowledgement of the limitations of his doctrine of the mean, Aristotle does allow that there are some emotions which do not allow of a mean between excess and deficiency:

... for some have names that already imply badness, e.g. spite, shamelessness, envy ... ; for all of these and suchlike things imply by their names that they are themselves bad, and not the excesses or deficiencies of them. It is not possible, then, ever to be right with regard to them; one must always be wrong. (N.E.1107a9–14)

The virtues which Aristotle recognizes, such as justice, temperance and courage, equally imply by their very names that they are themselves good, and we might wonder why pity does not equally imply goodness. Perhaps Aristotle's limitation on the range of evils and those who suffer them makes it difficult for him to see pity in this light. What, after all, could be especially good about an emotion which is so closely related to the fears we may have concerning merely ourselves and ours, and cannot reach out to those in the wider community—let alone to those in other states?

Nussbaum on compassion

Martha Nussbaum develops her account of compassion explicitly on the basis of Aristotle's account of pity—indeed, she takes com-

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passion and pity to be the same emotion.⁴ Yet the context in which she develops her account is much more promising than that of Aristotle's *Rhetoric*. Among other good intentions in her quite ambitious paper are the undermining of the supposed dichotomy between emotion and reason—which she achieves by stressing the rich cognitive dimension of compassion—and the depiction of compassion as contributing to the moral enrichment of social life in the major areas of political leadership, welfare planning, legal reasoning and public institutions. Space is given, too, to the case for the educative role of Greek tragedy and modern literature for the emotions in general, and for compassion in particular.

One of the three features of Aristotle's approach to pity, its limitation to a naturalistic treatment in terms of when and why we feel pity, thus appears to have been left behind by Nussbaum's context. The second feature, the objectivity or intersubjectivity concerning the range of evils which arouse our emotion, is nevertheless still present, in as much as those evils might threaten to befall the one who feels compassion. And closely connected to this is the strikingly self-centred emphasis of Aristotle's account, for Nussbaum imports from Aristotle this major failure to capture the serious altruism within compassion which renders it a candidate for the status of social virtue.

In her paper 'Compassion: the basic social emotion' Nussbaum expounds Aristotle's account of pity as follows:

Pity, Aristotle argues, is a painful emotion directed at another person's misfortune or suffering ... It requires and rests on three beliefs: (1) the belief that the suffering is serious rather than trivial; (2) the belief that the suffering was not caused primarily by the person's own culpable actions; (3) the belief that the pitier's own possibilities are similar to those of the sufferer. Each of these seems to be necessary for the emotion, and they seem to be jointly sufficient. (Nussbaum, p. 31)

Adopting this as her own account of compassion, Nussbaum gives little attention in this paper to the affective and the volitional

⁴ Nussbaum, p. 29. When writing about 'the historical debate', Nussbaum uses the word 'pity' as a translation of the Greek *eleos* and the French *pitié*; she switches to 'compassion' when writing about contemporary issues. Not wishing to commit myself to equating these concepts, I have rendered Nussbaum's position in terms of 'compassion' rather than 'pity', and where necessary I have indicated this modification in quotations from Nussbaum's paper.

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dimensions⁵ and concentrates instead on these three beliefs. They constitute in effect a rendering of the 'who and why', the cognitive dimensions of the emotion. It is Nussbaum's readiness to defend these beliefs which clearly manifest her failure to capture the altruism of compassion.

Concerning (1), the belief that the suffering is serious rather than trivial, Nussbaum argues that the *judge* of the seriousness is the onlooker, not the sufferer. The three cases⁶ she gives in support are these:

Loss of reason A person who has altogether lost the use of reason is an object of compassion to anyone who has (in Adam Smith's words) 'the least spark of humanity'.

Uneducated deprivation A woman in rural India is severely undernourished and poorly educated but, having no idea what it is to feel healthy, and no idea of the benefits and pleasures of education, she does not think her lot a bad one. Others however are moved to render help.

Peacocks' tongues 'Q, a Roman aristocrat, discovers that his shipment of peacocks' tongues from Africa has been interrupted. Feeling that his dinner party that evening will be a total disaster in consequence, he weeps bitter tears, and implores his friend the Stoic philosopher Seneca to pity him. Seneca laughs.' (Nussbaum, p. 32)

I think we can deal with the first two cases, loss of reason and uneducated deprivation, in the following way. Let us draw a distinction between the kind of suffering which is actually experienced by the sufferer, *felt suffering*, and the kind which is not, *unfelt suffering*. Examples of the latter might be a financial loss which I 'suffer' but which I am unaware of; or the death of a distant relative which never comes to my attention; or a permanent comatose state which I 'suffer' after an accident. There are many such cases of unfelt suffering—the list is quite easy to add to. The loss of reason case, and the uneducated deprivation case, are both examples of unfelt suffering. Now those who suffer but do not feel their suffering might well be candidates for *pity*, but could not be candidates for *compassion*.

The reason is simply this. It is a conceptual truth that compassion involves a shared experience of suffering, even though the degrees and kinds of suffering could well be very different in the one who feels compassion and in the one for whom compassion is felt. If the

⁵ Nussbaum discusses these issues at greater length in other papers, and in the Gifford Lectures given at the University of Edinburgh in 1993 which was planned for publication as *Upheavals of Thought: A Theory of the Emotions*, (Cambridge University Press, 1997). I have not been able to consult that volume.

⁶ All three cases are at Nussbaum, p. 32.

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sufferer's suffering is unfelt, there is no room for a sympathetic response other than pity—we may 'feel for' the sufferer, judging the sufferer's lot to be a pitiable one, and if we can we are moved to try to alleviate his misfortune; but we can hardly 'feel with' the sufferer since the sufferer does not feel his misfortune. In both of Nussbaum's first two cases the object of our pity is clearly in a most pitiable state, but neither is able to appreciate the misfortune that is their lot. It is clear, then, that Nussbaum's thesis that the one who feels compassion is the judge of seriousness cannot be supported by such cases of unfelt suffering.

I can only make this move, of course, because unlike Nussbaum I am willing to draw a distinction between pity and compassion. Yet the very plausibility of the distinction between felt and unfelt suffering, and of some serious consequences for our reactions to them, argue strongly for a distinction reflecting the distinct conceptual dimension of the emotions. I will return to the difference between pity and compassion later, and now take up the remaining case which Nussbaum offers in support of the claim that in compassion the judge of seriousness is the onlooker.

My own reaction to the case of the Peacocks' tongues is quite opposed to that of Nussbaum. Perhaps at root our different responses are a reflection of a difference in moral outlook, but I think there is more to it than that. The obvious problem with the case of Q's suffering is that we might find his value system so alien that we might well reject it and him and his suffering as quite foolish—as does Seneca. The extreme nature of Q's case probably lends more support to Nussbaum's thesis than it should. So let us look at a similar, but less extreme, case.

Lawrence Blum has offered us an example of compassion which seems to undermine Nussbaum's case for the onlooker's authority as the judge of seriousness. He writes:

... the imaginative reconstruction involved in compassion consists in imagining what the other person, given his character, beliefs, and values is undergoing, rather than what we ourselves would feel in his situation. For example I might regard my son's decision to work for the CIA with distress, while someone with different beliefs and values might regard such a decision with pride: yet this other person may well be able to understand my reaction and to feel compassion for me in regard to it. (Blum, p. 510)⁷

This case seems to me to go the heart of the matter. It is perfectly conceivable that the onlooker here should be sympathetically moved

⁷ Lawrence Blum, 'Compassion', in the volume *Explaining Emotions*, edited by Amélie O. Rorty, (University of California Press 1980).

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by the very real suffering which the father is going through. He does not need to share the system of beliefs and values, in terms of which the father suffers from the action of his son, to be able to understand the felt suffering involved. An appreciation of those values and beliefs is enough to give sense to the suffering and enough, in Blum's example, to call up the response of compassion. The onlooker would not suffer in the same way if his own son took the same career decision; and he does not, obviously, suffer simply because he is aware that someone else's son has taken it. What he appreciates is the father's predicament, given a set of values and beliefs in terms of which the decision is a major misfortune.

What the onlooker has achieved is an insight into the values and beliefs of the suffering parent, his 'heart and mind'. It is perfectly conceivable—and so indicative of a conceptual truth concerning compassion—that the onlooker can have this insight, can appreciate the suffering, and can respond sympathetically to the one who suffers. That suffering is real enough, even though premised on a system of values and beliefs which are not shared by the onlooker. Compassion is not ruled out of court simply because of the difference between onlooker and sufferer.

But it might be, if the onlooker finds the sufferer's heart and mind morally repugnant or wilfully out of touch with reality. The insight achieved by the onlooker may be enough to give sense to the weight of the suffering involved, but at the same time it may result in turning away from the sufferer as reprehensible or simply foolish. The decision will depend on the degree of tolerance which the onlooker can find within his own heart and mind to exercise. Indeed, it would seem to be central to the idea of compassion that an extension of our capacity for that emotion is an extension of our capacity to enter into the hearts and minds of others, and an extension of our capacity to tolerate what we find within them.

What of Q? Nussbaum's rejection, along with Seneca, of Q's system of values may well be what blocks her compassion, for Q is an extreme case. But it would be much too quick to take the example as supporting the general claim that the onlooker is the judge of the seriousness of the suffering in all cases. That would imply that only such suffering as is premised on the values and beliefs of the onlooker could be taken seriously as cause for a sympathetic response. We would always be imposing our own values and beliefs on others, or simply turning away from them as morally reprehensible or fools. Compassion, on the contrary, involves our reaching out of ourselves into the misfortunes of others who are importantly unlike ourselves.

In support of (2), the belief that the suffering was not caused pri-

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marily by the person's own culpable actions, Nussbaum suggests that 'insofar as we believe that a person came to grief through his or her own fault, we will blame and reproach' and not feel compassion. (Nussbaum, p. 33). Yet let us consider a case which seems to indicate the contrary. Suppose a professional soldier—even perhaps a mercenary such as a member of the Gurkha regiment of the British army—has, in his enthusiasm for the honour of the regiment and his own promotion, just suffered horrific injuries and is carried off to the field hospital. Would we blame and reproach? Would we dismiss him from our minds for his foolish profession and its likely outcome? I think we would rather respond with greater sympathy, and feel compassion for his suffering. The fault was his own, but the 'least spark of humanity' demands an appreciation of the very real suffering which that fault has produced. And what of the relatives—parents, siblings, wife—who have tolerated or indeed encouraged this foolhardy profession, but must now live with its consequences? The fault was theirs, but their suffering calls up our compassion nevertheless. We cannot just turn away and reject them as fools.

If we did so we would be once more imposing our own value system upon them. The case is not so far away from that of Roman aristocrat Q, where Nussbaum's compassion is blocked by a rejection of his very different scale of values. It is not perhaps so difficult to understand the soldier's actions in terms of family tradition, the desire for regimental and personal honour, the wish to push oneself to the limit and prove oneself against undeniable dangers, indeed the desire for financial gain for one's skills and one's risks. In these desires lies the fault, but the risks have been weighed against the possible gains.

Certainly we might not arrive at the same decision and such a profession would not be of our choosing. But to see the suffering as due to the sufferer's own culpable actions and reserve our compassion accordingly would be hardhearted indeed, and manifest an intolerance of others' choices and ways of life. As with Q, where Nussbaum's response is based upon her judgment of seriousness, so here such a response would be based on the spectator's judgment of risks worth taking. Compassion transcends our own personal judgments in both cases, and understands the situation in terms of the sufferer's heart and mind.

In her support of (3), the belief in 'similar possibilities' to the sufferer, Nussbaum again strikes wide from the mark. Quoting with approval Aristotle's clause concerning misfortunes 'which the person himself might expect to suffer, either himself or one of his loved ones', Nussbaum elaborates as follows:

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While retaining awareness of her separateness ... the [one who feels compassion] at the same time acknowledges that she has possibilities and vulnerabilities similar to those of the sufferer. She makes sense of the suffering by recognizing that she might herself encounter such a reversal; she estimates its meaning in part by thinking about what it would mean to encounter that herself, and she sees herself, in the process, as one to whom such things might in fact happen. ...

Why is this important? The point seems to be that the pain of another will be an object of my concern only if I acknowledge some sort of community between myself and the other, understanding what it might be for me to face such pain. (Nussbaum, p. 35)

And at first sight, we might take a passage from Blum as fully in agreement with this Aristotelian thought, for he writes:

Compassion ... involves viewing the other person and his suffering in a certain way. I can put this by saying that compassion involves a sense of shared humanity, of regarding the other as a fellow human being. This means that the other person's suffering (though not necessarily their particular afflicting condition) is seen as the kind of thing that could happen to anyone, including oneself insofar as one is a human being. (Blum, p. 511)

But the words in parenthesis hint at Blum's distance from Nussbaum in his understanding of 'shared humanity'. In a footnote to this passage he points out that

It is not actually necessary that one believes that the afflicting condition *could* happen to oneself: one might have compassion for someone suffering napalm burns without believing that there is any possibility of oneself being in that condition. (Blum, p. 517)

Blum seems to appreciate, what Nussbaum does not, that 'similar possibilities' have to be so broad as to include reversals which are not in any way a threat to oneself. The sense of 'shared humanity' is a very broad sense of being 'equally human', which allows for enormous differences between the sufferer and the one who feels compassion. This is why Blum speaks of the necessity for an 'imaginative reconstruction involved in compassion [consisting in] imagining what the other person, given his character, beliefs, and values is undergoing, rather than what we ourselves would feel in his situation'. (Blum, p. 510)

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Putting back the altruism

I want to suggest that compassion is a social virtue precisely because it involves an act of transcending the self-centred standards of judgments which Aristotle and Nussbaum rest their analyses on. The capacity to feel compassion depends upon the capacity to enter another's 'heart and mind', to understand what the other person takes to be important and how the other person judges his situation. It is in terms of these values and expectations that the suffering has its existence, and an appreciation of them is therefore a prerequisite of grasping the suffering.

I do not want to claim that we cannot feel compassion for those who share our own values and expectations: that would clearly be wrong. I do, however, want to suggest that the social value of compassion lies precisely in this central feature of the variety of evaluative and cognitive environments in which suffering exists. In coming to understand how others think and feel, and therefore in coming to understand how others suffer from the harms and misfortunes which make sense in terms of those thoughts and feelings, we are reaching beyond our own self-centred world. An altruistic emotion directed exclusively at the suffering of those most similar to ourselves would leave out the vast majority of mankind, even the vast majority of those within our own community. It is in our capacity to grasp the differences and hence comprehend the suffering of people different from ourselves that the social value of an otherwise extremely limited altruist emotion lies. Altruistic it would still be, in manifesting a concern for the suffering of another: extremely limited, nevertheless, in encompassing only others who are just like ourselves.

A thought pointing in this direction is well expressed by Lawrence Blum, responding to the fallacy that sees compassion as involving an identity confusion between the one who feels compassion and the one who suffers:

Nevertheless, as a matter of fact, we often do come to understand someone's condition by imagining what our own reactions would be. So expanding our powers of imagination expands our capacity for compassion. And conversely the limits of a person's capacities for imaginative reconstruction set limits on her capacity for compassion. Finding another person's experience opaque may well get in the way of compassion. (Blum, p. 510)

What I add to Blum's thought is that the imaginative reconstruction which enables us to consider what our own reactions would be may well take us away from our own particular system of values into that of others. We put ourselves 'in their shoes' and comprehend the

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suffering accordingly. Little or no imagination is required to feel compassion for those like ourselves. Much imagination is required to feel compassion for those very different from ourselves. And the expansion of our powers of imagination expands the range of humanity over which our altruism can extend. It is precisely in this extension that the claim of compassion to be a social virtue lies.

There are two consequences of this way of looking at compassion which are worth noting. The first concerns the supposedly objective or intersubjective depiction of the misfortunes which befall us, explicit in both Aristotle's treatment of pity and Nussbaum's reconstruction. The second concerns the educative role of tragic drama and narrative literature.

For Aristotle, pity is aroused at the sight of some evil 'which we might expect to befall ourselves or some friend of ours'. Pity, therefore, is aroused by events which are seen in the same light by the pitier and the pitied. It was for that reason that I described Aristotle's depiction of evils as an objective or intersubjective one. For Nussbaum, compassion rests on the belief that 'the suffering is serious rather than trivial', where the seriousness of the suffering is judged by the person who feels compassion; as well as on the belief that the agent's 'own possibilities are similar to those of the sufferer'. It seems fair to say that for Nussbaum, as for Aristotle, the evils which arouse the emotion are seen as evils alike by both parties, and her account of those evils is therefore equally intersubjective.

Now some of the evils which might befall us are such that we are, no matter what our individual 'hearts and minds' may be, all equally at risk from and there is no objection to putting them under the naturalistic or objective head. Remember Aristotle's list of 'death, bodily injuries ... old age, diseases, lack of food ... friendlessness ... deformity' and so on. But if my suggestion is right, and compassion reaches out to others whose hearts and minds are very different from our own, then many of the evils which arouse our compassion are not intersubjective but subjective. This is why we have to appreciate the system of values and of thoughts which give sense to those events as misfortunes productive of serious suffering. Let us recall briefly Blum's example of the father whose son has joined the CIA, and who sees this as a tremendous misfortune. His suffering is real, but an appreciation of it depends upon an appreciation of the system of social values and parental expectations without which the event might seem on the contrary the cause of celebration. An account of the event *as a misfortune* needs to place the event within the subjective values and thoughts of the person who suffers. The loss of the peacocks' tongues was a real misfortune for Q, and caused him real pain. But only a sympathetic appreciation of

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his system of social values could bring home to us the depth of that suffering and make it possible for us to feel compassion for him. If, like Seneca, we laughed, we would have closed our minds to his subjective world.

The second consequence of my suggestion concerns the educative role which Nussbaum quite plausibly claims for Greek tragic drama and indeed for certain kinds of modern narrative literature. The difficulty I find with Nussbaum's defence has its source in the self-centred account which she has given of compassion. I think we will only make real sense of the claimed educative role in terms of the kind of altruism for which I have argued.

Writing about ancient Athenian culture, Nussbaum suggests tragedy has a special significance to the young adolescent who will later play the role of citizen in the city:

Through sympathetic identification, it moves him from Greece to Troy, from the male world of war to the female world of the household. It asks him to identify himself not only with those whom he in some sense might be—leading citizens, generals in battle, exiles and beggars and slaves—but also with many whom he never in fact can be, though one of his loved ones might—such as Trojans and Persians and Africans, such as wives and daughters and mothers. (Nussbaum, p. 39)

But what could this 'sympathetic identification' be? Does it involve an appreciation of how like his own the lot of these other people are, so that he can appreciate their misfortunes as events which may quite easily befall him too? Or does it involve an appreciation of the very different hearts and minds of people quite unlike himself, who nevertheless he can thereby see as like himself in being equally human, and yet for whom there is a very different catalogue of potential misfortunes?

Nussbaum's account of compassion would lead us to take the first option, but that is quite implausible. The young Athenian might become a leading citizen, a general, an exile or a slave—such were probably real possibilities, involving nevertheless a degree of fantasy. But were he to become such, he would find his values and his expectations of life quite radically transformed from those he brings to the theatre. Even more problematic is the fact that he could not in the real world see himself as a Trojan, Persian, African, wife, daughter or mother. These are not situations in which he could find himself, and would (were they even possible) involve an even greater transformation of his values and expectations.

Suppose he is watching King Agamemnon sacrifice his daughter Iphigenia to raise the winds necessary for the fleet to sail to Troy.

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He cannot identify with Agamemnon, since he is not a king and not a father. He cannot identify with Iphigenia, since he is not a princess, not even a daughter. Their hearts and minds are so very different from his that it requires a radical move away from his own values and expectations to appreciate the situation in which they find themselves caught up. The tragic inevitability—and the tragic consequences, depicted in later dramatic works—must be opaque to him from within his own world. But this, I suggest, is where the argument for the educative role of tragedy can take off.

The actual sympathetic identification involved must be something like Blum's imaginative reconstruction of the values and expectations of Agamemnon and of Iphigenia. Only in this case these are laid bare by the dramatic depiction of the culture, society and events in which these characters find themselves, and the young Athenian is drawn into this world and out of his own so that he can appreciate that which would normally be opaque to him. The educative role of the drama lies in its revealing alternatives to those which his own situation has shown him, and the enrichment of his appreciation of a shared humanity.

Two problems and a suggestion

The issue in moral psychology with which we began was that of understanding just how the altruistic emotions of pity and compassion might be seen as social virtues. Aristotle's account of pity took it to be a quite self-centred emotion, and Nussbaum's account of compassion exhibited the same self-centred emphasis. We have seen how to modify Nussbaum's account to reintroduce the essentially altruistic emphasis of compassion, and recover a role for it as a social virtue. This leaves us with two problems outstanding: how to describe the difference between pity and compassion; and how to recover a role for pity as a social virtue also.

I suggested earlier that we divide suffering into that which is felt and that which is unfelt by the sufferer; and that whereas compassion or 'feeling with' is a possibility in regard to felt suffering, pity or 'feeling for' is still possible in regard to the latter. There is here a clear division between the cognitive dimensions of the two emotions. Compassion rests upon an appreciation of the suffering as conceived by the one who suffers, whereas pity involves a grasp of the misfortune of which the sufferer is unaware. But this is not the only case in which pity can be the apt response in the absence of the possibility of compassion; though it provides a clue to other cases.

A second case in which 'feeling with' is ruled out has also been

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discussed above. This was the kind of case—perhaps, for example, with Q and his peacocks’ tongues—where the onlooker does appreciate the values and beliefs of the sufferer and hence can understand the felt suffering in those terms, but where those very values and beliefs are found reprehensible or foolish. Because of the rejection of the sufferer’s heart and mind, the onlooker cannot therefore ‘feel with’ the sufferer. But pity is still an option: we can pity Q for his obvious pain, we can find his circumstance a pitiable one, though we cannot exercise our capacity for compassion. It is commonly claimed that the term ‘pity’ has nuances of condescension or superiority which ‘compassion’ lacks (Nussbaum, p. 29), and that might indeed be a reflection of the kind of case being referred to. Pity is felt instead of compassion, since the option of ‘feeling with’ is ruled out along with the values and beliefs of the sufferer.

Pity might even be ruled out too, if those values and beliefs are taken to be too extreme. No doubt Hitler experienced a serious misfortune in losing the war, and no doubt his ‘felt suffering’ could be understood in terms of his peculiar ambitions. The onlooker may nevertheless have been unable to raise the faintest degree of pity within himself, since his assessment of those ambitions put the sufferer too close to the edge of any sense of shared humanity.

And now, with this distinction between pity and compassion, we may be able to see how pity too can be a social virtue. Through education, perhaps through exposure to the right kinds of drama and literature, and through a general process of social maturation, we have come to understand that there are people different from us in their values and beliefs; our capacity for compassion has been extended to encompass their hearts and minds. But we have at the same time become aware of such a complexity and variety in humanity that our capacity to feel pity for those we do not understand—and hence cannot ‘feel with’—has itself been extended much beyond the ‘me and mine’ of Aristotle’s analysis. Pending a judgment, based on a greater knowledge of the sufferer concerned, of the extreme nature of his values and beliefs, we can respond with pity if not compassion because of this educated tolerance. The range of humanity whose suffering calls up the sympathetic response of ‘feeling for’ has been extended along with the extension of our capacity to feel compassion, and indeed has become wider than that for which mere ‘feeling with’ is an option.

University of Nottingham