

COMPASSION AS A MEANS
TO FREEDOM FROM
CONSTRAINT

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
San Francisco State University
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requirements for the
degree

Master of Arts
in
Philosophy

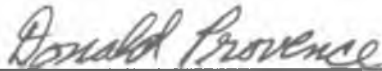
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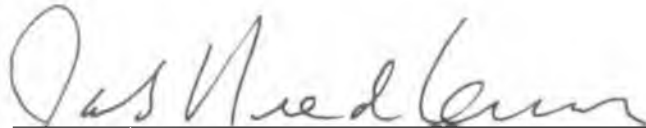
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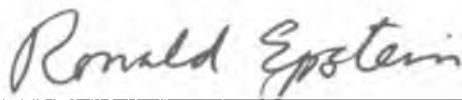
I certify that I have read *Compassion as a Means to Freedom from Constraint* by Julian Friedland, and that in my opinion this work meets the criteria for approving a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree: Master of Arts in Philosophy at San Francisco State University.



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COMPASSION AS A MEANS TO FREEDOM
FROM CONSTRAINT

Julian Friedland
San Francisco State University
1994

This paper challenges the assumption that to consider the subjective interests of others is to take on a burden that constrains our personal freedom. The nature of compassion will be examined as a disposition to have a certain subjective insight into a given social atmosphere. The inquiry will develop by showing the role that this emotive quality plays in freeing the will from perceptive constraints. The discussion will take place within the context of both Analytic and Buddhist philosophies of moral psychology in order to show that together they provide a coherent groundwork in support of the thesis at hand.

I certify that the Abstract is a correct representation of the content of this thesis.

Donald L. Provence
(Chair, Thesis Committee)

5/18/94
(Date)

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INTRODUCTION

Compassion is an affective attitude that can be considered moralistic insofar as it is by nature altruistic. That is to say it represents one's consideration for the welfare of others. To have developed a compassionate disposition means to have acquired a particular trait of character that most of us would ideally like to share. A compassionate person perceives interests external to his own and integrates them into his personal motivations. Though almost everyone does this at least to some extent, it always involves a concern that is to some degree other-regarding. Because of this, compassion is sometimes thought of as the foundation of moral virtue.¹

Regardless of its proper place in a hierarchical account of the virtues, compassion is cultivated as are all virtuous dispositions. However, because of its altruistic status, our motivations toward encouraging it within ourselves may not measure up to those we have for more obviously self-regarding virtues such as patience, temperance and courage. While it is apparent that the latter function to our own personal benefit, compassion may seem to work only for the good of others. To pursue the cultivation of a compassionate disposition is seen from this perspective as an external demand that constrains one's personal freedom. Some might think of it as a necessary burden for the benefit of society, while others may exercise it only in the most convenient occasions.

¹ Arthur Schopenhauer forcefully defends this view as an alternative to Kantianism in *On the basis of Morality*.

This paper offers an account of compassion as an emotive disposition with a certain historical life that actually frees us from our own perceptive constraints. In order to justify this thesis it will first be necessary to present a coherent view of the perceptive capacity of emotion. In other words, we will have to establish how it is possible for an emotion to show us anything at all. A preliminary phenomenological examination will provide grounds for demonstrating the way compassion fits into the picture of emotive sensibility. This first part of the discussion will conclude by addressing the role of the will in controlling our emotional states. While it is clear that there are very real limits to the will's power in such matters as feeling, it will be necessary to provide some room for it if we are to concern ourselves with the task of cultivating compassionate dispositions.

The remaining project of developing how freedom is achieved through compassionate awareness will then be undertaken in two consecutive parts. The first will concern the *freedom to* receive its perceptive quality, while the second will deal primarily with *freedom from* the constraints of its absence and neglect. The former section makes use of the conceptual tools revealed in part one, to show what deliberative gains are obtained by compassion. The latter section will take place from the perspective of the psychological teachings of Mahayana Buddhism, for they present the most thorough account of the liberational aspect of compassion that I have encountered; that is to say, they provide a structural analysis of what it is that compassion frees us from. I hope to accurately support the appropriate Buddhist doctrines through the detail of the phenomenology that will have previously been established.

COMPASSION AS EMOTIVE SENSIBILITY†

Compassion is traditionally regarded as a mental state in which one takes the suffering of another as her own. This is not to say that one actually feels *what it is like*² for another to be in pain. To feel compassion is to have a sympathetic concern for the condition of another, while engaging in some degree of empathy. It is difficult to find a definite point at which the concepts of sympathy, empathy, and compassion clearly diverge. Webster's implies that some contexts exhibit their synonymous use. Nevertheless, since the following examination will not be using them interchangeably, clarity requires outlining the more general distinctions between them.

Excluding its use as a synonym for empathy, sympathy involves having a charitable understanding of another's attitude which acknowledges the factors that brought it about. Empathy is the act of projecting one's own personality into that of another in order to share the perspective, emotions, or feelings of that person. It seems therefore that sympathy has more to do with objectively perceiving the condition of the other, while empathy attempts to share in the person's subjective experience.

Compassion, as I see it, combines these two activities, so that one is able to gain a deep insight into the inner life of another. Compassion is an emotive feeling that looks into the totality of another's condition because it is motivated by a wholehearted concern for his/her general

† I am greatly indebted to Richard Wollheim for directing a seminar on emotions in which his lectures and research guidance provided invaluable stimulus for the development of these remarks.

² Thomas Nagel uses this phrase to describe subjectivity in "What Is It Like to Be a Bat" 1974.

welfare. It uses empathy to better understand another's perspective, while combining it with the more objective outlook of sympathetic concern. Such a perception can be of a situation that is in the present, past, or impending future. It takes place whenever we are able to share in any of another's interests in both fortunate and unfortunate situations.³ Compassion is deeply rooted in the mental state of affect and may thus be precipitated by any number of different empathic triggers, ranging from witnessing the effects of chronic persistent hunger, to feeling the seriousness of a tune.⁴

If compassion is to be considered as having an essentially emotive quality, it will be helpful to establish a working basis for what constitutes an emotion. The clearest cases of emotion involve the satisfaction or frustration of desire. It is often the case that having a specific desire or set of desires fixes our perceptions in relevant directions, thereby existing as a kind of emotive potential. For example, the fact that we have a desire for the well-being of a particular individual may cause us to feel compassion when finding her bearing a substantial burden. That affect is likely to make us more attentively involved in lightening her load. Compassion motivates us in this way to become more in tune with the conditions of others. It also amounts to a kind of awareness itself, for it uses the tools of empathy and sympathetic understanding collaboratively, in order to achieve a comprehensive account of the situation at hand. This perceptive aspect will be developed further in the following section.

³ I am referring to compassion in its broad etimological sense of 'feeling with.' Although the term is normally used only in regard to unfortunate situations, its etimology represents the affect I am describing more closely than any other word I have found in this language.

⁴ Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* p. 210e.

Although this model of desire-based emotion is useful for the purposes of understanding the characteristic role desire plays in the genesis of emotion, it does not call attention to the more fundamental perceptive dimension of emotive phenomena. It seems wrong to have to posit the existence of desire as a prerequisite to our having anything that can be significantly thought of as an emotive sensation. It seems that we do have many emotive feelings which do not depend upon any specific desire. Must there be some compelling desire which allows us to feel the seriousness of a tune? Someone might respond by claiming that in such cases we are affected by melodic patterns which are composed in order to make the ear "want" to hear a specific note, or set of notes. Indeed musicians often speak as if this were the case, maintaining that good stirring melodies simply play with our auditory desires by first stimulating them and then artfully satisfying them at crucial moments in a way that results in emotive arousal.

It is not unlikely that something that could be called aesthetic desire is aroused by the right kinds of music.⁵ However we run into further difficulties when applying this account to such experiences as feeling the serenity of a countryside, or joyous at the sight of a bright, detailed, but surprisingly abstract Matisse painting. Consistency would require us to claim that as our gaze moves along, it desires to discover certain colors, textures, and designs. The depth of such desires would have to function as the necessary impetus that forces aesthetic feelings upon us.

⁵ A Naturalistic theory of art might consistently maintain that only sounds that accomplish this task can be considered as music.

The persuasiveness of this account fades even more when we consider the feelings precipitated by visual spaces that are too small for the eye to develop any "wants" because all the stimulus is conveyed at once. Perhaps none of these feelings actually qualify as emotions. They may only be subjective mental states identical to the most banal experiences of color. But if this picture is incomplete, i.e. there remains in these occurrences a kind of subjective qualia that allows us to become sad, inspired, serene or melancholy, then there must exist emotions that are not desire dependent.

Nevertheless, the experience of any emotion does require some sort of predisposition. The same is true of the most basic sensations. It is extremely difficult to find where my disposition to see the sky as blue ends, and my disposition to have it as my favorite color begins. This may be a more accurate description of what is required for an emotion to take place. It is perhaps more appropriate to consider a desire as simply a sophisticated breed of emotive disposition. This would allow for there being reasons that are supervenient upon my genetic makeup, enabling me to have a favorite color without having anything which qualifies as a desire that I see it that way. In other words, the fact that I have the favorite color of blue does not necessarily satisfy a desire to have one. However, I may one day develop a desire to experience the beauty of a cloudless sky that conditions me to have a much more powerful emotion upon looking up at it. Since compassion does depend upon having a desire, namely for the well-being of others. it is extremely difficult to find out if there is any part of it that does not depend upon any motivating interests. I will therefore side-step this question in order to further examine the perceptive aspect of compassion.

While compassion involves desire, it is also an affective sensibility that allows us to perceive a tune as serious, or to grasp the tragic quality of a good melodrama. It is a kind of disposition to feel a certain way. To feel love is not merely to feel satisfaction, even though that aspect may have much to do with the overall experience. Love is something we notice about a given state of affairs that overtakes us; something which in itself is essential to our being able to refer to its meaning. It would be very difficult to imagine someone who never had any emotions, but nevertheless could perceive what it is like to love, hope, or dread. Such a person would lack the subjective capacity to apprehend that kind of knowledge. She may perhaps learn to use these terms in the appropriate context, but would be at a considerable disadvantage when trying to distinguish one emotive behavior from the next since she could not actually relate to the subject matter at hand. To know the meaning of the word pain is not simply to be able to recognize its representative behavior.

Compassion fits into the category of perception, for it is the advantage we have over this paradigmatic non-emotivater. We use it for myriad social interactions. It is a sensibility to the interests of others that we come into contact with. Compassion is a kind of skillful awareness which carries the understanding outward in communication that is nondescriptively expressive. Wittgenstein provides some convincing examples:

When it is said at a funeral oration "We mourn our. . . ." this is surely supposed to be an expression of mourning; not to tell anything to those who are present. But in a prayer at the grave these words would in a way be used to tell someone something.

But here is the problem: a cry, which cannot be called a description, which is more primitive than any description, for all that serves as a description of the inner life.

-- But if "I am afraid" is not always something like a cry of complaint and yet sometimes is, then why should it *always* be a description of a state of mind?⁶

Compassion is a tool we use to grasp expressive meanings. It is not something that relies only upon shared judgments, but affects us more deeply in shared sensitivity to the events of inner life.

But the question remains: What is the structure of this perceptivity and how do we develop a skill for using it? I believe that examining the latter part of this question will begin to shed light on the former. To become more perceptive in regard to matters of sense means to become proficient at something that requires a certain subjective coordination. Just as learning to pole-vault requires training in kinesthetic awareness of the precise movement and location of the body, becoming compassionate involves being clued-in to the subtleties manifest in "what it is to lead the life of a person."⁷ Although this can be taught, it does not consist of codifiable rules. It is founded on innate dispositions to have certain experiences. However, we do learn to coordinate these dispositions according to shared judgments of how and when it is appropriate. Wittgenstein takes up this issue when considering how we can know the genuineness of expressions of feeling:

Can one learn this knowledge? Yes; some can. Not, however, by taking a course in it, but through *'experience'*.--Can someone else be a man's teacher in this? Certainly. From time to time he gives him the right *tip*.--This is what *'learning'* and *'teaching'* are like here.--What one acquires here is not a technique; one

⁶ *Philosophical Investigations*, IIix; p. 189e.

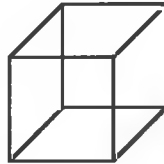
⁷ Richard Wollheim's *The Thread of Life* is a book entirely devoted to this topic.

learns correct judgments. There are also rules, but they do not form a system, and only experienced people can apply them right. Unlike calculating-rules.

What is difficult here is to put this indefiniteness, correctly and unfalsified into words.

-- There might actually occur a case where we should say "This man *believes* he is pretending." ⁸(to feel pain)

While each of us has the potential to discriminate between the subtle types of emotive expression, our ability to recognize these events increases with experience. Enhanced sensitivity arises after a new perspective has been brought to our attention. Hence, the knowledge of other's feelings depends on two phenomenological mechanisms: the subjective quality of the experience, and the intentionality required to notice it. A good example of this dichotomy is provided by this simple illustration:



The experience of seeing this figure as a cube has both of these aspects. The quality of perceiving it as such is what I refer to as subjectivity. It requires a specific way of looking that enables us to see either the higher or lower square as the front of a cube. Each of the two experiences has its own intentionality--its direction of perceiving.

Merely coming across a cube unexpectedly positioned between the lines of a text may have produced a kind of mental feeling reminding us of the radically different intentionalities at work in forcing the mind to recognize these two separate symbolic schemata. It would be possible to imagine someone who did not see the illustration both ways, either because she lacked the ability, or she had remembered the example from

⁸ OpCit, IIxi, pp. 227e+229e.

a previous encounter, and did not take the time to see if the image still flipped back and forth in her mind. The way in which we come to see this figure, e.g. that it is a cube and that its front is lower or higher, forms a kind of phenomenology of sense impression.

There is something characteristic about these two factors that is at some level present in all our mental states. How we come to have a given *subjective experience depends on our preceding ones, which together* make up a particular disposition to have certain impressions. We can now begin to see the role experience plays in our perceptive development. It is possible that someone might have seen the illustration as representing only one cube until the other was pointed out to him. This could be considered a kind of *tip*, leading us in the right direction.

Similarly, we can come to see another's behavior in the right emotionally expressive light. How this is accomplished depends on shared judgments of which emotion is appropriate. However, this is not always a requirement. Such experiences can be sufficiently forceful to entail only minimal interpretative skill. They seem to tap directly into the innate sensitivities which are to some extent hardwired into our subjective constitutions. This is true of cases where we "feel the seriousness of a tune." Nevertheless, we could imagine someone who is never moved by any of Beethoven's compositions. Like the person who only sees the illustration one way, he lacks the right intentionality to experience the given subjective qualia. Assuming that both individuals have some sense impression of the stimulus being presented, namely, one hears the sounds and the other sees a cube, finding the missing intentionality becomes a matter of practice. Getting the right *tip* here *might consist of seeing a three dimensional example of cube B, or*

coming into contact with a person who cannot contain her musical rapture.

Coming to the tip-off, constitutes a shaping of our dispositional sensitivity by the onset of an appropriate mental state. Becoming clued-in to the overpowering emotion of *Schiller's Ode to Joy*⁹ through the dynamic expressions of a masterful dancer, will have a persisting effect upon one's future musical encounters. Thus, as our emotions develop, they become an integral part of our experiences and judgments. Kenny illustrates this point with a reference to Wittgenstein:

All feelings have duration; but perceptions and sensations are much more closely tied than emotions to the time which is the measure of local motion. One can hear a loud noise for just a second, or feel violent pain only for a moment, no matter what precedes or follows; one cannot in the same way feel ardent love, or deep grief for the space of a second, no matter what preceded or followed this second.¹⁰

Emotions therefore are tied to dispositions in a way that cannot be isolated to a specific place and time. They are made up of perceptions we have about the world and have a history that extends throughout our lives. Emotive reactions are built upon the interaction of mental states and dispositions. Just as having a certain mental state requires an appropriate disposition, so are dispositions precipitated by fitting mental states. Together, they form patterns which recur, with different variations, in the weave of our life.¹¹

Although compassion is not required for this dynamic to occur, it plays an important part in the processes which shape our emotive

⁹ Beethoven, *Symphony #9*, movement IV.

¹⁰ Kenny, *Action, Emotion and Will* p. 58, from Wittgenstein, P. I., I, rem. 583; III.

¹¹ Kenny quotes a larger section of this remark on p. 59, from Wittgenstein's example of the feeling of grief. *Philosophical Investigations*, III.

experiences. The ability to recognize that someone “believes he is pretending” to feel pain, requires being tuned-in to the inter- subjective subtleties of emotive expression. Compassion is a disposition to feel and reinterpret the recurring patterns of subjective expression that describe the inner life. It is affected by each new manifestation and grows with experience.

It is somewhat paradoxical that such intimate emotive events are not brought about by the will. The fact that I feel compassionate does not arise because I desire that this be the case. Similarly, my ability to distinguish green from blue does not require my wanting to do it. If all is operating as it should, i.e. lighting, visual receptors, etc. discrimination will occur whether I like it or not. The same is true of intentionality. Once I have learned how to perceive the shapes of ink that cover this page as symbols that make up words in a language, it becomes impossible, or at least very difficult to see them as merely well defined blots of ink. In this way all emotions require a given intentionality that reappears upon each successive precipitation. Once we have been exposed to the horror of the World War II holocaust through some particularly forceful images, our affective disposition will be systematically alerted, if it is not fully aroused upon any future encounters with that subject matter.

However, it is to some extent possible to shut off our feelings of compassion for personal or practical reasons. A surgeon must in this sense put at least some of her compassion on hold if she is to maintain the stability of attention and dexterity required for carrying out a successful operation. Nevertheless, surgeons never lose the intentionality for perceiving patients as objects of compassion. If that were

the case, they would cease to understand our reasons for having them perform operations to begin with. Conversely, we also enter into situations while intending to feel a certain way that can lead to a proportionately more forceful experience. Hence, though emotions are not willable, we can be willing or unwilling to have them.¹²

This unwillability of emotion presents a problem to the person who wants to cultivate the awareness of a compassionate disposition. Is such wisdom only available to those who have the luck to be presented with the right kinds of stimulus in just the right way? If we are to take any of the preceding conclusions as correct, then at least part of the answer must be yes. To control the way in which we feel at any given moment is not within our power. However, we *can* be responsible for having developed a compassionate disposition by trying to become more virtuous. As Aristotle notes, someone may not be responsible for vicious actions performed under the influence of alcohol, but nevertheless be entirely responsible for getting drunk in the first place and not having previously recognized his own vicious character.¹³

This example suggests that it is possible for responsibility to exist for an emotion that arises uncontrollably. Compassion can be cultivated by voluntarily engaging in a virtuous action with the intent that it be the first in a series designed to effect a transformation in one's disposition to being compassionate. Of course in this case, such a virtuous action would have to be in some sense other-regarding. If the deed is successful, that is to say, it succeeds in affecting our emotions into a benevolent

¹² However, as we shall see in the third section with respect to enlightenment, some individuals may have the uncommon ability to will all their emotions.

¹³ *Nicomachean Ethics*, 3.5. 1113b30 ff., L. A. Kosman examines this distinction in further detail in "Being Properly Affected: Virtues and Feelings in Aristotle's Ethics" from *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics*, ed. Amelie, O. Rorty.

direction, then we can be said to have been responsible for the development of some affective potential. As this process continues it may become easier to act compassionately, since acting as such will be an important part of our emotive disposition. Making sophisticated contextual judgments of how someone is suffering, is satisfied, or is in what degree of danger might become almost second nature.

Now, to show why we should want it that way.

FREEDOM TO AFFECTIVE PERCEPTION

To speak of having a *freedom from* something implies having some *freedom to*. To be free from constraint means to have some corresponding degree of power to do whatever it is that one could not accomplish while being constrained. Conversely, to gain a *freedom to* represents being free from a potential hindrance. In the case of compassion, the *freedom to* is perceptive. It therefore implies becoming free from perceptive constraint, although as we shall see in the following section, certain other freedoms also depend upon it.

Up to now, compassion has been presented as an awareness of others that develops through a kind of affective experience. It therefore has a perceptive quality, and in this sense yields a type of freedom. However, the question remains: What advantages does it provide to the individual who has taken the trouble to cultivate a compassionate disposition? There are the more obvious eudemonic advantages of developing an emotive sensibility to certain aesthetic experiences as well as acquiring useful intuitions for interpersonal communication. But there is also included a perspective which allows one to make decisions that take into account more of what is at stake in a given deliberative situation. Compassion puts us more in tune with the interests and intentionalities of others. It is therefore indispensable for making the right ethical choices.

A virtuous person depends upon his compassionate sensibility in two very important ways. One is to perceive evidence of others' intentionalities from such things as their subtleties of glance, gesture,

and tone.¹⁴ We do this for example when seeing anxiety in someone's eyes, though of course what we are perceiving is not localized in the eyes themselves. We are gaining an insight into the intentionality of an individual. However, compassion is not all that we use in order to perceive the intentionalities of others and make judgments about what they express. Such distinctions are made according to shared experience of what entails living. Nevertheless, compassion allows us to look more deeply into the expressive behavior of others through our empathetic concern for their welfare. Compassion helps us to understand the underlying interests of others when knowing them is crucial to responding in the most beneficial manner.

An example of this enhanced awareness might be present in the situation of sensing that a child is taking something for granted. Compassion may not be necessary for perceiving the child's behavior as such, nor for acknowledging the inappropriateness of encouraging it. But without having compassion for the child, we risk engaging in some corrective or disciplinary action which may not take into account the child's reasons for acting ungrateful, nor recognize the educational response that is most sympathetic to her point of view. Instead of reacting merely out of annoyance, we might feel compassion for the child's state of ignorance, and respond in a manner which has a more positive influence on the child by appeal to her own desires and impressions revealed in expressive behavior.

The other way in which compassion is necessary to the virtuous person is that it continually redescribes his own conception of how to

¹⁴ Wittgenstein uses these examples to show how knowledge is acquired through imponderable evidence, *Philosophical Investigations*, IIxi.

live. It performs this function because it characterizes our judgments of what is the most admirable way of living, in every exemplary action. McDowell explains what it means to understand the actions of a virtuous person:

We do not fully understand a virtuous person's actions--we do not see the consistency in them--unless we can supplement the core explanations with a grasp of his conception of how to live. And though this is to credit him with an orectic state, it is not to credit him with an externally intelligible over-arching desire; for we cannot understand the content of the orectic state from the envisaged external standpoint. It is, rather, to comprehend, essentially from within, the virtuous person's distinctive way of viewing particular situations.¹⁵

This comprehension deepens through the perception of each successive virtuous reaction. Judgments of what is and is not compassionate are essentially uncodifiable. In other words, they cannot be conclusively determined in complete abstraction from the situations in which they arise. This is not to say that they do not involve reason. In fact, a person who is compassionate by character is in principle committed to as rational and as intelligent a course of action as possible.¹⁶ Compassion feels the virtue of each new beneficent action as it occurs. Thus, it serves as an evolving perception of what is essentially imponderable.

The insight of a compassionate disposition is indispensable in providing support for the establishment of ethical norms. The use of thought experiments for testing the adequacies of a given ethical framework seems to have become a kind of tradition for the way recent philosophers tend to think about ethics. I am thinking of that rather insidious scenario involving a runaway locomotive in which the driver

¹⁵ "Orectic" is taken from Aristotle's conception of *orexis* meaning a state of desiring. John McDowell, "Virtue and Reason" *Monist* 1979, p. 62.

¹⁶ Lawrence Blum, "Compassion" *Explaining Emotions*, ed. Amelie, O. Rorty.

has to choose to either kill a few people walking on one track, or use the body of a sufficiently large person standing on another track as a means to stopping, without killing, another group standing behind him.¹⁷ Putting aside the question of what decision should be made, experiments such as this one are designed to extract 'oughts' from our innate moral intuitions.

When conducting a thought experiment on moral norms, we are appealing to our shared conceptions of what it means to be moral. For the results of any thought experiment to be considered legitimate, they must be supported by a strong intersubjective sense of what is the case. They are in this sense the products of pre-theoretical contents, and hence, we can only allow them to count if they give a definite answer.¹⁸ The fact that in ethics they sometimes do, tells us that our intuitions do hold some knowledge, which though imponderable, provides the strongest kinds of insights into the identity of moral norms.

As Simon Blackburn recently pointed out,¹⁹ the proper use of thought experiments in general demands a considerable amount of experience and judgment, and even these may not guarantee that the right decision has been made. It is not uncommon for scientists to operate from faulty thought experiments, especially when working at the limits of physical imagination. Seeing the experiment as successful is to recognize more about the actual world through comparison with the imagined one. This knowledge depends upon experience that must be

¹⁷ This thought experiment has been widely used in discussions comparing deontic and consequentialist moral norms.

¹⁸ I owe this point to Richard Wollheim, who presented it within a seminar by developing his argument on thought experiments in *The Thread of Life*, Lecture 1, pp. 21-30.

¹⁹ I am referring to his article entitled "What if...? The uses and abuses of thought experiments" *Times lit. rev.* Jun. 18, 93' p. 10.

checked by reason, so that the experimenter does not fall too far from the realm of shared intuitive recognition.

The same is true of our compassionate sensibilities. An overly empathetic person who has become biased by his obsession with some significant other can easily make an incorrect normative judgment on matters concerning that individual. Nevertheless, normative thought experiments depend upon our being disposed to feel things in certain ways. The accuracy of our verdicts on whether each experiment is informative will vary with the level of comprehensive awareness reached by our compassionate sensibilities.

The sense of compassion is therefore essential for rating certain actions against others, and its sensibility grows upon each successful judgment. However, thought experiments in ethics are much more limited in their utility than those concerning scientific matters. This is because our compassionate sensibilities respond to the evidence of certain expressive signals which can only be alluded to in abstraction. Conversely, scientific matters have more to do with physical observations that are in principle more objectively describable.²⁰ Abstracted ethical decisions can to an extent be made with a considerable amount of accuracy when they only have to do with facts about people or social norms that depend less upon circumstantial evidence. The more complex situations become, the less accurate are our armchair judgments. What I mean by complex here is not analogous to, say, the complexity of a sophisticated equation--some policy decisions are made according to that very analog. I am referring to situations in which accuracy of moral

²⁰ I say "in principle" because theoretical physics for example, attempts to move beyond the limits of our imaginative capacities.

judgment depends on perceiving important factors that are present in the intentionality of the individual(s). Such instances characterize the majority of our ethical decisions, for they exist whenever knowledge of the way someone is thinking is pivotal. Here, we can refer to the example of not rewarding a child if one knows that he is taking it for granted, even if that child is legitimately deserving in all other respects.

To make these kinds of judgments requires experience in the distinctive expressions of the inner life. One must have the disposition to feel a certain way that will recognize these subtle features in order to respond in concert with the moments of the intersubjective atmosphere. Often, just coming into contact with another's expressive behavior is enough to make us aware of his intentionalities. However, a neutral approach leaves us less sensitive to what may actually be the case, and therefore much more open to error. Having a very limited sense of *compassion will make us less likely to tune in to someone else's state of mind*, even when doing so might prove crucial to achieving some of our most important ethical intentions.

While I doubt that Kant would take any judgment as being uncodifiable, in his later writings he points out the importance of having something like a compassionate disposition:

--the man who wants to spare his wife or children trouble or pain must have enough fine feeling, to judge their sensibilities not by *his* own strength but by their *weakness*, and his *delicacy* of feeling is essential to his generosity.²¹

The point Kant is making is that there is a way of cultivating a disposition to be affected by the welfare of others that is essential to our

²¹ Nancy Sherman quotes this passage of Kant's *Anthropologie from a Pragmatic Point of View*, p. 104, in her article entitled "The Place of Emotions in Kantian Morality." *Identity, Character and Morality*, ed. Owen Flanagan and Emilie, O. Rorty.

being able to make the right decision. This entails sharing similar desires and wishes, or at least perceiving them in others in order to be able to act according to their best interests. Although this knowledge may not involve compassion, 'feeling' is being used in a way that connotes empathy and sympathetic concern. Taken together, they amount to an emotive disposition to act in a way that feels for the interests and conditions of the family in each interpersonal occasion.

Aristotle supplements this point by noting the role emotions play in the character of a trained virtuous disposition:

In the development of the orectic soul there is a hexis when a permanent attitude towards his emotions (towards any possible disturbances of his orectic self) has been reached--an attitude which expresses itself in actions which are either the right or the wrong response to such disturbances.²²

Hence our overall interpersonal deliberative capacities hinge upon the degree to which we have developed a sensitivity to the intersubjective qualities of any given social atmosphere. Compassion is a permanent emotional investment in developing such a sense. Being free in this way means being able to respond appropriately to the ethical situations we find ourselves in, by taking into account all the relevant evidence.

²² L. A. Kosman quotes this passage of the *Nicomachean Ethics* p.85, in "Being Properly Affected: Virtues and Feelings in Aristotle's Ethics." p.108.

FREEDOM FROM DESIROUS BIAS AND DISSATISFACTION

In the Mahayana Buddhist tradition, compassion is considered as the root of all aspects of enlightenment.²³ It begins in its simplest form as sympathy²⁴ and later grows into higher levels of concentration required to achieve the greatest wisdom. Compassion is an emotive tool of governance that, when used appropriately, guides us along the path of experiential knowledge. It allows us to learn from the conditions of others by remaining open to their own perspectives without being distracted by our personal biases of desirous attachments. Hence the exercise of compassion is two-fold in that it has a perceptive role, while also freeing us from the frustrations that can stem from the attachments of desire.

Simple compassion is what is used when we perceive external circumstances through a kind of sympathetic concern for the effect they have on others. It is an emotive awareness that allows us to share in the positive or negative predicaments of others, so that we are able to make appropriate contextual decisions on how to act most beneficently. Simple compassion is also the primary motivating force behind all ethical decision-making. It is the root of all our other-regarding concerns. As such, compassion is the foundation of philosophy in its original meaning as the love of wisdom. If the love of wisdom meant the ultimate desire

²³ Nagarjuna quotes Gotama Buddha twice in support of this claim in *Le Traité de la Grande Vertue de Sagesse*, trans. into french by E. Lamotte, pp. 1269 +1712.

²⁴ Aronson, *Love and Sympathy in Theravada Buddhism*, p. 22. Although the Theravada tradition is part of the Hinayana school and consequently does not place such a strong emphasis on the role of compassion, it continues to uphold compassion as one of the four unlimited states of mind: *love, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity*. Hence, Theravada Buddhism focuses equally on all the relationships between these four attitudes, thus shedding valuable light on the developmental role each attitude plays with respect to each of the other three.

for personal gain, wisdom would lose its independent epistemic value of benefiting all beings. Simple compassion continually directs our attention toward wholesome activities which have inherent value for everyone. In this way, compassion leads us toward wisdom.

As compassionate insight progresses, it involves a considerable amount of concentration. It requires upholding a constant equanimous awareness so that mental poise is maintained, free from bias. Harvey Aronson provides an active example of this wholesomeness of compassion as given in the Buddha's "What ?' Discourse" in which he instructs the monks on what to do if they see another monk acting contrary to the rules of training. "He advises them not to be hasty in correcting, but to consider the situation carefully. It may or may not be a discomfort to correct the other monk, and he may or may not get angry when corrected, but if a monk is capable of establishing another in wholesomeness (*kusala*), then it is fitting to speak to him. If he would be discomfited in correcting the errant monk and the latter would get angry while not changing his ways, then he should not forget equanimity and remain silent."²⁵ One of the monks' rules is that unless ill they should not urinate while standing. On this the Buddha states:

A monk who sees such an individual urinating while standing and says, "Sir, shouldn't you be sitting ?" is said to have forgotten equanimity.²⁶

In this case, someone who cannot keep such a simple rule "is beyond the pale and does not merit energetic advice; here, it is best to maintain the balance of equanimity."²⁷

²⁵ Ibid., p. 23.

²⁶ *Papancasudani* : *Buddhagosa's Commentary on the Majjhima Nikaya*. iv. 31.

²⁷ Op. cit.

In this example, acting appropriately is accomplished out of a concern for another's interests that places us in tune with that person's present emotive disposition. To achieve this relatively advanced state of contextual awareness requires a certain amount of concentration. In order to notice a given set of circumstances like the ones in the above example we must have the even-mindedness necessary to put simple compassion into effect. In other words, we cannot be distracted by personal attachments and expectations that may cloud our perspective with self-regarding intentionalities. When we are free from such distractions and have developed the concentration allowing us to make sophisticated momentary distinctions concerning the conditions and welfare of others, we have what is called the sublime attitude of compassion.²⁸

The ultimate form of this attitude is attained partly by having had enough experience to recognize the significance of a given occasion in its entirety. That is to say, to apprehend the psycho-temporal dynamics that are passing through the moment in order to act with utmost beneficence. As was elaborated in part one, this consists in becoming progressively more aware of the "patterns which recur in different variations in the weave of our life"(p.10). As we mature and acquire experience in such matters we come to have the ability to recognize various emotively expressive phenomena in their new respective contexts. In fact, we may become perceptive enough to predict the effects of certain actions in others, as well as determine the past activities that are likely to be the causes of their present dispositions. Attaining such depth of perception represents a kind of equanimity of simple compassion. The Buddha

²⁸ Ibid., chapter 5.

describes it as "the state of observing another's suffering or happiness and thinking, "these appear because of that individual's own past activities."²⁹

Developing the sublime attitude of compassion depends upon acquiring a corresponding degree of equanimous discipline. It is not possible to feel the more subtle grades of other-regarding awareness if one is not focused enough to actually manifest them. Though it is possible for someone to perceive the inner life of others through expressions of pleasure and pain without using compassion, such perceptions remain very limited. In order to develop a more complete awareness of others' interests and dispositions, we must attempt to think from their perspective. This consists of having the compassion necessary to empathically focus on another's feelings with sympathetic concern for their own welfare. What makes this difficult is letting go of our own mental preoccupations that limit our scope of attention. To maintain this ability, one must undergo meditative training toward cultivating the sublime attitude of equanimity.³⁰

Compassion is by definition other-regarding. At the most obvious levels its experience is so striking that it is almost impossible to ignore. We can think of many examples of such feelings, from uncontainable grief at another's grave misfortune to sympathetic joy for the success of a close friend. However, in the more common occurrences of daily life the exercise of compassion requires a state of mind that is free from the clutter of personal preoccupations. Cultivating a compassionate disposition not only involves becoming privy to the expressive signals of

²⁹ Ibid., p. 64.

³⁰ Ibid., chapter 6.

the inner life, but also entails being free of distractions caused by desires.

Equanimity represents a balanced state of mind in which one is focused without being fixated upon any particular impermanent phenomenon. Equanimous awareness is open to acknowledge events as they occur instead of being biased by some intimate set of distractions. Cultivation of equanimity begins the process of mental transformation culminating in an altruistic aspiration to enlightenment. Thus, "equanimity prepares the ground for love and compassion which in turn induce this altruistic aspiration, the precious source of the qualities of buddhahood. The actual meditation of equanimity is cultivation of the thought:

May all sentient beings abide in an equanimity free from intimacy and alienness, desire and hatred. May they not fight, considering some to be alien and others to be intimate. May they value everyone equally."³¹

Developing equanimous compassion has the benefit of freeing us from all the frustrations that come from such desirous biases as intimacy and alienness. Ultimately, enlightenment is achieved by freeing the mind from the cycle of continually striving toward attachments and attempting to escape suffering. This cycle of distracting mental engagement is referred to as the vicious state of *samsara*.³² It is symbolized by a wheel depicting how pain becomes amplified into a vicious circle when we have the wrong psychological disposition. Basically, the more we try to escape the characteristic pains of life, the more miserable we become, each time we are confronted by our

³¹ Hopkins, *Compassion in Tibetan Buddhism*, p. 27.

³² sGam.po.pa's *Jewel Ornament of Liberation*, Trans., Guenther, pp. 55-78.

disappointments. The goal is to rid ourselves of attachment in order to be free to accept unpleasantness instead of continually striving in the other direction.

The self deception which fuels *samsara* is overcome through the teachings of the *dharma*.³³ The *dharma* represents the method by which liberation is achieved. It acknowledges suffering as taking place in three different categories: all pervading suffering, the suffering of alternation, and the suffering of suffering.³⁴ Taken together, they represent all the suffering of the birth and death continuum. Coming to terms with these natural truths allows us to move more freely in everyday situations of unsatisfactoriness without becoming frustrated with them--in the thought of some future goal that is consequently being missed.

All pervading suffering, or the misery of conditioned existence represents the most fundamental struggles of life in which we are forced to work to protect and preserve ourselves. Chögyam Trungpa characterizes it with the following examples:

This fundamental pain takes innumerable forms--the pain of losing a friend, the pain of having to attack an enemy, the pain of making money, the pain of wanting credentials, the pain of washing dishes, the pain of duty, the pain of feeling that someone is watching over your shoulder, the pain of thinking that we haven't been successful, the pain of relationships of all kinds.³⁵

³³ Ibid., p. xi.

³⁴ Guenther translates sGam.po.pa as using the word 'misery' instead of 'suffering'. Ibid., p. 55. However, since misery seems to imply that one is conscious of the suffering, I prefer to use 'suffering' which does not necessarily require one to be aware of it. The justification for this word choice lies in the fact that beings trapped in *samsara* are there largely because they make a concerted effort to ignore suffering and consequently do not yet recognize it as miserable.

³⁵ Trungpa, *The Myth of Freedom*, pp. 10-11. Although Trungpa uses the word 'pain' instead of 'suffering', this is somewhat misleading since 'pain' is traditionally considered as physical, while 'suffering' is mental. What is being described here is clearly mental and should be referred to as suffering.

Next is the suffering of alternation, or the misery of change. It is the unpleasantness of realizing that we are carrying these burdens. It occurs when we must go back and forth between carrying and escaping them. We may feel relieved to have been set free of one, but this satisfaction is only temporary. Soon we have to go back and reshoulder at least one or more of these burdens. This continual process is the insidious decay of happiness due to impermanence. Lastly, there is the suffering of suffering, or the misery of misery. It refers to the plight of being born, growing old, and dying.³⁶ This is the most basic form of suffering, for it does not depend on externals.

All three pains are intertwined as part of everyday experience. Trying to escape them only amounts to more pain. If we spend all our time seeking happiness or security then we are deceiving ourselves and will only become progressively more dissatisfied every time we are confronted with the recurrent pains of life. Ultimately, freedom lies in accepting such pain as a companion, so that it no longer controls our moods, giving us the liberty to improve the moments that we would normally be filling with revolt. Being trapped in *samsara* is to be governed by the constant striving for further situations that will temporarily free us from burden. Conversely, becoming accustomed to the presence of suffering in a habitual way, is to begin the exercise of compassion. Having recognized the misery inherent in our existence leads to a philosophical attitude of acceptance from which to perceive the suffering of others without considering it as a sacrifice.

Equanimity describes a precise awareness of present situations in which there is no grasping. It allows one to feel compassion for the

³⁶ Op. cit., p. 69.

suffering of others without becoming overwhelmed by it, nor neglecting it. Being thus free of mental attachments, it is possible to have a much greater sensitivity to all the interpersonal events of inner life. This completely open mental atmosphere depends on achieving a state of emotional nonattachment in which perception is not directed by our self-ascribed interests.

Since the sublime attitude of equanimity represents freedom from the desirous bias of attachments, it has often been interpreted to mean a state of complete emotional detachment. That is to say, "(a) emotional detachment with respect to both one's own fate and the fate of others and (b) the destruction of all emotion.³⁷ However, this is a misinterpretation, for what is abandoned is not emotion itself, but the desirous attachments that narrow-mindedly govern it. In fact, each sublime attitude stems from a desire, namely, for the welfare of all beings. Although it is a wholesome and balanced awareness, it is not necessarily accompanied by a neutral feeling. Harvey Aronson succinctly characterizes the nature of this dynamic mental quality:

Possessed of this even-mindedness, fully liberated beings have a whole spectrum of attitudinal responses open to them, such as cultivating concerned love with its associated feeling of bliss. Such persons are not unemotional. Their emotions can be outgoing and joyous, yet always even and pure.³⁸

The emotions of an enlightened being however do not include those of anger and frustration, for those depend on the cycle of samsaric suffering, and can no longer occur if one is not continually striving to escape displeasure. Nevertheless, all the feelings of sadness and grief

³⁷ This is the interpretation of Spiro's in *Buddhism and Society*, p 48, as quoted by Aronson, in *Love and Sympathy in Theravada Buddhism*, p. 79.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

associated with the requisite unpleasantness of impermanence are acknowledged on a regular basis. If this were not the case, it would be impossible for one to feel compassion or sympathetic joy for another's emotional condition. It is possible to have an equanimous perspective on another's anger and frustration by understanding the causes of it, but one who is free from *samsara* does not share its affect.

At the level of enlightenment, emotions are chosen to be experienced at the most appropriate times. That is to say, emotion becomes willable. Enlightened beings are able to express their emotions how and when they want to, in order to produce intended effects. Consequently, such beings are fully responsible for their emotional reactions and take responsibility for their consequences. An example of this would be a master's angry shout and slapping of a student at a time when it will produce a mental awakening in that monastic trainee. In such circumstances, the teacher chooses to manifest the emotion of anger because she knows that it will lead to an amount of learning that greatly outweighs the suffering she used as an educational vehicle.³⁹ Hence, the anger is itself the result of the master's compassion for the student's condition.

On the more common level, compassion provides similar insight into the conditions of ourselves and others, though we have less control over its arousal. Through the exercise of compassionate awareness we are pulled progressively farther away from our own desirous preoccupations so that we are less bound to the frustrations of self-regarding disappointments. Consequently, we come to expect the recurring

³⁹ Aronson mentions this consequentialist theme by reference to the "timeliness of Buddha's sympathy," p. 8.

unsatisfactoriness of life and learn to make our peace with it. From here, we have room to develop our emotions freely without having them prefabricated by our desirous attachments. It then becomes possible to guide our emotive dispositions instead of being guided by them.

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