

Comments on Warren Reich’s article on ancient consolation and modern empathy

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Warren Reich deserves recognition for his description of “consolation” as well as his thorough research of this term in a recent article, “From Ancient Consolation and Negative Care to Modern Empathy and Neuroscience” [1]. Empathy and compassion in this article are analysed in a limited aspect, that is, as a sharing or responding to the other’s pain. Nonetheless, the author’s views when it comes to the understanding of empathy and the virtue of compassion give rise to debatable discussions. (1) Reich assigns to consolation a fundamental role in our moral life and identifies consolation as a “virtue” by distinguishing—or even separating—it from empathy and compassion. I will argue against this distinction and identification. (2) Reich’s prioritization of consolation in relation to empathy and compassion is questionable. I will demonstrate how this prioritization of consolation contrasts with some experts’ views on the role, scope, and priority of empathy in human interactions and moral life. (3) Reich considers that consolation is accompanied by an action to help whereas empathy is not. I will show that scholars consistently and frequently associate empathy with action and consider consolation to be the action to take when painful situations call forth the feeling of empathy.

Prioritization and distinction

It is worth first identifying a lack in the terminology. Reich seems to defend the understanding that consolation is *a remarkably uncomplicated virtue* whereas empathy or compassion is *a demanding practice*. I believe this is a mistake. Actually, it is the term compassion that is defined as a virtue. Socrates, Protagoras,

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and Aristotle tackled this virtue at length. Even today, contemporary philosophers and scholars continue to write about compassion as a virtue [2]. And no online dictionary defines nor attributes to consolation the characteristic of a virtue.

With regard to the distinction between consolation and empathy, I believe the author exaggerates. Consider Reich's description of consolation as "Being aware of the plight of the other and recognizing it as a common human experience" (p. 26). We know from the many definitions of "empathy" that "awareness" and "recognition of others' feelings" are the most common words used in describing empathy. If consolation is described as "recognizing the plight of the other as a common human experience," then it is no different from empathy in painful situations, when we "share someone else's feelings or experiences by imagining what it would be like to be in their situation."¹ And this phenomenon of imagining—or recognizing as a common human experience (to use Reich's terminology)—occurs before any engagement in a psychological process. As Simon Baron-Cohen puts it, "Empathizing is about spontaneously and naturally tuning into the other person's thought and feelings, whatever these might be" [3, p. 21].

As for the priority or classification of consolation, in his two statements below, Reich seems to convey that empathy is ingredient to and a sub-category of consolation: "Consolation should take practical and developmental *priority over* compassion, empathy, and sympathy understood as 'full-blown' compassion" (p. 26; emphasis added). Moreover, he says, "From an ethical perspective, minimal forms of empathy, compassion, or sympathy, prompted by humanity, are *certainly ingredients* in the practice of consolation" (p. 28; emphasis added). We can argue against this view knowing that the general understanding of empathy is that it encompasses responses such as consolation and that it is empathy that should be developed first for anyone to be able to practice consolation.

So what is the sequence? Does empathy come first or consolation? Where do we start? Reich's statement, "the exercise of full-blown empathy and compassion, following the initial step of consolation, should be regarded as *subsequent steps*" (p. 28), is intriguing. Normally, it is consolation that is regarded as a subsequent step to empathy and not the other way around as stated by Reich. Actually, I notice a contradiction when further down in the article, he states, "The basis of interpersonal morality that *commences with empathy*, which *then leads*, paradigmatically, *to a form of care known as consolation*, requires a life long effort at moral development" (p. 29; emphasis added). Reich puts it right in this statement while contradicting his previous ones.

Empathy and action

With regard to the notion of action in Reich's comparative analysis between consolation and empathy, it can be easily argued, with Daniel Goleman, that compassionate empathy or "empathic concern" is to "not only understand a

¹ *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, s.v. "empathy," accessed January 24, 2013, <http://dictionary.cambridge.org>.

person's predicament and feel with them, but be spontaneously *moved to help*, if needed" [4, p. 96]. Nancy Eisenberg's view of empathy is "an emotional *response* that stems from another's emotional state or condition, is congruent with the other's emotional state or condition and involves at least a minimal degree of differentiation between self and other" [5, p. 132]. John Hosking, in his paper, "Compassion: what is in a word?" after listing multiple definitions of the word compassion (from Latin) or empathy (from Greek), explains that the definition bears two components: "Feeling for or with, a feeling of closeness to others (to *feel* compassion), coupled with *a desire to help*, a sense of responsibility for another's welfare (to *show* compassion)" [6, p. 2; emphasis added]. Thus, unlike what Reich tried to convey, empathy or compassion is often accompanied by an action. Empathy alone matters little if we fail to act.

Conclusion

There is often a response in experiencing empathy or compassion. These responses can take the form of consolation, including sharing tears in the realm of painful situations, or of rejoicing, such as sharing cheers and laughter in the realm of happy situations.

Consolation is a response to someone else's painful situation, following the feeling of empathy. Consolation is "empathy in action," it follows empathy. If there is no empathy there is no consolation. We cannot console people if we do not first recognize, understand, and feel empathic with them. Consoling is a skill based on the virtue of compassion. We cannot develop this skill if we do not have the platform developed first. So it is this link, this interconnection between consolation and compassion or empathy that I believe is missing in Reich's article. The article even evidences an inclination to reduce the link to a minimum, if not to a complete separation. If this is Reich's message, it is hardly going to be heard.

I would like to end with the following statement by the psychologist Marshall Rosenberg. The statement approves in a way the simple concept of consolation described by Reich for its use of the word "heart" instead of mind, but at the same time, the statement brings forth the practical and developmental priority of empathy: "Empathic connection is an understanding of the heart in which we see the beauty in the other person, the divine energy in the other person, the life that's alive in them" [7, p. 80].

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