EDUCATING COMPASSIONATE BEINGS

Frans De Wachter
Catholic University of Leuven, Belgium

Abstract. This paper explores the notion of compassion and points to some intricacies inherent in it, in particular the paradox of egocentrism. Most ambiguous is its ontological status: is it an emotion, a virtue, a moral commitment, or a neurological reflex? Each category entails different implications for the process of educating compassionate beings. The conclusion is that genuine compassion is, from the very beginning, not just mere feeling, it is based on the recognition of rights of others. A person in need is much more than the object of our noble compassionate feelings and caring help, she is the subject of rights.

Is compassion an emotion that is morally relevant, and to what extent could it be useful within the framework of moral education? Some philosophers obviously endorse the moral relevance of compassion, especially those philosophers who emphasize the importance of the psychodynamics of affectivity in the ethical field: Adam Smith, Rousseau, Schopenhauer, Rorty, Nussbaum and others (not to mention Buddhism – or Dostoiewski). For Rorty, moral education consists primarily not in cognitive learning of moral principles, but in a kind of sensitivity training: 'What matters is not finding a reason to care about suffering, but making sure that one notices suffering when it occurs'. What we need is 'skill at imaginative identification' (1989, p. 93). Other philosophers are not convinced at all of the moral value of compassion. After all it is an emotion, and emotions, as we all know, are volatile and not completely rational: Stoicism, Mandeville, Kant, Nietzsche, Arendt. Quite divergent philosophers of course, but united in their distrust of the role of sentiments in the realm of ethics.

All the philosophers mentioned deploy their specific arguments and counter-arguments. It is not our intention to enter into a discussion with them; moreover we can refer to abundant literature on the subject. It is not our intention either to

discuss best practices in moral education, more concretely, pedagogical practices of how to increase the pupil's competence for feeling empathy or compassion. There is extensive psychological literature on empathy as well. We want to limit ourselves to what can be considered as the conceptual core of the problem: the notion of compassion as such possesses a very problematic and even paradoxical structure. In what sense?

At first sight this specific emotion of 'compassion' seems to be an ideal gateway to effective interpersonal moral engagement. Ordinary talk of moral duty tells me that I have to relieve the suffering of my fellow beings. It focuses on the suffering of the *other,* whereas talk of compassion is also about the pain I feel *myself* when being confronted with the pain of others. Com-passion, *Mit-leid*. I *myself* am afflicted, and touched affectively, so deeply that somebody else's suffering becomes my own suffering, so intensely that I am bound to *do* something about it. Moral commitment.

In our cultural tradition, the paradigmatic narrative is the biblical story of the Good Samaritan. Everybody knows the story. A man is wounded by robbers, who leave him half dead. A priest sees him, but passes by; a levite sees him, but passes by. But then 'a certain Samaritan being on his journey, came near him; and seeing him, was moved with compassion' (Luke, 10, 33). He went up to him, and took care of him. This is remarkable, because in those days, Jewish people looked down on Samaritans. They were considered to be tough commercial people, who only cared about business and profit, not about morality. So, why did this Samaritan care for the wounded man? The answer is, in the English translation: 'he was moved with compassion'. It repeats the Latin translation: '*misericordia motus est*'. But the original Greek is much stronger. It does not use the usual word for compassion (*eleos*), but says: *esplanchnisthè.* This is a very corporeal term, something like 'it turned his stomach'. The *splanchna* are the intestines (the bowels) that are used at ritual sacrifices (heart, stomach, liver) and those are the seat of our basic emotions like fear, anger, or compassion. *Gut-feelings*, so to speak, that affect, touch, catch, overwhelm us in a very immediate and prereflexive, corporeal way. Compassion seems to force us in a *visceral* way into the moral commitment to our fellow beings. So, cultivating that emotion might be a better way to educate moral beings and to initiate moral responses, than convincing them cognitively of their duty to help others.

The story of the Samaritan is not exceptional. In fact, it fits completely within the Jewish moral tradition throughout the ages. It is well known that in this tradition the very core of morality focuses on our commitment to the sick, the poor, the widow, the orphan, the foreigner. This focus is still present in 20th century philosophers like Hermann Cohen or Emmanuel Levinas. The idea is that only the *misery* of our fellow beings can put a binding moral claim on us. Why? If all my fellow beings were flourishing and perfectly happy human beings, why should I care for them in a moral sense? What could morality mean in this case? It could only mean that I have commitments to my own perfection, in other words, that I should become a gentleman among gentlemen, a *kalokagathos.* Hence morality would have nothing to do with hard moral commitments, it would be reduced to some art of living. But that means esthetics, not ethics.

So the claim is: it is only by being painfully affected myself by the misery of others (com-passion), that I am lifted out of my egocentrism, and *forced* into a hard moral commitment to my fellow beings. This idea is embedded so deeply in our judeo-christian tradition (the Good Samaritan being the paradigm of morality) that we might not be aware of its problematic or even paradoxical conceptual make up. If we understand 'compassion' as an emotion, and nothing more, it is very plausible indeed that experiencing such an emotion remains an egocentric attitude after all. Because after all it is *my* emotion, and there is a possibility that it stays focused on *my* suffering, and *not* on that of my fellow-humans. Let us examine this possibility on two levels: on the level of face-to-face relationships, and on the level of group behaviour.

Face-to-face relationships

In order to circumscribe the problem, we can start from the two best known philosophical texts on compassion: those of Aristotle and of Adam Smith.

In a famous passage in his *Rhetoric*, Aristotle defines compassion, pity (*eleos*) as 'a feeling of pain caused by the sight of some destructive evil, which befalls one who does not deserve it, and which we might expect to befall ourselves' (*Rhet.* II, 1385b 12). Two points should be noticed here. First, we are in the *Rhetoric*, a treatise about the techniques of persuasion that can be used by an orator. Among these tricks is the manipulation of the feelings of the listeners. In forensic rhetoric the emotion of compassion is, of course, primordial. It makes a huge

difference, sometimes it makes all the difference, if as a lawyer one succeeds to arouse compassion for the defendant or not. In ancient Greek law courts it was common practice that a defendant dragged into the court his weeping wife or his crying children, in order to influence the emotions of the jury. We can find such texts in all the famous Greek lawyers, Lusias, Demosthenes and Isocrates. We *are* in a rhetorical context. On the other hand, in the *Nicomachean Ethics* compassion does *not* appear in the list of virtues, but in the list of *pathè* (literally passions, but to be translated as 'emotions'). Other *pathè* that are listed are: fear, anger, hatred, jealousy and joy (NE II, 5, 1105b 21-23). They are all emotions by which we are overcome, overwhelmed, moved on the waves of natural impulses – therefore they are unstable and therefore they can be manipulated by the orator.

A second element to be noticed in Aristotle's text on compassion is the following. Compassion is finally egocentric fear, fear that the same evil that comes to others could happen to me: 'What we fear for ourselves excites our pity when it happens to others' (*Rhet*. II, 1386 a 28). *My* fear, that is crucial. And that is the reason, Aristotle says, why only people we can identify with can arouse our pity. (Much later Rousseau will use this idea in his *Emile*). But this is a completely egocentric statement. It does not even contain a beginning of a moral approach. It is about *my* fear for *my* vulnerability. I am not *morally* addressed by the suffering of the others. I suffer myself, but I do not suffer from his or her suffering, I suffer from the tragedy of a fatal destiny that also could be mine. Later, Nietzsche's vehement attack on compassion in *Morgenröthe (Daybreak)* is mainly targeted on this Aristotelian egocentrism.

The other famous text is the very beginning of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* by Adam Smith (1759). It is a type of modern naturalistic interpretation that has become popular in the British moral sense tradition and in Darwinism. Here, compassion is to be understood as a kind of physical causalistic process: when others have a feeling of discomfort or pain, and when we come close, this feeling is transplanted, grafted upon us as a kind of contagion. Just as when, in the opposite case, a cheerful guy joins the group, and his merriment infects everybody. A transfusion of feelings, Adam Smith calls it. But such a kind of mechanistic contagious process, is beyond any *moral* intention. *The greatest ruffian is not altogether without it*, he says. We resonate in the vicinity of suffering, a kind of instinctive natural reluctance, or discomfort, is initiated (2002, pp. 13-15).

The idea has recently been supported, as is well known, on a neurological level by the discovery of the system of mirror neurons (Stamenov & Gallese, 2002). A mirror neuron is a neuron that fires both when an animal acts and when the animal observes the same action performed by another. So it has, quite surprisingly, both motoric and perceptive functions. It is active, say, when I raise my arm, but also when I see *you* raise your arm. Thus, the neuron mirrors the behaviour of the other, as though the observer were acting himself. And this is also true for emotions. The same brain regions are active when people experience an emotion (such as pain) *and* when they see another person experiencing that emotion. So here we reach a kind of neurological basis for social interaction and empathy (although there might still be some speculative elements in the theory).

But some questions remain unanswered. Even if I can understand now how I intuitively feel pain myself when noticing the pain of others, does this imply that I have a *moral* feeling? Am I already on the level of morality? Of course, I can *use* this mechanism for my moral plans, as Kant already wrote in his *Tugendlehre* (*Doctrine of Virtue § 34)*. When I am aware of my duty to help others, this awareness alone will not be sufficient to make sure that I really will fulfill this duty. Consequently, I have a kind of indirect duty to visit hospitals and prisons, in order to let nature stimulate my natural feelings of compassion, and drive me in the direction of helping others. Compassion here is morally relevant, but only instrumentally. It is not a moral attitude in itself.

In this context, compassion is not much more than a passive natural reflex or reflection. Seeing the pain of others, awakens a kind of natural discomfort or even repugnance in me. I cannot stand seeing the suffering of somebody else. But is this a *moral* reaction? I cannot bear the sight of blood either, but this is not yet an ethical position. If somebody's suffering proves infectious, and is causing in me a kind of reduplicated suffering, I remain focused on my own misery, and not on the misery of the other. Real com-passion in a moral sense should be the primordial concern for somebody *else's* misery. It should therefore remove the emphasis from my own misery. But compassion as mirror pain increases this emphasis. It remains within an egocentric universe. It might not be the ideal gateway into my *moral* commitment to others.

The problem can be summarized as a paradox. At the very moment when compassion becomes ethically promising, namely in the affective moment, the moment of pathos and *splanchna*, the moment when we get deeply touched and

afflicted, prereflexively, by the suffering of others, at that very moment everything becomes problematic, because the response that follows, helping the other, seems to become a solution for my very own suffering, my own emotional housekeeping. When I am really and totally concerned about the suffering of the other, and totally focused on it, then my own suffering should vanish, so to speak, or should become completely irrelevant.

This skepticism is shared by experimental psychologists who conducted experiments on empathy. In psychological terms we could define empathy as the attitude of a person who not only cognitively perceives somebody's distress as distress, but also affectively immerses oneself in that situation to such an extent that he himself is feeling in distress. Eisenberg (1990), who did a lot of research on empathy, is quite convinced that it is possible to share somebody else's distress *without* experiencing any impulse to console the other or to come to his assistance. The reason is that so many factors, different from feelings of empathy, play a part in social behaviour. Cognitive factors. Important, for instance, is the way in which we assess the meaning of our own emotions, and the way we control them. As important is the global moral judgment we pass on a situation. For instance, we can empathize, and still try to repress that emotion. Or we can feel so overwhelmed by that emotion, that we try to run away from it by closing our eyes for the other person's pain. Or we can judge that more important things are at stake than the pain of an individual: we can be smart enough to find reasons to overrule compassion by other considerations. Although not all psychologists agree on Eisenberg's skeptical viewpoint, we could refer to many other elements in support of her. An extreme example of overruling compassion by ideology, are the texts of the nazi-regime, where compassion (*Mitleid*) was very explicitly considered as a vice that should be resisted (Haas, 1988). Or even worse, we can think of situations in which compassion can be deployed as an alibi for crime. In this respect the Milgram experiment is widely known. Under the cover of an experiment on memory, what is measured is the readiness of a person to administer electro-shocks to a fellow testee, when this is commanded by a scientific authority. Everybody knows the amazing percentage of people that obey the authority. But it also became obvious from the experiment that feelings of empathy with the pain of the other person, do not always obstruct the readiness to inflict pain, and in some situations even *facilitate* it. The very human, and socially applauded, feeling of compassion forms a kind of alibi to render the acts of cruelty

(the electro-shocks) psychologically bearable, and consequently, possible. In Milgram's debriefing it is very clear that in some experimental subjects precisely the feeling of compassion with the victim counterbalances the reluctance people normally experience against administering painful electroshocks, because it proves that after all they remain human and that they continue to have honourable emotions. Compassion as an alibi for crime! (Milgram, 1975, pp. 73-77).

These considerations do not imply that compassion is not important in moral life at all. They imply that we have to redefine this emotion in such a way that its relevance for moral life should be safeguarded. We should redefine it as being more than a purely emotional attitude, more than just *splanchna.* In order to achieve this, we should reconsider its time dimension. In most concepts of compassion it is presupposed that there is first a moment of the *splanchna*, when we are touched naturally and prereflexively by the misery of somebody else. And this affect is so intense that it motivates me, in a second moment, to a helping response, a moral reaction. It is precisely this second moment that was the problem. But maybe a different chronology is possible. The *pathos*, the affect by which I am overwhelmed, is not just emotion. Maybe it is already of an ethical nature itself. Kant calls this 'a moral feeling' (*moralisches Gefühl).* Respect is his example of such a moral feeling that is more than just an emotion, because it already embodies a moral attitude. In compassion, I suffer from the suffering of somebody else, because I consider his distress unjust, something that should not be. I suffer from the other, not in a natural feeling of sympathy or resonance with his suffering, but I suffer from the ethical claim which he lays on me. That explains the Good Samaritan: not the emotional shock of seeing the horror of another man's wounds. In that case he could as well be inclined to flee from it. But he is overwhelmed by something that already contains an ethical element: a call for help. The ethical reaction: I cannot let this happen, I need to respond, *is* the shock, *constitutes* his compassion and stirs his *splanchna.*

Social macro-context

So far we have spoken about face-to-face relationships, and in how far a real concern for my fellow beings can be provoked by compassionate feelings. But what about macro relationships, in society at large, in group behaviour, humanitarian aid for instance? Would the same problem and the same paradox occur here?

And if yes, is the same solution possible? Presumably the same problem, that paradox of egocentrism, would occur and the same solution would be possible. Let us consider humanitarian action as it is admirably exemplified in organizations like *Medecins sans frontières*, or *Amnesty International*. At first sight, they are based on feelings of compassion that are overwhelming people when they learn about the misery and suffering of people in the third world. And just as Aristotle said, this humanitarian emotion of compassion can be manipulated, provoked even (*emotelevision*.) And to some extent, it can be egocentric as well. The thesis of the French sociologist Lipovetsky (1992) and the French philosopher Finkielkraut (1996) has become quite popular. In their view, our emotional humanitarian responses, these collective versions of compassion, do not embody a real moral commitment to others, and cannot even be understood as emotional impulses to help others. What is at stake is, in their interpretation, that we live in a culture that can only appreciate positive feelings of well-being, ease, and pleasure. Such a 'wellness-culture', they say, is incapable of dealing with suffering. In such a culture suffering as such, and even each kind of negative feeling as such, have become unbearable and intolerable, something that should be exterminated in ourselves and in others. I undergo suffering, even the suffering of others, as a kind of assault on *my* quality of life, a kind of environmental pollution, and I must get rid of it. In this sense, the so called humanitarian concern for our fellow beings and their misery, is finally an egocentric regression. Even worse than in the Aristotelian context, because it is based not on my fear of my vulnerability, but on a perverse fear of each and every negative feeling, in and around me. Now this is a very extreme position, because it interprets humanitarian intervention as egocentric: we feel compassion for suffering people, and we help them, simply because we cannot stand suffering, the latter being an attack on *our* feelings of wellness.

This kind of *Kulturkritik* is wrong, but on the level of society it exactly expresses the problem of egocentrism we already encountered in the notion of compassion in face-to-face relationships. And we can propose the same solution. This kind of criticism repeats the same error. It interprets our humanitarian solidarity with victims as being nothing more than pure emotion, pitying *Les misérables* all over the world. But is our solidarity with victims nothing more than being moved by a vague sentimentality, or even by a perverse relation to suffering? The answer is that humanitarian action should be interpreted as being based on the *rights* of those victims, which is something quite different. Of course,

the humanitarian organizations mentioned above apply what is called caritative marketing, focused on emotions of compassion and charity. But the humanitarian idea itself is not merely based on emotions. The core of the message of *Medecins sans frontières* is *not* how terrible and painful those miserable people feel who lack medical treatment. The core of the message is the recognition of a universal *right* to medical care, in all situations. The core of the message of *Amnesty* is not to trifle with the feelings of those who cannot tolerate emotionally that people are imprisoned (like the old women in Seneca's *De clementia).* The core is a universal right to a fair trial and a fair punishment. William Turner's famous painting *The Slave Ship* (1839), recently exhibited in the National Museum in Krakow, is full of drama and emotion: the spectator stares right into the faces of the handcuffed slaves who were thrown overboard. This painting shocked the public so deeply, that it played an important role in the abolitionist campaign in those times. And yet this campaign was not about our feelings of aversion and pity when confronted with ill-treated slaves. It was about their rights to be free.

So here again, in the macro-context, the misery of the other not only elicits suffering in me, but in the first place lays a *claim* on me. And in a macro-context, such an ethical claim amounts to a rights claim. This viewpoint has an important consequence. It answers the much-heard criticism that any form of compassion is, by definition, condescending, or even humiliating. Of course, when people are in trouble *any* form of help is condescending at first sight. Who does not need help but extends help, is by definition in the stronger position. Unless. Unless we are mindful of Kant's *Doctrine of Virtue* (§23)*:* 'we should be reminded that the welfare of the poor to whom we come to assistance, is dependent on our benevolence, and that this is *humiliating* him. Therefore it is our duty to act as if our assistance is nothing more than what he is entitled to'. All condescension vanishes when suffering is understood as a claim on us, a rights claim, and when our compassion is understood as suffering from that claim. Then we, those who show compassion, are in the weaker position. An example. I can conceive of disabled people being the object of our noble compassionate feelings and our caring help. Or I can conceive of them as subjects of rights. Both approaches are very different. If the story is only about caring and benevolent people, the handicapped person, being only an object of care, disposes only of a vocabulary that permits him to say: thank you, you really take care of me. A 'thank you' that is quite humiliating indeed. A help that is quite condescending. On the contrary, the

disabled person, if he is approached as a subject of rights, disposes of a language that permits him to claim those rights, to make demands, to assert his claims, and if necessary to organize protests in the streets when rights are violated. It is all about dignity. Feelings of compassion with the sick and disabled always existed. But the disabled have only become dignified in 1975: when mankind proclaimed their inalienable rights in resolution 3447 of the United Nations.

Compassion is more than just emotion. Compassion is linked with rights claims. Consequently, our final conclusion will be the following. Of course moral education should take into account the dynamics of action, and human affectivity. But at the same time, it should be more than a kind of é*ducation sentimentale*, more than a process of learning to empathize. It should induce commitments to others that are based not just on *our* emotions, but on *their* rights.

Correspondence
Frans De Wachter, Catholic University of Leuven, Belgium,
e-mail: frans.dewachter@hiw.kuleuven.be

REFERENCES

Eisenberg, N., & Strayer, J. (1990) *Empathy and its development* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press).

Finkielkraut, A. (1996) *L'humanité perdue* (Paris, Du Seuil).

Haas, P. J (1988) *Morality After Auschwitz: The Radical Challenge of the Nazi Ethic* (Philadephia, Fortress Press).

Lipovetsky, G. (1992) *Le crépuscule du devoir* (Paris, Gallimard).

Milgram, S. (1975) *Obedience to Authority* (New York, Harper).

Rorty, R. (1989) *Contingency, irony and solidarity* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press).

Smith, A. (2002) [1759] *A Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press).

Stamenov, N.I., & Gallese, V. (2002) *Mirror Neurons and the Evolution of Brain and Language* (Amsterdam, John Benjamins Publ.).