

Misery Loves Company

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1. Introduction

When you are going through a personal hardship it is often good to talk with others who have gone through something similar. It can help you get through the hard time, or simply feel less bad for a while, to hear about someone else's similar experience. This is a familiar phenomenon. But there is, I propose, something puzzling about it. If you are a good person, you wouldn't want the other person to have gone through this bad experience. You should wish that they hadn't gone through it, and it should pain you to hear that they have. And yet the phenomenon is that hearing about their similar hard time makes you feel better, rather than worse. It is comforting. It puts you in an overall more positive emotional state than you were before. Why is that?

Various answers might come to mind. For example, you might propose that hearing of someone else's similar hardship could help you see that what you are going through is more common than you thought; or that it could give you hope, or a sense of connection with others. After giving some philosophical context and clarifying the initial puzzle in section 2, I discuss many such intuitive answers in section 3. But I argue in section 4 that while these answers can be part of the story, they do not resolve the puzzle. There remains – I argue – a tension between two ideas:

(1) that it seems perfectly fine, appropriate and not at all vicious, for someone going through a hard time to find it emotionally helpful to hear another person's similar story, and

(2) that one should be pained or saddened by the hardship of another person.¹

In section 5, I consider how ideas from Robert Adams and Nic Bommarito might offer a way out of this tension. But I argue that neither of these proposals are satisfactory. The aim of the paper is to bring out this puzzle and show that it is harder to resolve than it might initially look. But I end, in section 6, with a suggestion for how we might resolve it.

2. Philosophical Context and the Initial Puzzle

Inner states, including feelings and emotions, can be virtuous or vicious.² To illustrate this, Adams asks us to imagine someone “very aged and infirmed”, who is immobile and has severe memory loss. He writes:

Such a person, I believe, can still be virtuous, and even an inspiration to others. She can still be considerate of those who see her and care for her, and thus need not be altogether without a decision-making dimension of virtue. But if we see notable virtue in her, much of it surely will be in her attitudes [...] Suppose she appreciates whatever good things she is still able to enjoy, is grateful to those who care for her, is delighted when she hears someone else's good news, and never enjoys hearing of another person's misfortune. I believe all of that is virtue.³

This example highlights the inner dimensions of character that are present for all of us. Just as for this woman, for all of us, our moral characters are manifested not only in what we do, but also in how we think and feel.

One important aspect of this is our inner reactions to how others are doing. As Adams describes, it is virtuous to delight when good things happen to others, and to be pained by others’

¹ Neither of these ideas is meant to be a true-in-all-contexts, exceptionless claim. But they do often hold, and I argue that they are in tension in many instances of the phenomenon in question.

² Or, perhaps more accurately, can be manifestations of virtue or vice. Whenever I talk of feelings or emotions being virtuous or vicious, you can feel free to think of this as shorthand for their being “manifestations of” virtue or vice.

³ Adams 2006, 16.

misfortunes.⁴ More generally, virtuous inner responses to new information about others tends to match the valence of the news: when the news is good, a virtuous response is to feel pleased, happy or some other positive emotion like gratitude; when the news is bad, a virtuous response is to feel pained, saddened, or some other negative emotion like grief. When there is, instead, a valence mismatch (a positive or indifferent reaction to bad news, or a negative or indifferent reaction to good news) that tends to be vicious. Examples of such vicious responses include envy (feeling bad when good things happen to others), malice (wanting bad things to happen to others, or feeling pleased when they do), and callousness (being indifferent when bad things happen to others).

Some theorists treat a general version of this point as central to understanding virtue.

According to Hurka:

What separates the virtues from the vices is that the former involve a morally fitting attitude toward their object while the latter involve an unfitting one. Thus, benevolence is a virtue because it involves a positive attitude toward the good of another's pleasure; its positive orientation – its being *for* the pleasure – matches its object's positive value. Likewise, compassion involves a negative attitude toward pain [...] and it's virtuous for that reason. (Virtue is therefore like boosting one car battery from another: you want to connect positive to positive and negative to negative.)⁵

In a similar vein, Adams argues that virtue is a matter of being “for good things and against bad things – and not just in any way, but excellently.”⁶ And according to Bommarito, virtue involves caring about moral goods; a virtuous state is one that manifests this care. Vice is lacking concern for some moral good, or caring about things that are morally bad; vicious states are those that

⁴ Adams says “to never enjoy”, but I think “pained” better captures what he is getting at. One can “not enjoy” hearing about other people's misfortunes because one finds hearing about their problems to be a bother or boring. That is clearly not what Adams has in mind.

⁵ Hurka 2010, 121. Hurka 2001 puts this in terms of “loving” what is good and “hating” what is bad.

⁶ Adams 2006, 14.

manifest these concerns.⁷ These views differ in their details, but they all centre around the idea that virtue involves some form of being *for* good things and *against* bad things.⁸

I will draw on some ideas from these theorists in what follows, but the discussion does not rest on acceptance of this sort of general account of virtue and vice. All we really need to get our discussion going is the simple point that virtuous inner reactions to other people's news tend to be valence-matching, and that when there is a valence mis-match this tends to reflect some vice.⁹

Turn now to the phenomenon that I want to discuss: that when people are going through a hardship, it is often emotionally helpful for them to hear about the similar hardship of another person. Imagine Sarah, who has just lost her husband to a heart attack at age sixty-two. Suppose Sarah runs into an old acquaintance Silvia, who she hasn't seen for a long time. When Sarah tells Silvia her sad news, Silvia expresses how sorry she is. Then she tells her that she too lost her husband, five years ago to cancer. Silvia talks about how hard it was, and she talks about how she still sometimes forgets that he is gone. Sarah might find this conversation with Silvia emotionally helpful. She might leave the conversation feeling a little better than before – a little less distressed, a little less overwhelmed by her grief.

The puzzle with this – at least initially – is that it seems to be a positive emotional response to news of something bad happening to someone else. Sarah feels a little better (a little more at ease, a little less distressed) through hearing about Silvia's serious misfortune. And yet there does not seem to be anything at all vicious going on. Sarah's reaction seems entirely fine and fitting.

⁷ Bommarito 2018, Chapter 1.

⁸ Arpaly and Schroeder (2014, Chapter 9) give another view of this sort.

⁹ Indeed, all we really need is that this is so in contexts of hearing someone's substantial undeserved hardship first-hand, in a direct, personal interaction with them. See note 20 for more on this point.

In general, it typically seems perfectly appropriate and not reflective of anything bad about us, when we find it helpful to hear from others who have gone through (or, are currently going through) something similar to what we are going through. The puzzle is one of understanding how this could be, given that this sort of inner response seems, on the face of it, to be one of feeling overall better upon hearing someone else's bad news.

How might we answer this? A natural response is to try to show that it is actually something good that is making one feel better, and not the other's hardship in itself. Bommarito highlights that one can have a positive inner reaction toward someone else's misfortune without this being vicious if what one feels positive about is a good aspect or outcome of the misfortune. He gives the example of Peter who feels pleased upon hearing that his hard-working colleague has been fired but only because "he knows it will allow him to spend much needed time with his family and is the opportunity he needs to ultimately land a better job."¹⁰ The firing, Bommarito says, is still a genuine misfortune; it is painful for this colleague to go through. But since Peter is not taking pleasure in the hardship itself but instead in these good outcomes that he foresees it will have, this does not reflect badly on Peter's character.

When it comes to our puzzle: if one feels somewhat better upon hearing of someone else's similar hardship, but only in virtue of some good aspect or outcome of their hardship – not in virtue of the bad in itself – then there is no valence mismatch after all. And this point can be extended from good aspects or outcomes of the hardship to good aspects or outcomes of hearing about it. If there is something good that comes out of hearing about another person's similar hardship, and this good thing is the object of one's positive emotional reaction, then there is no valence mismatch.

¹⁰ Bommarito 2018, 59.

In the next section I look at various responses to the puzzle that I think many people will be inclined to give. All of them operate in just that way: they try to answer the puzzle by identifying a good thing that comes out of hearing about the other's similar hardship, which can be the object of one's positive emotional response.

3. Initial Responses: Good Things to Feel Better About

My aim in this section is just to set out and make some preliminary comments about each of these natural responses to the puzzle. I turn to the question of whether they really do resolve it in section 4.

I divide the responses into two groups. Responses in group 'A' identify ways in which hearing someone's similar story could change one's understanding of one's own situation, such that it seems in some respect less bad than it did before. Responses in group 'B' identify something else good, besides a revised understanding of one's hardship.

(A.1) Hope

Suppose Tess has recently been diagnosed with a severe case of colitis. She has been very unwell, and now at least she knows what is causing her symptoms. But she is struggling physically, and she is distressed by the diagnosis and afraid of what it might mean for her future. One day Tess mentions her situation to her co-worker Tina. To her surprise, Tina tells her that she too suffered from colitis many years ago. Those years were hard, and various treatments they tried did not work. Eventually she had proctocolectomy surgery. Recovery was difficult, but she is now doing great. She says she feels like she has her life back. Hearing that Tina went through this, and hearing a little bit about her story, is emotionally helpful for Tess. After talking with Tina, Tess feels less upset and a bit more at ease.

If we are looking for something good that is what is uplifting or comforting for Tess, there is a straightforward answer: things eventually got better for Tina, and she is now doing great. In addition to feeling happy for Tina that she got through the hard time, this could also give Tess hope for herself.

There are two good things to separate here: (i) that Tina got through the hardship, and (ii) the hope this might give Tess for herself. As far as our puzzle is concerned, (ii) is crucial if this explanation is to help. To see this, imagine someone else in the office, Tabitha, who is not going through any similar hardship. One day, a conversation about food leads Tina to tell Tabitha about her past illness and the difficult surgery she eventually had. We would expect that, insofar as Tabitha is not in some sort of moment of vice, she would feel primarily sorry to hear that Tina went through such a hard, stressful time in the past. This is not to say that her emotional response must be purely negatively-valenced. A feeling of relief that things worked out for Tina might be mixed in. But the point is that, since the new information she is getting about Tina is bad news (even though it is past), she would primarily be sorry to hear it.¹¹ So, (i) alone does not explain why one's emotional response to learning about Tina's past illness would be dominantly positive.¹² But with Tess there is this additional element that might do the trick: (ii) it could give her new hope for herself.

Increased hope for one's own future cannot always be what explains our phenomenon. First, it can be helpful to talk with someone who is simultaneously going through a similar hardship, and so for whom things have not yet worked out. Second, even if one is talking to

¹¹ She would not feel as pained as she would if she were hearing that Tina was still suffering. But the fact that it was in the past does not make it fitting to not feel sorry to hear it.

¹² There may be cases in which the fact that someone got through a hardship is enough to make it fitting to feel primarily happy or uplifted upon hearing for the first time about their hardship. But when such a reaction is fitting, something more explains this, other than just that the hardship was in the past.

someone who went through the hardship in the past and who is now doing better, this is not always what is helpful about the exchange. Recall Sarah, who just recently lost her husband, and who runs into Silvia. Even if Silvia is now doing well, and perhaps has even found new love with someone else, this might not be any part of why talking with her is helpful. Indeed, it could be that if Silvia had emphasized to Sarah how, even though the loss was hard, she has moved on and is now doing great, this would have made Sarah feel more upset, rather than a little better. It could be that, at this moment in time, a happy future without her husband is not what she can or wants to think about. If so, then what is comforting about her conversation with Silvia must instead be something to do with the shared experience of losing one's spouse itself, rather than hope it instills for the future.

In general, it often seems to be something about the fact itself that this other person went through a similar hardship that is helpful, rather than a change in how one assesses one's future prospects. What could that something be?

(A.2) Probability

One observation is that hearing about another person's similar experience can lead one to realize that, while one's situation is bad, it is not as uncommon as one thought. This is clearly not always what happens. Speaking to someone who has gone through something similar need not change one's assessment of how common it is. But at least sometimes it does. Muriel might not appreciate how common miscarriages are until, upon telling a few people that she has just went through one, some of them tell her that they too have had miscarriages. Even just finding out that one person she knows went through this, could change her impression of how common it is (whether or not this is a rational inference to make). Coming to believe that what you are going through is more common than you previously thought can be comforting.

But why? Why does coming to believe that it is more common than one thought make one feel less bad? Our initial puzzle seems to just reappear here: insofar as she is not malicious, Muriel would not wish for others to go through this hardship. So, shouldn't coming to believe that it is more common than she thought make her feel sadder rather than better?

One answer is that as she realizes that it is more common than she thought, her own situation seems less unfair. When it looked as though she was the only one in her wide circle who had to deal with pregnancy loss, this might have felt unfair. This feeling is alleviated by finding out that many people she knows have gone through similar troubles. However, even if this is sometimes part of the explanation, this does not help with our puzzle, because this does not seem like a totally vice-free reaction. A desire for things to be fair in this sense seems to be a desire that things not go well for others if they aren't going well for you. And if things are fairer in this sense than you previously thought, this only means that others are worse off than you previously thought. The facts of your own situation are not any better in virtue of it. So, it actually does seem to reflect some vice if you want things to be more fair in that sense, or if you feel better in virtue of coming to believe that they are.

However, there is a nearby explanation that does not have that problem: coming to see that your hardship is more common than you thought can change your assessment of how probable it was that you would go through it. If Muriel had thought of miscarriages as very rare, then she would have thought that it would be very improbable for her to have one. If she does have one, this will feel very unlucky; all odds were in favour of a successful pregnancy, and here she is with a miscarriage. Whereas, if she comes to think that they are quite common, this means

that it was actually fairly probable that she would have one. So, she would not feel as much like the victim of major unluckiness. This could be why it makes her feel less bad.¹³

Notice that caring about how improbable it was that one would be in the situation that one is in does not involve caring about one's comparative well-being to others for its own sake. So, it does not involve preferring that things go badly for others if they are going badly for you. It might seem puzzling, though, why we should care about how probable our own situation is. The actual facts of Muriel's situation are the same, whether it was probable or improbable that she would be in it. Still, it does seem that we do sometimes care about this. And whether or not it is rational to care about it, it at least does not seem vicious if we do.

(A.3) Self-Judgment

There is a different way in which seeing that one's hardship is more common than one thought could make one feel better: it could affect how much one blames or negatively judges oneself. Suppose you are in your first year of law school, and your first set of exams are approaching. You are studying, but you feel overwhelmed by the work. Suppose that as a result, you feel that you are not cut out for law school – that you are not smart or capable enough. Talking to another classmate and hearing that they are just as daunted by the work might help ease your negative self-assessment. It might lead you to feel less like you are not cut out for it, and more like law school is just hard. This can explain why hearing that the other person is also having a hard time makes you feel better.

Of course this explanation is only even a candidate explanation when the person sees what they are going through as something they are at least partly to blame for, or as reflecting some weakness or shortcoming on their part. And that is certainly not always the case (e.g. it

¹³ This explanation fits well with a general observation that Hurka makes: we often are more pleased by goods or more pained by evils “when their *not* existing is a closer possibility.” (2001, 120)

need not be the case for Sarah or Tess). So again we have an explanation that does not always apply. But still, it does at least sometimes.

The explanations we have looked at so far all involve changes in one's assessment of one's hardship. They involve evaluating one's situation to be, in some respect, not as bad as one previously had thought. But talking to someone who has gone through something similar can make one feel better even if it does not result in such a change in assessment. Indeed, I think this is often the way it goes; there is some relief or comfort in hearing that this other person went through something similar, even though one is not gaining a new understanding of one's own situation because of it. When this is so, what explains this? Here are two possible answers.

(B.1) Empathy, Sympathy

Adam Smith discusses the pleasure there is in finding that someone else empathizes with you. He writes, "nothing pleases us more than to observe in other men a fellow-feeling with all the emotions of our own breast."¹⁴ This is surely a tremendous exaggeration. I am certainly much more pleased that I survived a life-threatening emergency than I am pleased that you empathize with me about what I went through. However, Smith is right that we might get some pleasure, or some relief, when we feel that others empathize with how we are feeling, and also – we can add – when we feel that they sympathize with us. Perhaps this could explain why it is distinctly comforting to talk with someone who has gone through a similar hard time. Because they themselves have gone through something similar, they might be able to more fully empathize. It might also be that they can have a distinctive, fuller sort of sympathy as a result of having gone through something similar. While it might very well be that none of A.1, A.2, or A.3 capture why Sarah finds it comforting to hear from Silvia that she also lost her husband, perhaps this

¹⁴ Smith 1759, Part I, Section I, Chapter II. Smith uses "sympathy" the way people now use the term "empathy".

point about empathy or sympathy explains it. Smith writes of empathy that it “alleviates [...] grief by insinuating into the heart almost the only agreeable sensation which it is at that time capable of receiving.”¹⁵

(B.2) Connection

A related idea is that if someone has gone through the same thing, one might feel a special sense of connection to them. This feeling of connection could result from knowing that they understand first-hand what you are going through, and that you understand their experience too. While it could be that Tina’s story of going through the same illness gives Tess hope for herself, it could instead be (or, in addition) that what is comforting is a distinctive feeling of connection with Tina over their common experience. (This could be what Tess means if she says that talking to Tina made her “feel less alone”.)

I am not sure if B.1 and B.2 are entirely distinct from one another. But either way, these explanations seem like they can frequently apply.

4. The Problem of Insufficient Concern

It might seem that we have more than solved the puzzle (in which case it wasn’t so puzzling after all). We have identified many potential good outcomes of hearing another person’s similar story that can be the object of one’s positive emotional response. Surely for most instances of our phenomenon one or more of these are at play.¹⁶ But while I agree that these explanations can be part of the story, I do not think they solve the puzzle.

¹⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁶ And our solution need not cover every instance, since there can be some cases in which the emotional response does reflect some vice. What is implausible is that it is typically vicious.

Begin with instances in which it seems to be B.1 or B.2 (or both) doing the work, and not any of A.1-A.3. So, it is not that hearing from this other person changes one's assessment of one's own situation. But there is something else good that comes from hearing that they have gone through something similar: a sense of connection with them, or a feeling of being empathized or sympathized with especially well. These are good things. So, they seem to answer the valence-crossing problem: you are only feeling better in virtue of some good, not in virtue of the other person's suffering in itself.

But here is the problem: the feeling of connection, or of being sympathized with, is a good thing, but this good is often very minor in comparison with what you are learning about the other person – namely, that they went through (or are going through) major hardship. So, if this is all we have to say about why you feel better in virtue of hearing their story, it remains unclear why this does not reflect some vice in you. In particular, why does it not reflect overconcern with this minor positive for yourself and insufficient concern for this other person and what they went through?

To illustrate, consider a different sort of example: suppose you meet and start to get to know an old woman named Irene who lives in the apartment down the hall from you. Irene is very cheerful, and as far as you can tell, she seems to have a good life, with nice family and friends. You chat in the halls whenever you see each other, and occasionally she invites you in for a cup of tea. After a little while of getting to know each other, Irene opens up to you and tells you that she is a Holocaust survivor. She tells you a bit about the horrors she went through, and about family members who were killed (including her parents and brother). This conversation with Irene might give you a deeper feeling of connection to Irene. (Perhaps you can tell that it is very hard for her to talk about this, and that she doesn't do so often, and so you feel a sense of

closeness because of this.) This feeling of connection is a good thing. But even though there is this positive aspect of hearing about what she went through, the experience of hearing her story of extreme, horrifying hardship should primarily be one of feeling very sad and pained for her. If what was dominant in your inner response was feeling pleased about or uplifted by your connection with Irene, rather than feeling pained by what Irene is telling you, this would likely reflect some vice. It would be a clear overconcern with your own interpersonal connection, and far too little concern about Irene and what she went through. Of course, this is *not* an example of our phenomenon; it is not a case of taking comfort in the similar hardships of others. (Also, the hardship here is of another scale than any that we have been talking about.) But what the example illustrates is that we cannot simply cite these goods (a feeling of connection, empathy or sympathy) as the object of the positive emotional response, and think we have dispelled the puzzle.

The puzzle, however, is relocated from where it had seemed to be in section 2. At least with regard to proposals B.1 and B.2, the puzzle turns out to be an issue of degrees of concern, rather than valence-crossing. If B.1 or B.2 explains why the interaction makes you feel better, then it is *not* that you feel better in virtue of the other person's hardship (a bad) in itself. It is only a good thing (a feeling of connection, or of being sympathized with) that is making you feel better. But the issue is that *if* this is all we have to say about why hearing about their hardship makes you feel overall better, then something about the degrees or balance of your concerns seems off. It looks as though you are too concerned with these relatively minor positives for yourself, and do not care enough about the other person and their suffering.¹⁷

¹⁷ This problem might not be there when it comes to more minor difficulties. The phenomenon of finding it helpful to hear from others who are going through, or went through, something similar occurs not only for serious hardships, but for all sorts of difficulties one might face in life. I focus largely on more serious hardships in this paper, though, because that is where the puzzle is most clearly present.

Various vices involve having insufficient concern, or a problematic balance of concerns, rather than valence-crossing. Selfishness, as Hurka explains, involves “caring much more about your own minor pleasure [or, minor relief from pain] than about other people’s larger pleasures or very great pains.”¹⁸ This is not a vice of valence-crossing; it is not a matter of being *for* bads, or *against* goods. It is instead a vice of not caring enough about certain things and caring too much about others. Callousness is sometimes a matter of completely lacking concern for the suffering of others, but it can also take the form of having insufficient concern. Suppose Oscar tells Kelly that he has just discovered that his long-time partner has cheated on him; he is devastated. Kelly feels a little sorry to hear it, but only barely; she has a little “oh, too bad” sort of feeling and that’s it. This seems like a case of having insufficient concern for Oscar, and it might reflect some callousness, or other vice of insensitivity. Self-centeredness is similar to selfishness in that it combines overconcern with yourself and insufficient concern for others, but – as Adams puts it – the difference is that selfishness is a matter of the self looming too large in one’s desires, whereas self-centredness is a matter of the self looming too large in one’s cognitive focus.¹⁹ If upon hearing what Oscar is going through, Kelly feels slightly bad for Oscar, but mainly a pleasant satisfaction in the fact Oscar feels close enough to tell her, this seems like an instance of self-centeredness.

When it comes to our phenomenon, intuitively instances of it do *not* exhibit any such vice (at least not normally). When one thinks of Sarah feeling somewhat better from her conversation with Silvia, this does not seem at all vicious, or reflective of anything problematic about Sarah. But the point is that if we understand what is going on simply in the way suggested by B.1 or B.2, it lookss a lot like self-centredness, or some other nearby vice (e.g. callousness). It looks

¹⁸ Hurka 2010, 129-230.

¹⁹ Adams 2006, 105.

like an instance of caring more about a relatively small positive for herself (a minor connection with another person, or the minor good of being empathized with) than about this other person and the major hardship that she went through. In other words, it looks like a case of insufficient concern for Silvia. I do *not* think it is reflective of any such vice. But the point is that B.1 and B.2 are not explaining why. So, the puzzle remains.

When they apply, do explanations of type A avoid this problem? When it comes to A.2, I think the answer is a clear ‘no’. Even if coming to see one’s hardship as less improbable than one thought counts as a positive aspect of hearing of someone else’s hardship, this is often a very small positive compared to the bad news you are hearing about their life. Imagine that Clive, who has cancer, meets Carl while sitting in the coffee shop in the lobby of the hospital. They start chatting, and it turns out that Carl has the same kind of cancer. Talking to Carl, and hearing that he is going through the same thing, is emotionally helpful to Clive; he leaves the conversation feeling somewhat uplifted or less badly about his situation. And let’s suppose this is because of A.2. Perhaps hearing that this other random person next to him at the coffee shop has the same disease makes the statistics that his doctor told him more vivid. But even if this makes Clive view his situation a little bit less badly, it surely would not change his assessment of how bad it is by very much. All his symptoms, and his prospects going forward, are the same. And this small positive difference in his understanding of his own situation is very small in comparison to what this other person is telling him about his own life – which is the difference between this person having cancer and not. Why, then, does it not reflect insufficient concern for Carl that Clive feels overall uplifted, or less bad, from learning that Carl has the same kind of cancer? A.2 does not seem capable of answering this, at least not on its own.

A.1 and A.3, when they apply, are more complicated. If the change in one's hope for one's own future, or in one's self-judgment, inspired by hearing another person's similar story is large enough then this might avoid the problem. But if the change in hope or self-judgment is only quite small, then the problem of insufficient concern is there. If prior to talking to Tina, Tess already knew a significant amount about colitis, and the various treatments and their probabilities of success, then it could be that even if talking to Tina does increase Tess's hope, it does so only slightly. Taken by itself, a slight increase in hope for her own future would be a perfect explanation as to why Tess feels a little better upon hearing of Tina's illness: she feels a little better, because she's a little more hopeful. But the slight increase in hope is *not* coming by itself; there is also this major bad news about what Tina endured in her own life. So again the puzzle is there: why is it not overly self-centred, and reflective of insufficient care about Tina, that Tess feels overall better upon hearing what Tina went through, rather than primarily sorry to hear it?

Now, some might wonder why we shouldn't just accept that these moments are, in fact, often minor moments of vice, like self-centredness. In one sense, such a conclusion would be no big deal: we all know that humans are imperfect, and that people are often overly self-concerned, and insufficiently concerned with others. But still, such a conclusion about this specific phenomenon would be surprising and unsettling, because we do not think of this common human phenomenon in that way at all. When we imagine Sarah's conversation with Silvia and her feeling a little bit better from it, or Clive finding it emotionally helpful to meet and talk with Carl, these do not intuitively seem anything like moments of self-centeredness, callousness or other vice. To come at this from another angle: consider the perspective of the person offering up their similar story of hardship to the other person. We often recognize that it might be helpful or

comforting for the other person to hear that we went through the same thing, and so we tell them about it for that very reason. When we do this, it certainly does not feel at all as though we are appealing to some vice in their character. Also, notice that people often talk, after the fact, about how helpful it was to hear from others who went through something similar. When they do, there is no sense that they are reporting something morally sub-par about themselves. I do not think we should conclude that these impressions are mistaken. They still seem exactly right to me. What we are seeing, though, is that our puzzle in understanding why might be harder than it initially looked.²⁰

5. Two Attempts to Resolve the Puzzle

So far, we have seen that we cannot simply cite the sorts of reasons identified in section 3 and think we have solved the puzzle. The reasons gathered in section 3 show that the phenomenon of feeling comforted, or less bad, in virtue of hearing of someone's similar hardship need not involve feeling positive about another's hardship in itself. (So, it need not involve being *for* another's suffering.) But the puzzle is: why does this overall positive emotional response not reflect insufficient concern for the other person and what they went through (or, are currently going through)?

²⁰ A different type of reply that some might try is to argue against the idea that one should in general be pained by the suffering of others. For instance, one might point out that we are constantly hearing about human suffering in the news; because of this – one might argue – it is appropriate, and perhaps even necessary, to not always be emotionally affected by such news. But even if that is right, this does not help with our puzzle. This is because even if that is so, it is hard to deny that one should feel pained by someone's substantial, undeserved suffering when hearing about it first-hand, in a direct, personal interaction with them. This is why I focus on examples of our phenomenon that involve hearing directly from the person. While the phenomenon of taking comfort in the similar stories of others can also occur when hearing someone's story indirectly (e.g. through a friend) or in the media (e.g. a celebrity interview), the puzzle is clearest in first-hand, interpersonal-interaction cases.

Here are two possible answers, drawing on ideas from Adams and Bommarito respectively:

Adams highlights that various factors affect what degrees of concern are appropriate, beyond just how good or bad things are. Of particular relevance for our purposes, there is justified partiality to oneself, and to those with whom one stands in a close relationship. Indeed, Adams argues that some partiality is not only consistent with but required for virtue. If one is entirely impartial, one cannot – he argues – have the depth of engagement required for virtue.²¹ This might help us with our puzzle, because we could say the following: it is no sign of any vice to care much more about one's own good than about the good of others. So, there is no vice in Tess's being more concerned about a small change in hope for her own future, or a small change in her assessment of how likely it is to have colitis, than she is about the hardship that Tina went through.

But does this work? I don't think so. I agree that there is no vice exemplified in Tess's caring much more about her own illness than about Tina's, or in Sarah's caring much more about the loss of her own husband than about Silvia's loss of hers. But I don't think it is plausible that partiality for oneself justifies or makes fitting caring more about someone sympathizing with you, or about your feeling some sense of connection with them, than about their serious hardship. Similarly, I don't think it is plausible that partiality for oneself justifies caring more about differences in how probable it was that one would be in the situation that one is in, than about the difference between someone suffering a serious hardship and not. And the same point goes for very small differences in how one assesses one's future prospects, or very small differences in one's self-judgment.

²¹ Adams, 28.

There is also a different problem with this Adams-inspired response. In section 4, we saw that the problem with citing the sorts of reasons gathered in section 3 as the solution to our puzzle is that these explanations suggest that, for example, Sarah cares more about being sympathized with than about the death of Silvia's husband. The Adams-inspired response does not question that that is the right understanding of what is going on with Sarah. Instead, it argues that this does not make her vicious. But that understanding of what is going on with Sarah when she finds talking with Silvia helpful just does not seem right. Imagine that you are Silvia, and that upon meeting Sarah and hearing about the death of her husband, you offer up your own story. You do so in part just to be honest, but also because you know that it might be helpful for Sarah to hear how hard it was for you when you lost your husband. Would you think that, if Sarah did in fact find it helpful, this showed that she cares more about receiving some sympathy from you than about you and your husband's tragic death? Surely not.

A response that does better in this regard draws on ideas from Bommarito's work. Bommarito emphasizes that while our feelings and emotions often track our cares and concerns, they sometimes do not. He discusses various ways in which this can happen, but of particular relevance for our purposes is his point that one can fail to feel badly when bad things happen to others *not* because one does not care about them but because, for instance, one is extremely exhausted, has a bad cold, or is on a sedative.²² Imagine a person who is coming off a nightshift and is exhausted. If she does not feel anything much upon hearing a news report about refugee children being separated from their parents at the border, this might just be because her exhaustion is numbing her, or crowding out her ability to process what she is hearing. It need *not*

²² Bommarito 2018, 51. Arpaly and Schroeder make a similar point (2014, 201).

be because she does not care about these children and families and the suffering inflicted. If so, her failure to feel pained by what she hears is not vicious, or reflective of anything bad about her.

This point from Bommarito offers an answer to our problem: even if Sarah feels primarily comforted upon hearing Silvia's story, rather than dominantly saddened that Silvia went through this, this does not mean that she does not care enough about Silvia, or that she cares too much about people sympathizing with her. It could just be that because Sarah is consumed by grief, her care for Silvia is not manifesting very much in her feelings.

One thing that I am not clear about is whether it is correct to attribute sufficient care to the exhausted nightshift worker who doesn't feel pained by the news about the refugee children, or whether it would be more accurate to say that while at the moment she does not care enough, this does not reflect badly on her character, because her lack of care is only due to exhaustion. But in any case, this does not matter much for our purposes, because the upshot is the same either way. As Bommarito puts it, "failing to feel the right emotion, at the right time, toward the right object is not always morally vicious."²³ This is because one can fail to feel those things as a result of factors that are not relevant to evaluating your character, including factors like being overwhelmed by exhaustion, distress, or grief.

But here is why I am not satisfied with this as our reply to the puzzle: this reply accepts that feeling better in virtue of hearing someone else's similar story of hardship is "failing to feel the right emotion, at the right time, toward the right object." In other words, it accepts that something is off about this inner response – that it is not what it would be if one's emotional capacities were not impaired or compromised by your distress, worry or grief. This is a problem for two reasons. First, it can be that your distress or worry about your current bad situation are

²³ Bommarito 2018, 103.

not at the moment acute, and yet you still find talking with someone who has gone through something similar helpful. The present explanation suggests that such instances do exhibit some vice, but that does not seem right (at least not typically). Even if Clive is not currently in an active state of distress about his cancer, and is rather quite clear-headed while talking with Carl in the coffee shop, it still seems not at all reflective of vice if he finds hearing that Carl is going through the same thing emotionally helpful.

Related, and more fundamentally, it simply does not seem right that when one feels comforted, or less bad, upon hearing of someone's similar hardship, one is failing to feel the right thing. I agree with Bommarito that if the exhausted nightshift worker does not feel anything much upon hearing about the refugee children, this is a case of failing to feel the right thing. If we imagine another nightshift worker who is tired but whose exhaustion is not so bad so as to interfere with their ability to feel as they normally would upon hearing such news, we would think it reflective of some vice if they did not feel pained by it. So, when it comes to the nightshift worker who is too exhausted to feel pained by this news, Bommarito's description seems correct: they fail to feel the fitting thing, but not because of anything vicious about them. But, unlike that example, when it comes to our cases, I do not think it is true that the emotional response in question is the "wrong" one. When Sarah hears Silvia talk about her similar hardship and feels less overwhelmed by grief as a result, or when Clive feels a little better after meeting and talking with Carl, these do not look like cases of failing to feel the fitting thing. Rather these seem like perfectly good, fitting reactions. The present proposal does not help us make sense of that. So again, our puzzle largely remains.

6. Moving Beyond Good Things to Feel Better About

The aim of this paper has been to show that this very common human phenomenon poses a puzzle, and one that is not easy to resolve. But in this last section, I want to give a suggestion for what the solution might be. This suggestion should be taken as just that – a suggestion for further thought, not a fully worked out solution.

Notice that the responses considered in section 5 try to work with the positive explanations of section 3 as to why hearing another person's similar story is helpful. And they do not deny that the phenomenon, therefore, often involves relatively small positives for oneself dominating emotionally over any negatively-valenced feelings one might have about the other person's hardship. What they try to do is explain why, even if that is the case, there need not be anything vicious going on. As explained, I don't think these responses are sufficient. I now want to suggest that a more promising way forward is to revisit the question of what the positive explanation could be. The responses of section 3 all took the form of identifying some good thing that comes of hearing the other's story – a good thing that can be the object of one's positive emotional response. These explanations can certainly be part of the story, and often will be. But I think this way of approaching the issue misses another sort of explanation that might be at work.

To bring this out, let me fill in the story of Sarah further, beginning before she meets Silvia. Imagine that Sarah has been in a distressed state all day. The loss of her husband is very recent, and her mind has been almost constantly consumed with shock and sadness about his death, and worry and stress about how she will get by without him. Then she runs into Silvia. After hearing Sarah's sad news and offering her condolences, Silvia tells Sarah that she too lost her husband, five years ago. Silvia talks about how hard it was, and she talks about how she still

sometimes forgets that he is gone. All day up until this point, Sarah has been in an inward-focused state of distress and sadness. But now Sarah's mind turns outward, to think about Silvia and what she went through. More specifically, her mind turns outward to Silvia but still in a way that is entirely on topic of the hardship she is going through. So, this is not a change of topic, or distraction. My suggestion is that this sort of shift in attention could itself be what is emotionally helpful for Sarah. That is, there need not be any further good outcome for Sarah that is doing the work, like feeling as though she is being empathized with, or feeling a special sense of connection with Silvia. It could rather be that turning her attention onto someone else other than herself, but while still cognitively and emotionally engaged with the hardship that she is going through, is psychologically helpful in working through, and thereby to some extent relieving, her pain and worry about her own situation.

In general, whether or not one is in an acute state of sadness or distress, if you are going through a hard time, hearing from someone who went through (or, is going through) something similar involves a distinctive kind of attention to your hardship: you are thinking about and emotionally engaged with the hardship that you are facing – what it involves, what is bad and difficult about it – but you are doing so in an outward, *other*-focused way (in terms of this other person going through it). In dealing with a personal hardship, we are often stuck either stewing inward or distracted away from our problem. Hearing about another person going through something similar allows us to engage with our problem but in this outward, other-centred way. My conjecture is that this kind of mental engagement is itself emotionally helpful: it can psychologically aid us in processing, and thereby alleviating to some extent, our hard feelings

about our own situation. I think something like this is often a central, basic part of what is going on with our phenomenon.²⁴

If something like this is right, does it help with the puzzle? I think it does. Insofar as this sort of explanation is at work, it is not a matter of there being some small positive upshot for yourself that you are “for” that is dominating emotionally over any negatively-valenced feelings that you have in virtue of being “against” their hardship. Instead, the explanation goes like this: you are against their hardship, and you are pained to hear it, and the sort of attention involved in thinking about and feeling pained for this other person is emotionally helpful. It psychologically aids you in processing, and perhaps letting go a little bit of, your pain or distress about your own situation. On this understanding, there is no worry that Sarah cares more about a minor positive for herself than about Silvia’s tragic loss. And rather than having a self-centered cognitive focus, on this understanding it is the fact that hearing Silvia’s story involves a specifically *non-self-centred* cognitive focus that is making the exchange emotionally helpful for Sarah.

We might, however, wonder if there is still a problem of insufficient concern here. We can still ask: why is it not reflective of insufficient concern for Silvia that the experience of hearing about Silvia’s husband’s death is dominantly emotionally positive for Sarah, rather than dominantly one of sorrow for Silvia that she went through this?

²⁴ Distraction can also provide its own kind of emotional relief. But what I am talking about is distinct from that sort of psychological effect. Talking to someone who went through something similar is *not* an escape from mentally engaging with the hardship you are facing. Rather, it involves turning your attention outward to someone else *within* your engagement with the hardship. The psychological effect is, it seems, therefore different. Instead of providing temporary escape from your feelings about your situation, my conjecture is that this outward, other-focused sort of mental engagement can help you process, and thereby let a little bit go of, your hard feelings about your own situation. That is not to say that this always has a more substantial emotional effect than distraction. Indeed, just as people say that talking to others helped them get through a hard time, people also often cite a steady source of distraction like work or a hobby, as having been crucial to ‘getting through it’. So, the point is not that one type of shift in attention is necessarily more helpful than the other. It is just that they are helpful in different ways.

But we may now have a good answer. On the sort of explanation under consideration, Sarah *could be* appropriately saddened or pained by Silvia's loss, and this would be fully consistent with the experience of hearing about the loss being overall emotionally positive for Sarah. On this explanation, Sarah's thinking about and feeling *fittingly* badly for Silvia would itself be what is emotionally helpful in processing her (*fittingly*) much greater, more consuming pain and distress about her own situation. Thus, there need not be any issue of overconcern with herself, or under-concern with Silvia here. And if one or more of the explanations of section 3 is also at play, this just adds on additional reasons for why it is helpful to talk with Silvia; it does not take away from this resolution of the puzzle.

Now, it could be that, in fact, Sarah does not feel very sorry to hear of Silvia's loss, and yet the psychological effect that I am talking about still occurs as a result of the shift in her cognitive attention from herself to Silvia. If so, then perhaps Sarah's emotional response would be correctly understood in the Bommarito-inspired way: she would not be feeling the fitting thing, but this does not reflect any vice if it is only because she is distressed or drained. But if so, this would just be a particular thing about Sarah in that instance. We still would have an explanation that allows us to make sense of why typically the phenomenon does not involve having unfitting feelings or insufficient concern for the other person. Indeed, not only is this explanation consistent with having fitting concern for the other person, but – if it is correct – the psychological effect it invokes often operates *through* one's fitting concern for them.

If something like this idea is right, then, a nice result of it is that, far from being manifestations of self-centeredness or other vice, these moments of finding someone else's story of similar hardship emotionally helpful are often manifestations of our *other-concerning* nature.

So, they would not only not reflect badly on us, but also would often reflect something positively good about us.²⁵

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