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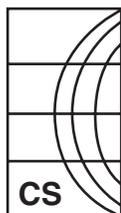
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Compassion, Suffering and the Self

A Moral Psychology of Social Justice

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abstract: Concerns for social justice have figured prominently in much current sociological and criminological discourse. Often implicated by these critiques is the enduring presence of harm, suffering and injustice in contemporary western society – particularly as these are reinforced and perpetuated by organizational and institutional policies and practices. Less often considered are the moral-psychological foundations that give rise to these problems and pathologies. Opposing the struggle for social justice, it could be argued, is a generalized impoverishment of moral sensibilities that would forefront the good of the other, thereby giving rise to relationships, communities and institutional policies and practices conducive to widespread human flourishing. This article suggests that meaningful social transformation in pursuit of social justice requires significant alterations of our collective value framework. More specifically, what seems needed is an overcoming of habitual cognitive and affective obstacles to the embodiment of compassion. Two such impediments to compassion are explored: appraisals of desert and responsibility; and perceptions of likeness and difference. The underlying concern throughout is to affirm the importance of the virtue of compassion as a crucial component of the struggle for social justice and human flourishing.

keywords: compassion ♦ humanism ♦ peacemaking ♦ social justice ♦ virtue

Recent years have witnessed the emergence and continued development of new perspectives within sociology and criminology that reserve a central role for social justice, community, human relationships and the values and virtues from which these might desirably proceed (e.g. Barak, 2003; Fuller, 1998; Pepinsky and Quinney, 1991; Sullivan and Tifft, 2001; Williams, 2002). The impetus behind these developments is recognition of the enduring presence of a variety of social problems, pathologies and injustices. The continued prevalence of poverty, homelessness, class-, race- and gender-based inequalities, environmental degradation and

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destruction, and various other kinds of real and symbolic violence reflect, for some, a cultural ethos and social politics characterized by a gross absence of concern for widespread and pervasive harm and suffering.

Theoretical efforts undertaken to confront these enduring pathologies are often underwritten by a deeper concern for social justice. Implicated are the various ways in which macro-level forms and processes (e.g. structural arrangements, laws, policies and institutional practices) serve to create social and cultural conditions that perpetuate injurious behavior and prohibit the development of meaningful human communities. Less often considered, however, are the moral and psychological accompaniments of injustice – those collective cognitive and affective barriers that impede the realization of productive human relationships based on care and concern. Less often cited is the absence of and corresponding need for an alternative ethos – one whose character provides for the minimization of harm and suffering while simultaneously maximizing possibilities for widespread human fulfillment.

As Anton (1969: 116) argues, the possibility of remedying social pathologies, realizing conditions of social justice, depends largely on the extent to which we make significant alterations to our collective value framework. Such transformative possibilities, I suggest, are dependent upon and nourished by the *virtue of compassion*. In its awareness of and regard for suffering as ‘deviating from the general conditions of human flourishing’ (Blum, 1980: 512), compassion gives rise to and makes possible inclinations toward non-harm as well as toward benevolent action. In Arthur Schopenhauer’s voice, compassion both ‘opposes and impedes those sufferings which I intend to cause others by my inherent antimoral forces’ and, simultaneously, ‘now not only restrains me from injuring another, but even impels me to help him’ (Schopenhauer, 1995: 149, 163). Arguably, compassion stands as a necessary but conspicuously wanting element of our contemporary moral vocabulary and social character. It is, I suggest, central to concerns of social justice and community, as well as for the types of personal and social transformation that are essential for their evolution.

Compassion and Social Justice

Though ‘social justice’ has been and continues to be variously defined and conceptualized, most if not all characterizations are rooted in ideals of human flourishing. At its core, the very notion of social justice seems wedded to the development of, or conditions that provide for the development of, human potentialities. More specifically, concerns of social justice seem each to emanate from one crucial and overriding humanistic concern: *the development and sustenance of social conditions within which all persons have the*

greatest opportunity to realize their potentialities, both as unique individuals and as members of greater communities and societies. In this light, issues of social justice might be most properly rooted in the *eudemonic* tradition – that tradition which takes human well-being, fulfillment and flourishing as the highest good and, consequently, directly confronts the various personal and social impediments to the realization of this good.

Critiques of structure and institution notwithstanding, the development and sustenance of conditions conducive to human fulfillment and flourishing have much to do with the ways in which we treat ourselves and one another. While concerns of social injustice are often linked with broader, macro-level forces, we should recognize that in good part justice and injustice are intra- and interpersonal realities. They are concerns not only of institutional policy and practice, but equally of moral psychology. In this respect, the possibility of social justice is directly proportional to the degree to which personal and social character are directed toward and facilitate human excellence and flourishing. Social justice must ultimately be grounded in a collectively embodied ethic that is ‘rooted in sensitivity to the interests and needs of others, a rational awareness that my good is tied up with the good of others’ (Kurtz, 1969: 10).¹

Awareness of the interdependency of individual goods is the foundation of a moral psychology that makes possible the types of human relationships and human communities necessary for the evolution of social justice and conditions of human flourishing.² At the same time, the absence of such awareness makes possible the types of thinking, feeling and relating toward others that generate injustice – that create and sustain indifference, harm and suffering. Cultural stereotypes, divisions on the basis of work functions and social roles, urban spatial arrangements and other forms of separation generate social distance and encourage the mediation of human relationships by categories and classifications (Hurst, 2005: 67). Where our interpersonal realities are defined by difference and dissimilarity, the promise of injustice is amplified. As Richard Taylor (2000: 238) suggests, ‘The distinction between justice and injustice presupposes the existence of a multiplicity of beings.’ Injustice feeds off this multiplicity and the distinctions inherent in it; justice, in turn, ‘calls upon us to refuse to invest in a social ethic that separates us from one another and instead to visualize all people . . . as being connected’ (Wozniak, 2000: 283).

It is in this respect that the virtue of compassion might be located as a – if not *the* – cardinal virtue of humanistic models of community and social health. Compassion is that disposition or way-of-being that is most fundamentally other-regarding – always interpersonal, always involving a regard for the good of the other (Blum, 1980). It *expands* the boundaries of the self rather than tightening or strengthening them (see Nussbaum, 2001: 300). In this view, we might regard compassion as the vital conative

force (i.e. that which directs and impels action) underlying the struggle for social justice. Compassion informs and, in fact, makes possible our awareness of suffering as an impediment to sentient well-being and flourishing and is thus crucial to a moral psychology of non-harm and benevolence – one by which we refuse to add suffering to the world and, positively, are inclined to remedy existing suffering wherever possible. Compassion might thus be understood as the *moral foundation of social justice*, with social justice promoted by and perpetuated through a collective value framework informed by an awareness of interconnectedness, sensitivity to the needs and interests of others, and rooted in the principle that ‘the highest moral prescription is for *humanity* as a whole’ (Kurtz, 1969: 9).

Compassion and the Moral Status of Suffering

Antithetical to conditions of community that would allow for and promote the realization of human flourishing are the realities of *suffering* that characterize contemporary social existence. It is not merely the presence of suffering that is of concern, but the ways in which individuals and institutions – both actively and passively – create communities and produce relationships and conditions within which suffering is likely to thrive (e.g. Quinney, 1991). The harm and indifference that characterizes many of our relationships reflects the growing dormancy of our innate capacity to treat ourselves and others with respect, care and concern. In sharp contrast to harm and indifference, compassion entails a sort of ‘suffering with’ – experiencing the suffering of others in such a way that we are compelled to act toward its alleviation. It involves ‘relatedness’ to that suffering and those others, and a consequent experience of suffering within oneself (e.g. Comte-Sponville, 2001). It is thus compassion that is both benefactor and adversary of suffering – its presence in the instance of the latter and its absence in that of the former.

The pursuit of justice and conditions of human flourishing thus begins as an *intrapersonal* pursuit. The root of suffering and injustice, and that of compassion, are one and the same; namely, they are each grounded in cognitive and affective structures – informed as those may be by culture – by which we (as individuals and as institutional representatives) make sense of and think, feel and act about the realities of suffering with which we are presented. Crucially, the struggle for social justice entails a collective ‘overcoming’ of obstacles that serve to inhibit the natural human disposition toward compassionate awareness – obstacles that are embedded in the very ways in which we think and feel about ourselves and others.

Compassionate awareness follows from and reflects largely shared appraisals of ourselves, others and of human suffering. In his *Rhetoric*, Aristotle (2004) noted that in any given instance, compassion involves

three key judgments: that the suffering of another is *serious*; that the suffering of another is *undeserved*; and that *one's own possibilities are similar* to those of the person(s) who are suffering (see also Nussbaum, 2001). Compassion issues from evaluations of the relative seriousness of different forms of suffering, as well as a twofold judgment of the person(s) who are subjects of circumstances that lead them to suffer. Informed by a more generalized (and culturally and institutionally shaped) cognitive and affective framework through which we experience ourselves, others and the harms and hardships of existence, these evaluations and judgments can be countervailing forces working against compassionate awareness. If compassion requires certain types of conclusions to be reached with regard to each of these evaluations, it follows that each judgment represents a location at which the misguiding of our beliefs can construct barriers to compassion and serve as impediments to non-harmful and remedial (i.e. benevolent) action. Between justice and its pursuit, then, lie several crucial collective cognitive barriers. Hereinafter, I focus on two such barriers: that of *desert*; and that of *perceptions of likeness and difference*.

Compassion and Desert

Whether natural or created, inevitable or avoidable, remediable or otherwise, suffering is a pervasive feature of human existence. As Richard Quinney (1991: 4) writes:

The forms of suffering are all around us. In our personal lives, there are tensions and anxieties. Each day we experience the physical pains in our bodies and psychological hurts in our hearts and minds. Our interpersonal relations often are carried out in violence of one kind or another. . . . We have created societies that are filled with the sufferings of poverty, hunger, homelessness, pollution, and destruction of the environment. Globally, nations are at war and threaten not only each other, but all earthly life.

Because it is universal, suffering is what connects us to others – to *all others* – and, thus, represents a basis for compassion and concern, mutual aid and community. Suffering is perhaps the fundamental way in which all sentient beings are connected or, at least, the fundamental way in which we can *experience* our connectedness. In practice, however, suffering is not always so generously appraised and compassion not so easily forthcoming.

In addition to a judgment of suffering itself, compassion involves an appraisal of the person(s) who are suffering; that is, a belief about *who is deserving of compassion*. Evaluations of desert inform compassion in that 'insofar as we do feel compassion, it is either because we believe the person to be without blame for her plight or because, though there is an element of fault, we believe that her suffering is out of proportion to the

fault' (Nussbaum, 2001: 311). In popular regard, negative appraisals of suffering seem reserved for those who do not deserve to suffer (e.g. that of innocent children, crime victims, persons afflicted with disease). Our experience of compassion and inclination toward sympathy is cognitively mediated by the belief that persons unnecessarily and unjustifiably suffer. In contrast, as Nussbaum (2001: 311) notes, 'insofar as we believe a person has come to grief through his or her own fault, we will blame and reproach, rather than have compassion'. In Clark's (1997, cited in Nussbaum, 2001) study of contemporary American attitudes, for example, she found sympathy to be tied to conditions stemming from 'bad luck' or forces beyond an individual's control. When suffering results from malfeasance, negligence, risk-taking, or is in some other way perceived as being brought on by the sufferer's own actions, sympathy is less forthcoming. In the latter sorts of cases, we tend to equate suffering with desert – even, perhaps, as 'justice'. Where those who suffer have themselves caused harm, we may even desire to *inflict suffering* in the form of retribution (e.g. Williams, 2002).

Significantly, our assessments of desert and responsibility are tied to social character in that the types of suffering we regard as deserving of compassion are wedded to prevailing social attitudes. Clark (1997, cited in Nussbaum, 2001) found that Americans are less likely to understand poverty as a consequence of 'bad luck' than are Europeans. This reluctance might be linked with dominant social attitudes concerning personal responsibility, as well as those regarding personal initiative and hard work as determinants of economic success. Similarly, the 'American cultural story of rape' (Fonow and Richardson, 1992) is one in which sexually based victimization is not always understood as an undeserved experience. There is a historical tendency, evident in early explanations of sexual assault (e.g. Amir, 1971), to regard some (if not many) sexual assault victims as in some way responsible for their own suffering – as provoking or precipitating their own victimization, often encouraging the assault 'by their behavior, demeanor, or dress' (Fonow and Richardson, 1992: 108; see also Ryan, 1971). As Amir (1971: 275–6) concluded, 'the "virtuous" victim is not always the innocent and passive party'. In both cases, what seems clear is that prevalent social attitudes toward suffering and appropriate compassion stem from an ideology of individual responsibility as opposed to social responsibility – one in which suffering is commonly a personal trouble rather than a public issue (Mills, 1959). Consequently, we are generally less likely to appreciate many forms and instances of suffering as worthy of compassion and demanding of subsequent alleviative action.

Appraisals of desert most always work against the virtue of compassion and, consequently, represent a location at which the pursuit of social justice runs upon a formidable boundary. Even in such cases where persons

'deserve' to suffer by most accounts, the absence of compassion is not altogether justifiable on moral grounds. The fact that persons may in some way bring on their own suffering does not alter the reality of pain, loss, distress or disability. Suffering is a universal experience that does not lend itself to categorical privileging or differential consideration. As a virtue, compassion is not selective; as an incentive for action, the desirability of compassion endures independent of the 'who, what, where, when, and why' of suffering's existence. Importantly, then, while the emotional or affective component of compassion entails evaluation and judgment, the *virtue* of compassion does not. It is possible, as Blum (1980: 508) notes, 'to have compassion for someone in a difficult or miserable situation without judging his overall condition to be difficult or miserable'. It is possible, for instance, to have compassion for the suffering of a prisoner without evaluating the condition of her or his imprisonment itself as undesirable or otherwise unjust. In this case, however, the conditions surrounding suffering may cloud our recognition of it and impede compassionate awareness. It is not, however, the condition or situation toward which we express compassion; rather, the virtue of compassion recognizes only the felt experience of suffering as its moral and motivational grounding (Nussbaum, 2001).

We need not, then, approve on a moral level of a person who is suffering; we need not approve of the reasons for which a person is suffering. We may well find such persons morally reprehensible. We may somehow regard as deserved the reasons for the existence of suffering. Such evaluations need not render impotent our fundamental human capacity for compassionate awareness. What is essential is that we *refuse to regard suffering as a matter of indifference* (Comte-Sponville, 2001: 106). The torturer, the murderer and the terrorist may be the most vicious of the vicious. Their actions may *cause* suffering, evoking anger, fear, hatred and other vicious tendencies within us. Yet to have compassion for the torturer, murderer and terrorist is not to approve of their actions, and it is not to approve of the consequence of their actions. To have compassion in these instances is not to lessen in any way the seriousness of the suffering caused. It is, rather, to *refuse to add hatred to hatred*.

Perceptions of Likeness and Difference

Alongside and interrelated to evaluations of desert, compassion also involves a judgment concerning the likeness between oneself and the person(s) who suffer. Aristotle (2004) described it as recognition of the possibility that similar suffering could befall oneself – that one's own possibilities and vulnerabilities are similar in kind (and, perhaps, prospect) to those of the person who is suffering. Like appraisals of desert, conceptions of 'other' in relation to 'self' serve as a sort of 'compassion filter'. As a

consequence of this second cognitive filter, compassion will be limited to cases in which we see others as similar to ourselves – contingent, in other words, upon our ability and willingness to recognize likenesses between ourselves and others. Crucially, what this means is that compassion will be inhibited in proportion to the degree that we separate ourselves from the other – physically, emotionally, cognitively and metaphysically.³

Evaluations of likeness and difference are often made on the basis of class, race, religion and other social markers that create both possibilities for similarity and prospects for judgments of difference (e.g. Fiske, 2004). While similarities may encourage us to be more sympathetic to, and thus more compassionate toward, the plight of others, social markers tend to be far more consequential in their reinforcement of difference (e.g. Beck, 1999). By virtue of the diversity that characterizes most contemporary western societies, differences are likely to be more readily available for appraisal than are similarities. Consequently, common social markers ‘prove recalcitrant to the imagination’ (Nussbaum, 2001: 317) and are thus better regarded as *social barriers* to compassion than as grounds for compassionate awareness.⁴

Rousseau echoed this point in *Emile*, noting that social distinctions such as class, race and ethnicity, when stabilized as social forms, impede compassion by abbreviating possibilities for those within certain social circles to recognize their own possibilities in the sufferings of those who stand without those circles (Rousseau, 1974). Where boundaries are strongest – where in-groups are most visibly demarcated from out-groups – is within those social systems built upon hierarchical privileging, whereby groups define themselves not only against others, but as superior (Nussbaum, 2001). Compassion must overcome not only constructions of group boundaries, but also boundaries of privilege – the other is both *different from* and *inferior to*.

The necessity of judgments of similarity means that the suffering of another will arouse my concern only insofar as I acknowledge some degree of *community* between us (Nussbaum, 2001: 317). From its Latin origin, ‘community’ implies a sense of ‘fellowship’ or common feeling between people whereby differences become less pronounced under a spirit of commonality and similarity. Yet community need not be defined in relation to geographical territories or social variables. Rather, what unites all sentient beings in commune is a *shared vulnerability* to suffering. As ‘Each may be tomorrow what the one whom he helps is today’ (Rousseau, 1974, cited in Nussbaum, 2001: 343), the human community supersedes any local forms of community or artificially constructed commonalities.

The recognition of shared vulnerabilities is ‘the thing that makes the difference between viewing hungry peasants as beings whose sufferings matter and viewing them as distant objects whose experiences have nothing to

do with one's own life' (Nussbaum, 2001: 319). Compassionate awareness requires that one acknowledge that 'the lot of the beggar might be (or become) [my] own' (Nussbaum, 2001: 320). The perceptual framework through which compassion emerges must ultimately be grounded in recognition of this interrelatedness or connectedness. To borrow from C. Wright Mills, compassionate awareness requires that we assume the 'sociological imagination' (Mills, 1959) – that we understand the ways in which what seem distant concerns are, in fact, personal concerns, and the ways in which personal concerns have a direct bearing on the well-being of others and society. Doing so allows for an expansion of our 'circle of concern' (Nussbaum, 2001) to include the well-being, fulfillment and flourishing of all that has an interest in the pursuit of happiness and the avoidance of suffering.

The Irony of Individualism and the Politics of the Self

Expanding our circle of concern requires the dissolution of artificially constructed barriers that serve to separate us from one another. One of the most fundamental of such boundaries is that assembled around the self. Implicating ideologies of individualism and liberal rights-based discourse, the construction of an atomistic and independently functioning self as a collective frame of reference is a key obstacle to compassionate awareness and the types of care and concern that are essential to the pursuit of justice. The centrality of the individual is embedded in everything from the philosophies and practices of our social institutions to the language that we speak (Fesmire, 1997). Yet the 'first American language of individualism' is, for many, demonstrably 'incompatible with the actualities of shared experience' (Bellah et al., 1985, cited in Fesmire, 1997: 283).

Individualism is perhaps the foundational ideology of American society. It has been and continues to be a key theme in sociological, social- and political-philosophical discourse. Often contrasted with community, individualism has been portrayed by many as the antithesis of that which fosters human flourishing. Widespread embodiment of the individualistic ethos leads to separation from others, thus contributing to pathological conditions of alienation and anomie (in sociological parlance) and the inhibition of virtue and prospects for *eudemonia* (in philosophical discourse). Feelings and dispositions of belonging, mutuality and connectedness commonly linked with community are quashed, thereby creating a personal, political and social atmosphere that fails to promote and foster other-directedness and benevolent concern.

As an example, consider the much discussed case of Kitty Genovese, who was violently murdered outside her apartment building on 14 March 1964 while 38 witnesses were not so much as moved to call the police. Over a period of half an hour, Kitty was attacked on three separate occasions – having been twice interrupted by lights and voices, the killer each

time returned to continue the attack. Later asked why they had not phoned for help or otherwise intervened, witnesses made claims such as, 'I didn't want to get involved', 'I was tired' and 'I didn't think it was any of my business' (Gansberg, 1964). For some, the Kitty Genovese incident illustrates the lack of care, concern and community that characterizes an increasingly individualistic and apathetic American culture. We are estranged from one another, our isolation and selfishness crippling our empathic sensibilities (Rosenthal, 1999).

In his classic *Democracy in America*, Alexis de Tocqueville (1969: 506) echoes these sentiments in describing the burgeoning character of social relations in newly formed American democratic society as one whereby citizens are 'dispose[d] to isolate [themselves] from the mass of [their] fellows'. Linking individualism with egoism – the latter 'lead[ing] man to think of all things in terms of himself and to prefer himself to all' (De Tocqueville, 1969: 506) – he argued that human beings were becoming confined in the 'solitude of [their] own heart[s]', thereby 'steriliz[ing] the seeds of every virtue' (De Tocqueville, 1969: 507). Toennies (1957), as well, saw the modern transition to *Gesellschaft* as weakening social bonds and replacing them with an impersonal, instrumental, self-interested form of consciousness. Whereas premodern societies are better characterized as organismic, transitions issuing from within and following modernity have ushered in a form of society that is better understood as mechanical and artificial. The impersonal, mechanistic character of (post)industrial society and its artifice of personal relations have resulted in a virtual bankruptcy of community.

As a contemporary example, consider the ways in which technology (e.g. radio and television talk shows, the virtual, electronic community of the Internet) has increasingly replaced face-to-face interaction (Heath, 1998, cited in Hurst, 2005: 52). Although, as some have argued, technology can be used to *create* community – increasing social involvement and strengthening social ties (e.g. Rheingold, 1993) – others have argued that it has precisely the opposite effect (e.g. Stoll, 1996). In a widely publicized study, for instance, Kraut et al. (1998) found greater Internet use to be associated with decreased family and social involvement, and with depression and loneliness. The substitution of technological communities for face-to-face community involvement exemplifies, for some, the withdrawal, isolation and alienation characteristic of (post)modern society.

Arguably, then, where social relations are impersonal and social differentiation high, where individualism is the working ideology, and laws, rules and regulations are the primary means of social control, possibilities for being fully human and leading fully human lives are correspondingly enfeebled. Cooperation is replaced by competition; universal responsibility by personal responsibility; relationships by contracts, rules, principles

and authorities; mutuality by self-reliance; altruism by egoism; and compassion by callous self-interest, indifference and maliciousness. In each instance, what seems most essential to sentient flourishing is subordinated to that which is 'woefully maladapted to current social realities' – 'extreme individualism, fossilized into our culture's language and customs, has become appallingly destructive' (Fesmire, 1997: 284). As John Dewey observed:

... [individualism leads to] aloofness and indifference. It often makes an individual so insensitive in his relations to others as to develop an illusion of being really able to stand and act alone – an unnamed form of insanity which is responsible for a large part of the remediable suffering of the world. (Cited in Fesmire, 1997: 284)

Like de Tocqueville, Dewey problematizes the separation to which individualism and corresponding egoistic sensibilities give rise. Prospects for social justice and human flourishing require a collective overcoming of this separation, their realization being meaningfully tied to awareness of our shared situatedness, a subsequent suturing of this socially constructed gap, and reclamation of concern for that which exists outside the abstract self.

The Metaphysics of Self and Other

In addition to a sociopolitical grounding, the separation of self and other that often precludes compassionate awareness and beneficent action has a metaphysical basis. Returning to Aristotle, our interconnectedness within the human community is a product of our nature as social beings (e.g. Hughes, 2001). Indeed, biologists have long recognized that organic beings 'live as integral parts of larger ecological systems'; and while it is common to speak of localized individuals, 'these individuals are intelligible only when understood in their interrelations with other parts of the systems they inhabit' (Fesmire, 1997: 282). As individual organisms, we think and are *taught* to think atomically, yet the 'web of life' (Capra, 1996) is a 'web of interdependencies' (Fesmire, 1997: 283).⁵ As much as we may appear to be isolated and self-sufficient, our lives are physically and metaphysically interwoven with those of others and our greater environment.

Expanding our circle of concern requires not only seeing past socially constructed differences on a cognitive level, but dissolving the metaphysical barrier that separates us from one another. Compassionate awareness springs from recognition of the interconnectedness of sentient beings and a corresponding appreciation for the unity that characterizes all living things. This is one of the central insights of the wisdom traditions, and one shared by western religious mystics such as Saint Francis of Assisi and the Bal Shem Tov. In the *Upanishads* and the *Bhagavad-Gita* of early Hinduism, prospects for 'Peace and harmony come with the awareness of

the oneness of all things and the transcendence of this small self to wholeness of reality' (Quinney, 1991: 5; see also, Chatterji, 1992; Hiriyanna, 1996). In Buddhist teachings, the development of compassion and loving kindness are a natural outgrowth of the development of wisdom, the crucial part of which is recognition of the illusion of separate selves (Berry, 1996; Wilber, 1996). Compassion thus involves 'Breaking through the barrier of the ego' (De Silva, 1995: 115) – overcoming the illusion of a separate and distinct self through realization that 'underneath the thin layers of personality . . . [w]e are all part of the same project' (De Silva, 1995: 115). As Bose (1981: 160) writes in the light of Gandhi, 'What though we have many bodies? We have but one soul. The rays of the sun are many through refraction. But they have the same source.'

This central metaphysical insight was borrowed by and became integral to Schopenhauer's (1995) moral philosophy, as well as those of contemporary humanist and peacemaking social scientists, for whom the 'dualistic thinking of the Western mind' (Quinney, 2000: 25) is a central disintegrating force. Indeed, dualism and polarity feature prominently in conventional western metaphysics (Taylor, 1992: 117), whereby what is 'I' is not 'You', and what is 'Us' must be distinct from 'Them' (Buber, 1996; see also Williams, 1999). These patterned ways of thinking about self and other give rise to a host of forces antithetical to compassion and justice. For Schopenhauer (1995), egoism, indifference and malice, and in Buddhist philosophy, the 'six afflictions' of ignorance, desire, pride, anger, jealousy and greed are grounded in perceptions of Self in relation to Other and are the root source of much evil and suffering (Quinney, 1991: 9).

Egoism, malice and the harms to which they give rise stem from the failure to apprehend this underlying unity which threads together each and every living thing (Schopenhauer, 1995). In compassion, by contrast, the distinction between self and other disappears or, better stated, is *overcome*: 'that this entire *difference* between me and everyone else, which is the very basis of my egoism, is eliminated, to a certain extent at least' (Schopenhauer, 1995: 143–4). The other is perceived as 'I once more' (Schopenhauer, 1995: 211). It is through such an understanding that we live *practically* what is justified metaphysically. We apprehend the self in the other and the other in the self and, consequently, are motivated to pursue the well-being of the other as if it were our own. As Quinney (1991: 9) offers, 'In compassion, the suffering of others is recognized out of one's own suffering, and the suffering is shared' – we experience the suffering of others, as Schopenhauer puts it, 'in a way in which normally I only feel my own suffering' (cited in Safranski, 1989: 320).

Ultimately, it is through such awareness and shared experience that we are inclined toward non-harm and benevolent regard for others. If harm and suffering are amplified where there is a gulf between self (ego) and

other (non-ego), self and world, then their remedy requires behaving 'in accordance with the metaphysical realities of the human situation' (Magee, 1997: 199) – collectively 'seeing through' the illusive and cognitively reinforced barriers that separate us from one another. It is through the 'relaxation of egotistical tensions' and a subsequent 'fusion with the sufferings of all existence' (Safranski, 1989: 335) that compassion becomes a lived reality, and through that lived reality that prospects for community and social justice emerge.⁶

Contexts of Transformation

Virtues are dispositions; and dispositions, as Aristotle (1976) noted, require cultivation. To be sure, the disposition toward compassion is a capacity or potentiality that each of us has by virtue of being human (e.g. Ridley, 1996). Yet as Seneca once suggested of virtue more generally, while we may be born *for* it, we are not born *with* it – until it is cultivated, we have only the raw material of virtue, not virtue itself (Seneca, 1958: 238). The cultivation of virtue is not purely an individual struggle; at the same time, it is not purely a social or cultural struggle. In many ways, the cultivation of virtue – of compassion, tolerance and all of those traits that seem central to the types of human relationships that engender and comprise community and social justice – is bilateral in its dynamic.

To borrow from Anderson (2002: 238), we might say that part of the struggle for community and social justice is an 'internal, existential struggle within all of us'. The significance of its externalized manifestations notwithstanding, injustice is something which 'lives within each of us, and until we overcome that internal form of violence . . . we will not be able to overcome its more external, social forms' (Anderson, 2002: 238). Those affective and cognitive barriers that impede the development and practice of compassion remain socially and culturally active only so long as they remain active psychological tendencies. They live in social character and find embodiment in cultural and institutional realities only so long as we fail in that 'internal struggle' of which Anderson writes.

This, I believe, is what Nussbaum (2001: 405) had in mind as well when she writes that, 'compassionate individuals construct institutions that embody what they imagine'. Similarly, we might suppose that the degree to which unjust, harmful and indifferent dispositions are active in individuals, they will remain active in the structures and institutions that we, as a collective of individuals, create. Embedded in structures, institutions and social character, in turn, they become that much more formidable as our 'internal, existential' adversaries.

At the same time that our cultural, structural and institutional realities are products of our imagination, we cannot neglect to consider the ways

in which our collective imagination is simultaneously shaped by existing macro-level realities. Whereas our structures and institutions tend to embody what we imagine, 'institutions, in turn, influence the development of compassion in individuals' (Nussbaum, 2001: 405). To be sure, we would not expect the capacity and potentiality of virtue to materialize in the absence of conditions conducive to their development and practice. Its scarcity in all spheres of human relating implicates not simply deficits of individual disposition, but perhaps more importantly the role of social character, socialization, social structure and institutional arrangements and practices. As Fesmire (1997: 285) writes, 'there is no such thing as someone who is "born" a saint or savage'. Rather, we should understand tendencies toward virtue and vice as prominently shaped by and informed through our interactions with the cultural, structural and institutional elements of our existence.

Virtues, Fesmire (1997: 285) continues, 'are not radically private possessions . . . and "vices" do not merely result from "weak wills" or "sinful natures"'. Characterological tendencies are best regarded as 'products of interaction between the make-up of an individual on the one hand and objective elements of the social world on the other' (Fesmire, 1997: 285). There is thus an important sense in which separation between people in interpersonal spheres is 'self-similar' (Williams and Arrigo, 2004: 43–64) to the separations embedded within and promulgated by social structure and the policies and practices of social institutions. Of the sense of separation that impedes the development and practice of compassion, Nussbaum (2001: 405) offers:

. . . empathy and judgment of similar possibilities are profoundly influenced by the ways in which institutions situate people in relation to one another: sharp separations impede these mechanisms; and similar situations promote them.

We might think, for instance, of the ways in which social problems such as crime, poverty and homelessness are reduced to psychological maladies. Indeed, prevailing cultural attitudes toward virtuous and vicious behavior tend, on the whole, toward psychologically reductionistic formulations. Thus, the prisoner, the homeless person and the drug addict represent problems of individual character or pathology. Such persons, through their own decisions and actions, bring about their own suffering and, thus, are less deserving of compassion. Yet, as Fesmire (1997: 288–9) offers:

Self-righteously calling a prostitute a sinner does not alter the social conditions that give rise to her trade. The politician who promises to 'get tough on crime' merely by building more prisons for 'born criminals' does nothing to transform the social and material conditions that make crime inevitable. Likewise, the campaign to combat drug use by asking people to 'Just Say No' . . . contributes little toward curbing the social problem of drug addiction.

Crucially, as a consequence of such reductionistic tendencies, we neglect the very links between individual and social character that make the maladies of both possible and, in fact, probable. Recognizing this interplay is an important step toward 'act[ing] intelligently for social progress' (Fesmire, 1997: 285).

Toward a Conclusion

Of the obstacles we face in the ongoing effort to promote conditions of social justice and human flourishing, perhaps the most crucial is what we might call a generalized impoverishment of moral sensibilities that forefront the good of the other. Meaningful social transformation thus requires significant alterations of personal and collective value frameworks – in many ways, the pursuit of social justice demands nothing less than a moral and spiritual revolution. An important part of this revolution is the embodiment and regular exercise of the virtue of compassion in interpersonal, institutional and global contexts (e.g. Fuller, 1998). Yet compassion itself requires the overcoming of crucial obstacles erected from the ways in which we perceive ourselves, others and the realities of injustice and human suffering. Social change begins intrapersonally, where appreciation of connectedness overcomes artificially constructed divisions and differences. Most importantly, recognizing the ways in which injustice and suffering stifle possibilities for all who share in the human community is the first step toward compassionate living. Only when our decisions and actions demonstrate concern for others – even those whose problems seem deserved or far removed from our own – do we begin to pave a pathway for conditions of equality, harmony, mutuality and community that make possible widespread human well-being, fulfillment and flourishing.

Notes

1. Social justice is simultaneously a personal and collective pursuit, demanding not only institutional and community-based strategies for transformation, but also personal responsibility, commitment and sacrifice. History has demonstrated the effectiveness of collective/community-based social movements (e.g. Gandhi's salt protest), as well as the transformative potential of personal responsibility – 'door to door, person to person, to whoever is in need that you or I come into contact with' (Braswell et al., 2001: 14).
2. The centrality of compassion to moral psychology was implied by Kohlberg (1984), for whom 'postconventional' morality entails imagining how every person participating in the situation would feel if they were placed in each other's position. In this respect, Kohlberg's Stage 6 moral reasoning is imaginative and *empathic*. Concern for compassion, caring and human relatedness, however, is

much more crucial to the moral psychologies of Carol Gilligan (1982), Nel Noddings (1984) and others promoting an ethic of care.

3. In the early modern period, for instance, Descartes and Malebranche popularized the idea that non-human animals were 'automata', incapable of suffering and therefore outside the boundaries of moral concern. Nicholas Fontaine, in his memoirs of 1738, described scientific experiments that were carried out under the guise of such modern distinctions:

They administered beatings to dogs with perfect indifference, and made fun of those who pitied the creatures as if they felt pain. They said the animals were clocks; that the cries they admitted when struck were only the noise of a little spring that had been touched, but that the whole body was without feeling. They nailed poor animals up on boards by their four paws to vivisect them and see the circulation of the blood, which was a great subject of conversation. (Cited in Rachels, 1986: 137)

'Dumb animals' were dissimilar – in fact, categorically distinct – from human beings and, consequently, existed outside the demands of compassion and benevolent concern. Not unlike other social and moral boundaries constructed along lines of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation and the like, the historical concern for non-human animals in the West has been one characterized by a variety of efforts to impose a moral distance between 'us' and 'them'.

4. As an example, some research on jury decision-making suggests jurors in criminal and civil trials may be predisposed to favor those with whom they share demographic characteristics (e.g. Kerr et al., 1995). This phenomenon is particularly problematic in cases involving victims who share similarities with jurors and defendants who are dissimilar in class, race, ethnicity or other observable ways. Bandes (1996) and others have drawn attention to the possibility that, in capital cases involving 'victim impact' testimony, jurors may be better able to relate to and thus empathize with victims than with defendants (thus increasing the likelihood of death as opposed to life imprisonment as a sentence) (see also Arrigo and Williams, 2003).
5. Consider the ways in which educational structure seems, in fact, to encourage social differentiation and self-conscious emotions such as pride and envy. Many educational theorists have suggested that our schools regain a sense of community, emphasizing cooperation and mutuality over and against competitive individualism. In part, this requires a de-emphasis on competition among students for superiority coupled with the encouragement of openness to the viewpoints and experiences of others. In competition, we seek to better others – our ultimate aim being their failure. To the degree that education is centered around and promotes competition, students are socialized not only in opposition to the spirit of cooperation and mutuality, but toward one in which the infliction of harm and suffering are necessary and inevitable elements of normal social functioning.
6. In his exploration of community-based initiatives as a compassionate response to the violence and suffering of homelessness, Gregg Barak (1991) examines the sensibilities informing the Hesed House – a temporary shelter constructed in

the mid-1980s in Aurora, Illinois. The Hesed House was established to meet the evolving needs of the poor, suffering and oppressed in that community through the provision of hospitality and care, coupled with the promotion of empowerment (Barak, 1991: 58). With regard to its underlying philosophy, Barak draws attention to common translations of *hesed* from the Hebrew scriptures as 'steadfast and enduring love' and 'interhuman compassion'. More specifically, *hesed* implies an *active* concern for the other – 'The Hebrew talks of *doing hesed* with someone, and *hesed* is frequently associated with the word "mispal" or "justice"' (Barak, 1991: 58). He continues:

According to the Hebrew scriptures, the unreserved commitment to the weak, the poor, and the oppressed is identical to an absolute sense of justice . . . *hesed* is, in fact, 'love-justice' and . . . calls on people . . . to reach out in a love that seeks justice . . . to go beyond 'the instinctual human impulse to reach out to those in need because it responds *even when the other hasn't earned it or doesn't deserve it*. (Barak, 1991: 58; my emphasis)

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