

# COMPASSION: TRAGIC PREDICAMENTS

## I. EMOTIONS AND ETHICAL NORMS

The child we imagined in Chapter 4 now has many emotions: joy at the presence of good things and fear of their absence; anger at the sources of frustration and gratitude for aid and comfort; shame at her inability to control the sources of good; envy of competitors and guilt at her own aggression; disgust at the slimy and the decaying; wonder at the beauty of the world. By now we can see how these emotions support the child's ability to act, as they mark off patterns of salience and urgency in her surroundings; we also see how they may support generous and beneficent action. But we also see a darker set of connections. The urgent needs of infantile dependency can engender a paralyzing shame, accompanied by destructive resentment that puts later ethical development at risk. The child's intense involvement with nearby objects risks impeding general social concern in later life. The intensity and ambivalence of the child's attachment to its first objects may distort the perception of other objects she will soon encounter. Disgust's repudiation of animality can eventually lead to destructive forms of social hierarchy. None of these problems threatens the account of emotion as value-laden recognition: for it is from evaluation that they all arise. They do, however, make us wonder to what extent emotions are rational in a normative sense, that is, suitable for guiding good adult deliberation.

Chapter 4 began to address normative issues, suggesting a mutually supportive relationship between an account of emotional health and a normative ethical view that stresses imagination, reciprocity, flexibility, and mercy. These connections, I said, should not be pressed too far. A

normative ethical view needs independent support; and psychology shows us as many problems for ethics as resources for its implementation. But a persuasive psychological account can at least help us to a better understanding of those problems and those resources.

At this point, however, and for the rest of this book, I shall pursue a different, though related, question: what positive contribution do emotions, as such, make to ethical deliberation, both personal and public? What reasons do we have to rely on people's emotions, rather than on their will and on their ability to obey rules? Why should a social order cultivate or appeal to emotions, rather than simply creating a system of just rules, and a set of institutions to support it? Such questions are sometimes posed, in political theory and law, without much prior analysis of emotions and without sorting out competing theories of their structure and development. It is my hope that the theory worked out to this point will prove a valuable resource in posing them clearly and getting plausible answers. Here again I follow the Stoics, who understood that normative reasoning about emotions would be only as convincing as the account of emotions it employed. Chrysippus thus devoted three books of his work *On the Passions* to the theory, and the fourth book to normative matters.

The Stoics' normative ethical theory relies heavily on their analysis of emotions as value judgments; we could not understand how emotions could possibly be removed from human life without seeing them in the way this analysis recommends. There is, however, no converse implication: we can accept the Stoic analysis (or a development of it) without at all accepting their normative thesis that the emotions are always bad guides and should be completely removed from human life. Much the same is true of the relationship between Part I of this book and Parts II and III: the later parts rely heavily on the analysis of emotions given in Part I, but that earlier analysis does not imply the conclusions reached here. (It could not, of course, insofar as it is a development of the Stoic theory, which was combined with a quite different normative account.) Nor will Parts II and III offer a complete defense of a normative ethical theory: the normative suggestions in these parts are intended to be both incomplete and general, compatible with more than one total ethical theory.

One could imagine many ways of using the material of Part I to raise normative questions. In keeping with my belief that these ques-

tions are best raised through a detailed focus on each emotion in turn, rather than by generalizations about emotions as a class, I have chosen to investigate just two cases of particular importance, by following two distinct, though related, strands in the tradition of Western philosophical debate about emotion. I turn first to the emotion most frequently viewed with approval in the tradition, and most frequently taken to provide a good foundation for rational deliberation and appropriate action, in public as well as private life. This is the emotion that I shall call *compassion*, though, as we shall see, several different terms have figured in the debates about its proper role. In this chapter I shall investigate the cognitive structure of compassion, drawing on analyses in Aristotle, Adam Smith, and Rousseau. I shall examine the resources for good that this emotion has seemed to contain, and also some impediments to its benign operation. In Chapter 7 I shall then reconstruct a philosophical debate about the proper role of compassion in social life that goes all the way back to Plato's attack on the tragic poets; it continues in modern thinkers, including Smith, Rousseau, Kant, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche. I shall argue that this debate has frequently been misunderstood in contemporary thought, and that a correct understanding will help us see what we ought to say about contemporary issues. Finally, in Chapter 8 I shall describe some specific ways in which a society pursuing justice might legitimately rely on and cultivate compassion, and suggest some ways in which it might deal with the impediments to compassion's ethical work supplied by shame, resentment, envy, and disgust.

But we will still have left unaddressed the more intense and more problematic emotions of the personal life, which itself both shapes public choice and is shaped by it. To that extent we will not have given a full answer to our questions about emotion's role in a good human life, even in its public dimension. To explore these normative questions further, I then turn, in Part III, to a different strand in the philosophical tradition: the tradition of proposing a reform or "ascent" of (erotic) love, in order to convert the most urgent and potentially ambivalent of our emotions into a constituent of the good and reasonable life. Thus we might say that Part II treats the most normatively attractive and promising case, Part III a difficult case, but one of central importance for any normative role that emotions may play. In the process, the account will continue to be attentive to several emotions that seemed

normatively problematic, even from the limited perspective of Part I: envy, shame, and disgust. These emotions will figure in the account as impediments to the development of compassion, and as insidious poisoners of the normative potential inherent in love.

One way of understanding the structure of the ensuing argument is to think of the structure of the self and its concerns. In thinking of emotions as eudaimonistic evaluations, I have pictured a self as constituted (in part at least) by its evaluative engagements with areas of the world outside itself.<sup>1</sup> Thinking of things in this way, we may now notice a bifurcation in the emotions. Some expand the boundaries of the self, picturing the self as constituted in part by strong attachments to independent things and persons. Love and grief are paradigmatic of such emotions; and, as we shall see, compassion pushes the boundaries of the self further outward than many types of love.<sup>2</sup> Some emotions, on the other hand, draw sharp boundaries around the self, insulating it from contamination by external objects. Disgust is paradigmatic of such an emotion. It still makes evaluative judgments about the importance of uncontrolled objects for the person's own flourishing: but these judgments are typically negative, and the project of disgust is to keep them away. Thus disgust might be said to be the emotion of an unachieved and anxious Stoicism: the disgusted person still cares about mortality and the body, but is trying very hard to reach an undisturbed condition. The intense and excessive shame that I have called pathological shame partakes, as well, of this boundary-drawing character: although it contains an acknowledgment of the weakness and insufficiency of the self, it wishes to conceal that weakness and to restore a condition of omnipotent control over objects. Like disgust, it contains the judgment that weakness and need are bad things, to be kept at bay. And, as we have already seen, shame and disgust are frequently linked to a hatred that seeks the total obliteration of the threatening object.

Parts II and III ask, then, how and whether ethical agents can live with the facts of their own interdependence and incompleteness – venturing out into the world and engaging evaluatively with it – without

1 I have learned a great deal on this matter from thinking about Charles Larmore's important work on the self. (That does not mean that he would agree with any of the specific claims about emotions made here.)

2. I am grateful to Keith Oatley for discussion of this point. See Oatley and Jenkins (1992), p. 58.

being stifled by shame, disgust, and hate. The Stoics recommended *apatheia*, the emotionless condition, because they thought that no non-Stoic life could be free of these reactive emotions and the evils they bring. The possibility of a non-Stoic ethics, in which there is some positive role for the guidance of emotions, depends on our answering their question differently.

A note on terms. The emotion I shall be describing in Part II seems to be a ubiquitous human phenomenon. Descriptions and analyses ranging from the theoretical accounts of Aristotle and Rousseau to the sociological data presented in Candace Clark's excellent book *Misery and Company*<sup>3</sup> remain remarkably constant across place and time. To put it simply, compassion is a painful emotion occasioned by the awareness of another person's undeserved misfortune. Compassion, in some form, is also central to several Asian cultural traditions.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, there is strong evolutionary evidence that compassion has played a central role in group selection; and related ethological evidence that it plays a central role, irreducible to that of egoistic reciprocity, in primate species, and in our own.<sup>5</sup> But there is more than the usual degree of verbal confusion in the English language concerning what to call the experience I have just defined. "Pity," "sympathy," and "empathy" all appear in texts and in common usage, usually without clear distinction either from one another or from what I am calling "compassion." "Pity" has recently come to have nuances of condescension and superiority to the sufferer that it did not have when Rousseau invoked *pitié*, and still does not have when "pity" is used to translate the Greek tragic terms *eleos* and *oiktos*. I shall avoid it here because of those associations.<sup>6</sup> "Empathy" is often used, as I shall later use it, to designate an

3 Clark (1997).

4 See Kupperman, in Marks and Ames (1995).

5 See Sober and Wilson (1998), de Waal (1996).

6 It is worth remarking, however, that "pity" has standardly and consistently been associated with the undeserved character of a misfortune, and thence with potential issues of justice; compassion occasionally has a looser usage, taking in the sufferings of creatures who are not imagined as agents, deserving or undeserving. There are perhaps not just terminological differences here, but subtly different phenomena; I shall use the term "compassion," but my analysis shall focus on the standard cases where compassion is linked to undeserved misfortune, and is thus coextensive with pity, in its older use.

imaginative reconstruction of another person's experience, without any particular evaluation of that experience; so used, obviously, it is quite different from and insufficient for compassion; it may not even be necessary for it.<sup>7</sup> But psychologists and psychoanalysts sometimes use the term "empathy" to mean some combination of imaginative reconstruction with the judgment that the person is in distress and that this distress is bad.<sup>8</sup> So used, it comes close to being compassion, although it still might not be identical to it (if, for example, we conclude that one may have compassion without imaginative reconstruction). I shall use "empathy" in a way that clearly distinguishes it from "compassion": empathy is simply an imaginative reconstruction of another person's experience, whether that experience is happy or sad, pleasant or painful or neutral, and whether the imaginer thinks the other person's situation good, bad, or indifferent (separate issues, since a malevolent person will think the other's distress good and her happiness bad). Finally, "sympathy" is frequently used in British eighteenth-century texts to denote an emotion equivalent to what I call "compassion." Contemporary authors often follow this usage: thus Candace Clark's research into the emotion is all conducted using the term "sympathy." If there is any difference between "sympathy" and "compassion" in contemporary usage, it is perhaps that "compassion" seems more intense and suggests a greater degree of suffering, both on the part of the afflicted person and on the part of the person having the emotion. People who are wary of acknowledging strong emotion are more likely to admit to "sympathy" than to admit that they feel "compassion."<sup>9</sup> But "sympathy," as standardly used today,<sup>10</sup> is very different from "empathy": a malevolent person who imagines the situation of another and takes pleasure in her distress may be empathetic, but will surely not be judged sympathetic. Sympathy, like compassion, includes a judgment that the other person's distress is bad.

We can see that there is a little more difficulty here than in many other cases about identifying the extension that the definition is to

7 For the history of the term "empathy," see Wispé (1987).

8 See examples in Eisenberg and Strayer (1987), Batson (1991)

9 It is also possible that "compassion" has a closer connection to concern and subsequent action than does sympathy: in terms of my later analysis, that sympathy lacks the eudaimonistic judgment, at least in some cases.

10 Not so in Smith, who associates the term "sympathy" with contagion of feeling: see note 11.

cover. But the fact that literary, philosophical, psychological, and sociological accounts are in remarkable agreement in the descriptions they give helps us to believe that the search for an account is not a waste of time.

A source of further complexity – but also a source of kinship holding the terms together – is the fact that in the philosophical tradition they are translated and retranslated in many different ways. Words in one language that may initially have had different connotations from those in another get drawn toward one another by the practice of philosophical translation and discussion over the years. Thus Greek *eleos* and *oiktos* get rendered into classical Latin by *miser cordia*, and both of these into Italian by *pietà*, into French by *pitié*. All of these, in turn, are translated into English by *pity* – although the British moral philosophers of the eighteenth century also at times use *sympathy* to allude to the classical tradition in question.<sup>11</sup> In German, meanwhile, *Mitleid* is the word most commonly chosen to translate the Greek, Latin, and French words, although *Mitgefuhl* also occurs. Although *Mitleid* may initially have slightly different associations from some of the words in the family, it gets pulled toward them by philosophical practices. English can at times render *Mitleid* (literally) by *compassion*, a word with its own (medieval) Latin history, which I shall not discuss here. The interchangeability of the two English words in philosophical contexts is noted already by Hobbes in *Leviathan*, chapter 6: “*Griefe*, for the Calamity of another, is PITY; and ariseth from the imagination that the like calamity may befall himselfe; and therefore is called also COMPASSION, and in the phrase of this present time a FELLOW-FEELING” (1991, p. 43). Nietzsche is aware of all of these complexities, since he comments on Greek and French texts sometimes using the German vocabulary (when he wants to insist on the fact that *Mitleid* means a double amount of *Leid*, pain), sometimes the French word (when he wants to scoff at Rousseau and the democratic tradition).<sup>12</sup>

11 Smith is clearer, using *pity* and *compassion* for our pain at the sorrows of another, *sympathy* for the more general tendency to have fellow feeling with “any passion whatever” in another person (Smith [1976], p. 10).

12 In thinking about who Nietzsche’s opponents are, we need to be aware that *pitié* is not common as a central ethical term in nineteenth-century texts: in Comte, Renan, etc. one tends to find, instead, phrases such as *sentiments fraternels* and *fraternité*. Rousseau’s usage, with its strong links to the Greco-Roman tradition, seems not to have survived the Revolution.

In short, the most sensible way to proceed is to give clear accounts of each term one uses and to be consistent; in the case of historical texts, we must ask to what extent their analyses are shaped by their choices of terms.

## II. THE COGNITIVE STRUCTURE OF COMPASSION

Philoctetes was a good man and a good soldier. When he was on his way to fight with the Greeks in the Trojan War, he had a terrible misfortune. By sheer accident he trespassed on a sacred precinct on the island of Lemnos. As punishment he was bitten in the foot by the serpent that guarded the shrine. His foot began to ooze with foul-smelling pus, and the pain made him cry out curses that spoiled the other soldiers' religious observances. They therefore left him alone on the island, a lame man with no resources but his bow and arrows, no friends but the animals that were also his food.<sup>13</sup>

Ten years later they come to bring him back: for they have learned that they cannot win the war without his bow. The leaders of the expedition think of Philoctetes as simply a tool of their purposes. They plan to trick him into returning, with no sympathy for his plight. The chorus of common soldiers, however, has a different response. Even before they see the man, they imagine vividly what it is like to be him, and they enter a protest against the callousness of the commanders:

For my part, I have compassion for him. (*oiktirô nin egôge*)  
Think how  
with no human company or care,  
no sight of a friendly face,  
wretched, always alone,  
he wastes away with that savage affliction,  
with no way of meeting his daily needs.  
How, how in the world, does the poor man survive? (169-76)

As the chorus imagine a man they do not know, they stand in for the imaginative activity of the audience, for whom the entire tragic drama is a similar exercise of imagination and compassionate emotion.

The drama strongly suggests that this emotion is linked with benefi-

13 I narrate Sophocles' version of the story. In the lost versions by Aeschylus and Euripides, we know that the island was inhabited.



cent action, as the chorus, having seen Philoctetes with compassion, begin to question the plot against the suffering man, imploring their young leader to grant his wish and send him home. Their speech of urging begins with the words, "Have compassion on him, lord" ("oiktir', *anax*," 507). Philoctetes himself relies on this connection when he asks for aid: just before pleading to be sent home, he says:

Save me, have compassion for me (*eleêson*),<sup>14</sup>) seeing that all mortal life lies open to risk and terrible affliction:<sup>15</sup> good things can happen, but the opposite can also happen. The person who is outside of suffering ought to look out for terrible affliction, and when someone's life is going well, then above all he should watch out, lest he be ruined unawares. (501–6)

The connection determines the shape of the plot: for it is when the young commander Neoptolemus feels for the first time the tug of compassion, witnessing an attack of Philoctetes' pain, that he repudiates his own deceitful conduct and returns the stolen bow to its rightful owner. Philoctetes, blinded by pain, asks, "Where are you, my child?" (805) – and Neoptolemus replies, "I have long been in pain (*algô palai*), grieving for your suffering" (806). He gives his location in the world by naming his emotions. The distress by which he locates himself is ethical distress: when Philoctetes refers to the discomfort his affliction causes others, Neoptolemus says, "Everything is discomfort, when someone leaves his own character and does what is not fitting" (902–4). And at last, when it is time to sail with the stolen bow, he says, "A terrible compassion (*deinos oiktos*) for this man has fallen upon me" – comparing his emotion to the sudden afflictions mentioned by Philoctetes, which fall upon mortals unawares. The affliction of compassion prompts a decision to treat Philoctetes justly and humanely.

Philoctetes' story displays the structure of compassion, drawing attention to the elements of its cognitive structure that are stressed in standard theoretical accounts. It is useful to begin with the fine analysis given by Aristotle in the *Rhetoric*, which has guided the subsequent philosophical tradition. Aristotle's analysis is continuous with less sys-

14 I have not been able to find a significant difference between *eleos* and *oiktos*; their interchangeable use in the play seems governed more by poetic considerations than by considerations of sense.

15 In the Greek, *deina pathēin*. The repetition of *deina* below does not explicitly include *pathēin*, but I have translated both as "terrible affliction" to indicate the repetition.

tematic earlier treatments in Homer, the tragic poets, and Plato; it is taken over, in most respects, by defenders of compassion such as Rousseau, Schopenhauer, and Adam Smith, and by opponents of the emotion such as the Greek and Roman Stoics, Spinoza, Kant, and Nietzsche.<sup>16</sup> Finally, the very same elements are stressed in many contemporary psychological accounts and in Candace Clark's analysis of current American beliefs. As I follow Aristotle's account, I shall also assess it in the light of the subsequent tradition, and criticize it in view of my own developing argument.<sup>17</sup>

Compassion, Aristotle argues, is a painful emotion directed at another person's misfortune or suffering (*Rhet.* 1385b13 ff.). It has three cognitive elements. It seems to be Aristotle's view that each of these is necessary for the emotion, and that they are jointly sufficient. Apparently he thinks that the pain itself is caused reliably by the beliefs: he calls it "pain at . . . the misfortune one believes to have befallen another," and gives the aspiring orator advice about how to induce or remove it, by inducing or removing the beliefs. Later we will have to ask (both on Aristotle's behalf and on our own) whether the pain is a necessary element of the definition, over and above the cognitive elements. For now, however, we may begin with the fact that the cognitive elements are, at the least, among the constituent parts of the definition: the pain of pity is distinguished from the pain of grief, or fear, only by the type of cognition it involves.

The first cognitive requirement of compassion is a belief or appraisal<sup>18</sup> that the suffering is serious rather than trivial. The second is the belief that the person does not deserve the suffering. The third is the belief that the possibilities of the person who experiences the emotion are similar to those of the sufferer. (I shall later argue that this

16 I discuss Aristotle's account in Nussbaum (1986), Interlude 2, and also in Nussbaum (1992), Nietzsche's in Nussbaum (1993b). See also the very perceptive analysis of both Aristotelian and tragic pity in Halliwell (1986).

17 Although Aristotle's Greek term, *eleos*, is usually rendered as "pity," I shall continue to translate it as "compassion," as seems more appropriate to the nuances of the two English terms.

18 Aristotle uses the participle of the verb "appear"; in Nussbaum (1994), Chapter 3, I argue that this does not entail that he is thinking of *phantasia* as contrasted with judgment or belief. In fact, he regularly uses belief-words interchangeably with appearance-words.

third element is not strictly necessary, and that another as yet unspecified element is.) Let us examine each Aristotelian element in turn.

Take seriousness first. Compassion, like other major emotions, is concerned with value: it involves the recognition that the situation matters for the flourishing of the person in question. Intuitively we see this quite clearly. We do not go around pitying someone who has lost a trivial item, such as a toothbrush or a paper clip, or even an important item that is readily replaceable. In fact, internal to our emotional response itself is the judgment that what is at issue is indeed serious – has “size,” as Aristotle puts it (1386a6–7).

What misfortunes are taken to have “size”? Once again, not too surprisingly, there is remarkable unanimity about core instances across time and place. The occasions for compassion enumerated by Aristotle are also the ones on which tragic plots, ancient and modern, most commonly focus: death, bodily assault or ill-treatment, old age, illness, lack of food, lack of friends, separation from friends, physical weakness, disfigurement, immobility, reversals of expectations, absence of good prospects (86a6–13). Candace Clark’s study of appeals to compassion in America<sup>19</sup> includes the same elements – adding some variants specific to contemporary life:

When I looked at what had triggered sympathy, I discovered dozens of plights. The inventory encompasses all of those enumerated in blues lyrics (e.g., poverty, a partner’s infidelity, death of loved ones). It includes illness (including “functional” or behavioral illnesses such as alcoholism and drug use), physical or mental disabilities or deformities, injury, and pain. The respondents also mentioned war trauma, sexual abuse, physical abuse, crime victimization, disaster victimization (e.g., by earthquakes, hurricanes, or airplane crashes), homelessness, infertility, divorce (or loss of “partner”), discrimination (e.g., in jobs or housing), political victimization (e.g., liberties abridged by tyrannical government), role strain (e.g., single parenthood), unwanted pregnancy, physical unattractiveness, car accidents, car trouble, house trouble (e.g., leaky roof), insensitive parents, ungrateful children, so-

19 This part of her account focuses on both interview data and the annual listing by the *New York Times* of its “Neediest Cases,” whose descriptions of “debilitating plights” involving “death, mental and physical illness, disability, poverty . . . loneliness” show that our sense of tragedy is not discontinuous with that expected from the audience of the *Philoctetes*.

cial ostracism, loss in competition (e.g., sports or job), depression, fear, public humiliation, accidental embarrassment, fatigue, bad judgment, ruined vacations, boredom, and discomfort (e.g., enduring heat, cold, or traffic jams).<sup>20</sup>

Apart from the fact that (as Clark stresses) Americans today tend to include more relatively mild predicaments in the list of “plights” than they did formerly, the list she presents is remarkably similar to Aristotle’s – and to Rousseau’s, and to Smith’s. Even though her list includes more items, she insists that this is because they are seen as having “size,” not because “size” is not considered important:

For a person to be considered unlucky, his or her plight must fit prevailing standards of direness – that is, it should be considered sufficiently harmful, dangerous, discrediting, or painful . . . Moreover, the plight must be bad and unlucky for those with the person’s particular set of gender, age, social class, and other characteristics. (82)

One interesting difference between Aristotle’s list and the “plights” enumerated as dire by Clark’s subjects is that various forms of political injustice and oppression play a more central role for Americans than they do in Aristotle’s account. But even this is not a general historical/cultural difference. For in omitting this occasion for emotion Aristotle has neglected central cases of Greek tragic compassion, where slavery and loss of citizenship are pivotal; even in Philoctetes’ case, the fact that he had suffered undeserved political injustice is as important as are his isolation and his pain.

We may conclude that societies (and individuals) vary to some degree in what they take to be a serious plight; they vary, too, in the level of damage required before something is taken to be a serious plight.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, changes in the shape of life construct new predicaments: obviously enough, car and airplane crashes were not on Aristotle’s list. Nonetheless, the central disasters to which human life is prone are remarkably constant; constant as well is the fact that people take these disasters to be central.

An important question now arises: from whose point of view does

<sup>20</sup> Clark (1997), p. 83.

<sup>21</sup> Here Clark’s use of the term “sympathy” may be significant: it is hard to imagine that her subjects would have described themselves as having “compassion” for people caught in traffic.

the person who has compassion make the assessment of “size”? Consider the following two examples. Q, a Roman aristocrat, discovers that his shipment of peacock’s tongues from Africa has been interrupted. Feeling that his dinner party that evening will be a total disaster in consequence, he weeps bitter tears, and implores his friend Seneca to pity him. Seneca laughs. R, a woman in a rural village in India, is severely undernourished, and unable to get more than a first-grade education. She does not think her lot a bad one, since she has no idea what it is to feel healthy, and no idea of the benefits and pleasures of education. So thoroughly has she internalized her culture’s views of what is right for women that she believes that she is living a good and flourishing life, as a woman ought to live one. Hearing of her story and others like hers, workers in the province’s rural development agency<sup>22</sup> feel deeply moved, and think that something must be done.

What these examples bring out is that people’s judgments about what is happening to them can go wrong in many ways. Suffering and deprivation are usually not ennobling or educative; they more often brutalize or corrupt perception. In particular, they often produce adaptive responses that deny the importance of the suffering; this is especially likely to be so when the deprivation is connected to oppression and hierarchy, and taught as proper through religious and cultural practices.<sup>23</sup> On the other hand, people can become deeply attached to things that on reflection we may think either trivial or bad for them; their suffering at the loss of these things may be real enough, even though the onlooker is not disposed to share in it. Compassion takes up the onlooker’s point of view, making the best judgment the onlooker can make about what is really happening to the person, even when that may differ from the judgment of the person herself.

Adam Smith makes this point powerfully, using as his example a person who has altogether lost the use of reason. This, he argues, is “of all the calamities to which the condition of mortality exposes mankind . . . by far the most dreadful.” It will be an object of compassion to anyone who has “the least spark of humanity.” But the person affected does not judge that his condition is bad – that, indeed, is a large part of what is so terrible about it:

22. For these and similar cases, see Chen (1983), Chen’s paper in Nussbaum and Glover (1995), and Nussbaum (2000a).

23. See Nussbaum (2000a), Chapter 2, with references to the literature on this question.

But the poor wretch . . . laughs and sings perhaps, and is altogether insensible of his own misery. The anguish which humanity feels, therefore, at the sight of such an object, cannot be the reflection of any sentiment of the sufferer. The compassion of the spectator must arise altogether from the consideration of what he himself would feel if he was reduced to the same unhappy situation, and, what perhaps is impossible, was at the same time able to regard it with his present reason and judgment.<sup>24</sup>

In short: implicit in the emotion itself is a conception of human flourishing and the major predicaments of human life, the best one the onlooker is able to form.

This is another way of putting our familiar point that the object of compassion is an intentional object – interpreted within the emotion as he or she is seen by the person whose emotion it is.<sup>25</sup> Therefore, as with any emotion, it may also happen that the person who has the emotion is wrong about what is going on, and the suffering person is right. Many judgments about the suffering of others are skewed by inattention, or bad social teaching, or by some false theory of human life. Seneca does not have compassion for Q, and here he is probably correct. As a Stoic, however, he would also refuse compassion to R, because he would judge that hunger and lack of education are not very important. Most of us will think him wrong, and to the extent that we do, we will be more likely to have compassion for R. Compassion, or its absence, depends upon the judgments about flourishing the spectator forms; and these will be only as reliable as is the spectator's general moral outlook.

The judgments of the sufferer are not altogether irrelevant to pity,

24 Smith (1976), p. 12, from which the two previous citations are drawn as well. Smith goes on to talk of a mother's pity for the suffering of her infant, as yet unable to understand the difficulties of its situation, and of our pity for the dead. Contrast Rousseau (1979), who holds that "the pity one has for another's misfortune is measured not by the quantity of that misfortune but by the sentiment which one attributes to those who suffer it" (p. 225). Blum (1980), p. 510, follows the Rousseau position, where what he calls "compassion" is concerned; he distinguishes "pity" from "compassion," arguing that the former involves a degree of distance and condescension to the sufferer. This may be right about some current nuances of usage, but not about the history of their philosophical use; nor would it be right to suppose that approaching the predicament of another with one's own best judgment, rather than the sufferer's, need involve condescension. I would say that there is condescension in suspending one's own reflection, and true compassion in trying to get things right.

25 Aristotle registers this point by insisting that compassion, like other major emotions, relies on the "appearances" and beliefs of the person whose emotion it is.

where these differ from the personal judgments of the pitier: for the onlooker may judge that the sufferer is right to accord importance to a certain sort of loss, even though she herself does not do so. For example, a wind player whose lip becomes even slightly injured may judge the suffering to be of tremendous size, and I may have compassion for him on that account, even though I myself would find a similar injury trivial. But this is because, at a more general level, I validate the judgment of the sufferer: for I agree with him that it is a terrible thing to be deprived of one's career and one's mode of expression, whatever it is, and I see his injury as such a deprivation. My compassion revolves around the thought that it would be right for anyone suffering a loss of that sort to be very upset. On the other hand, the wind player will be right to laugh at me if I complain a great deal about a minor injury to my own lip: for the very thing that would mean loss of career to him means no such thing to me, and it is this general description that validates the judgment of "size." Human beings have different ways of specifying the content of the major constituents of human flourishing: but unless the onlooker can bring the suffering back to one of these major components, as she conceives of things, she will not have the emotion.

Sometimes the relationship between onlooker and sufferer may militate against an independent judgment of "size." Often love takes up the viewpoint of the loved person, refusing to judge a calamity in a way different from the way in which the beloved has appraised it. Other circumstances, too, may suggest evaluative deferral. For example, if I know that a group in my society has suffered greatly in ways that I, a privileged person, have a hard time understanding, I may choose to take the estimate of misfortune offered me by qualified members of that group. But even in such cases I am, in effect, making a judgment of my own: namely, the judgment that the other person's estimate of "size" is the one I shall go by.

Now I turn to *fault*. Insofar as we believe that a person has come to grief through his or her own fault, we will blame and reproach, rather than having compassion. Insofar as we do feel compassion, it is either because we believe the person to be without blame for her plight or because, though there is an element of fault, we believe that her suffering is out of proportion to the fault. Compassion then addresses itself to the nonblameworthy increment. This comes out very clearly both in

Aristotle's account and in the poetic material on which he bases it. *Eleos*, he insists, sees its object as "undeserving (*anaxios*)" of the suffering.<sup>26</sup> Such undeserved suffering appeals to our sense of *injustice* (1386b14–15). He adds that for this reason the emotion is more likely to be felt toward people who are seen as in general good (1386b6–8): for then we will be more likely to believe that they do not deserve the bad things that befall them.<sup>27</sup> But it is not inconsistent with his account to have compassion for people for things they do out of their own bad character or culpable negligence – so long as one can either see the suffering as out of all proportion to the fault or view the bad character or negligence as itself the product of forces to some extent excusably beyond the person's control.

This point about desert is strongly emphasized in Homeric and tragic appeals for compassion. When the suffering is plainly not the person's fault, as in Philoctetes' case, the appeal for compassion need not be preceded by argument. But where there is a possible disagreement about culpability, the appeal to pity comes closely linked with the assertion of one's innocence. Throughout the *Oedipus at Colonus*, Oedipus insists on the unwilling nature of his crimes – in order to hold the emotions of the characters (and of the audience). Similarly, Cadmus, at the end of Euripides' *Bacchae*, joins to his admission of wrongdoing a claim that the god, by inflicting "unmeasurable sorrow, unbearable to witness" (1244) has exceeded the just penalty.<sup>28</sup> Only this justifies, it seems, his claim to compassion from the other characters (1324); the audience is being asked to share those judgments and that emotion.<sup>29</sup>

26 *Rhet.* 1385b14, b34–86a1, 1386b7, b10, b12, b13; *Poetics* 1453a4, 5.

27 He adds that if one believes that people in general are pretty bad, one will rarely have compassion, for one will be inclined to believe that they deserve the bad things that happen to them. In saying this, however, he ignores the importance of the causal connection between the person's badness and the *particular* thing for which he or she suffers: even bad people will get sympathy for a particular reversal if it is clear that it is not their fault. Such connections are sometimes in fact ignored – as when people who despise homosexuals view AIDS as a punishment for their alleged bad way of life; but the logic of compassion requires the person who withholds it to posit some sort of causal link; such links are often supplied by views of divine punishment.

28 *Endikôs men, all' agan*, 1259; and *epexerchêi lian*, 1346.

29 On the connection thus made between compassion and the Aristotelian notion of *hamartia*, see Nussbaum (1992), Halliwell (1986), and, for a superlative study of the word and its connection with blame and innocence, Stinton (1975).



A significant further step is taken in Sophocles' *Trachiniai*. Hyllus insists that the tragic predicament of Heracles was caused by the negligence (*agnômosunê*) of the gods. This being the case, it is appropriate for the human actors to have compassion for his plight – it is “an object of compassion for us (*oiktra men hemin*).” But it would not be appropriate for the gods to have compassion, since it was their fault: instead the events are “an object of shame for them (*aischra d'ekeinois*).” So compassion requires blamelessness not only on the part of its object, but also on the part of the onlooker. It would be simply hypocritical to weep over a plight that you yourself have caused. In other words, the onlooker has to see the disaster as falling on the person from outside, so to speak; and she will be unable to do this if she believes either that the person has caused it or that she herself has caused it.<sup>30</sup>

These ideas are developed in a fascinating way in Clark's study of contemporary American attitudes. Her subjects all feel sympathy only for plights caused by “bad luck” or “victimization by forces beyond a person's control” (84). And “[a] plight is *unlucky* when it is *not* the result of a person's willfulness, malfeasance, negligence, risk taking, or in some way ‘bringing it on him or herself’ ” (84). Such assessments, of course, are profoundly influenced by prevailing social attitudes. Clark finds that Americans are not very tolerant of ambiguity: they tend to place events “either in the realm of inevitability, chance, fate, and luck or in the realm of intentionality, responsibility, and blame” (100). In order for emotion to occur, they need to be able to conceive of the event as something that simply strikes someone, as if from outside: they use terms such as “befalls,” “besieges,” “ails,” “struck,” “hit her like a ton of bricks.” Where it appears that agency makes some difference, they are unwilling to see any admixture of external bad luck. Thus Clark finds that Americans are on the whole less ready than Europeans to judge that poverty is bad luck, given the prevalence of the belief that initiative and hard work are important factors in determining economic success. Similarly, Americans have been slow to judge that sexual assault is a “plight,” even if it is clearly a wrongful act against the woman, because they retain attitudes suggesting that the

30 For further discussion of Hyllus's speech, and Bernard Williams's interpretation of it, see Nussbaum (2001b).

woman “brought it on herself” – by walking alone in a dangerous place, for example. On the other hand, alcoholism and drug abuse are surprisingly likely – and more likely than in previous generations – to be seen as things that “fall on” the person through no fault of her own.<sup>31</sup>

This cognitive element of the emotion is, then, highly malleable. The rhetoric of “sympathy entrepreneurs” such as politicians and journalists can make a considerable difference to public emotion. Sociologist Michele Landis has argued, for example, that Roosevelt was a brilliant rhetorician of compassion during the New Deal, when he got Americans to think of economic disaster as something that strikes people from outside through no fault of their own, like a flood or a dust storm. Even the term “the Depression” was a masterstroke, with its links to hurricanes (“a tropical depression”) and ensuing flash flooding.

We often have compassion for people whose “plights” are in large part of their own creation. A parent, for example, may feel compassion for the mess an adolescent child has gotten into, and yet think that it is the child’s own fault. Still, when we have such thoughts, we are, I believe, making a two-stage judgment. In one way, it is the child’s own fault; and yet the condition of adolescence, which is not her fault, brings with it a certain blindness and a liability to certain types of error. For these sorts of errors, culpable though in one way they are, we also have compassion; we would not in the same way feel compassion for errors that do not seem to be a part of the predicament of adolescence. Thus, we are likely to feel compassion for a teenager who has been arrested for drunk driving, but not for one who has tortured and killed a dog. The latter does not seem to be a part of any kind of “bad fate,” even the bad fate of being sixteen.

Compassion requires, then, a notion of responsibility and blame. It also requires, as we can now see, the belief that there are serious bad things that may happen to people through no fault of their own, or beyond their fault. In having compassion for another, the compassionate person accepts, then, a certain picture of the world, a picture according to which the valuable things are not always safely under a

31 See Clark, Chapter 3, describing responses to a questionnaire about several examples of “bad luck,” including a sexual assault and a job loss due to alcoholism. For the general evolution of attitudes on women’s responsibility for sexual assault, see Schulhofer (1998).

person's own control, but can in some ways be damaged by fortune. As we shall see in Chapter 7, this picture of the world is profoundly controversial. Nobody can deny that the usual occasions for compassion occur: that children die, that cities are defeated, that political freedoms are lost, that age and disease disrupt functioning. But how important, really, *are* these things? To what extent are important human goals really at the mercy of fortune?

Let us now turn to the third requirement of compassion, as Aristotle and the poetic tradition understand it. (My account will depart from Aristotle at this point.) This is a judgment of *similar possibilities*: compassion concerns those misfortunes "which the person himself might expect to suffer, either himself or one of his loved ones" (1385b14-15). Thus, Aristotle adds, it will be felt only by those with some experience and understanding of suffering (1385b24 ff.); and one will not have compassion if one thinks that one is above suffering and has everything (1385b21-22, b31). This fact is repeatedly stressed in poetic appeals to compassion: thus Philoctetes reminds his visitors that they, too, may encounter uncontrollable pain. To Achilles, who is slow to identify his lot with that of ordinary mortals, Homer's Priam points out the vulnerability he shares with them through the old age of a beloved father (*Iliad* 24). In the *Odyssey*, Antinoos' belief in his own immunity from reversal (the state of mind that Aristotle perceptively calls a "hubristic disposition") apparently suffices for his refusal of compassion to Odysseus, disguised as a beggar.

This element in compassion is the focus of the marvelous discussion of that emotion in Rousseau's *Émile*. Drawing his account from the classical tradition, Rousseau takes as his epigraph Dido's statement from the *Aeneid*, "Not inexperienced in suffering, I learn how to bring aid to the wretched." He argues, agreeing with Aristotle, that an awareness of one's own weakness and vulnerability is a necessary condition for *pitié*; without this, we will have an arrogant harshness:

Why are kings without pity for their subjects? Because they count on never being human beings. Why are the rich so hard toward the poor? It is because they have no fear of being poor. Why does a noble have such contempt for a peasant? It is because he never will be a peasant . . . Each may be tomorrow what the one whom he helps is today . . . Do not, therefore, accustom your pupil to regard the sufferings of the unfortunate and the labors of the poor from the height of his glory; and do not hope to teach him to pity them

if he considers them alien to him. Make him understand well that the fate of these unhappy people can be his, that all their ills are there in the ground beneath his feet, that countless unforeseen and inevitable events can plunge him into them from one moment to the next. Teach him to count on neither birth nor health nor riches. Show him all the vicissitudes of fortune.<sup>32</sup>

Both Rousseau and Aristotle insist, then, that compassion requires acknowledgment that one has possibilities and vulnerabilities similar to those of the sufferer. One makes sense of the suffering by recognizing that one might oneself encounter such a reversal; one estimates its meaning in part by thinking what it would mean to encounter that oneself; and one sees oneself, in the process, as one to whom such things might in fact happen. This is why compassion is so closely linked to fear, both in the poetic tradition and in Aristotle's account.<sup>33</sup>

As I observed earlier, this judgment of similar possibility requires a demarcation: which creatures am I to count as sharing possibilities with me, and which not? If it really is true that I will have compassion only to the extent that I see the possibilities of others as similar, this means that the emotion will depend on my ability to see similarities between myself and others. Aristotle insists that the similarity should be not to my own possibilities alone, but to those of my loved ones as well – a plausible addition, given that this is a prominent way in which we make sense to ourselves of disasters befalling people of different age, for example, or different gender.

Here we arrive at another place where social and familial teachings play a powerful role, and errors may easily occur. The beings who are likely to be seen as similar to myself or to my loved ones will probably be those who share a way of life, those whom society has marked as similar. Rousseau argues that acquaintance with the usual vicissitudes of fortune will make it impossible for *Émile* (who does not inhabit a diseased society) to exclude the poor, or members of the lower classes, since he will know that people lose money and status all the time, and their political entitlements. But he also tells us that in his own society many people sever themselves in thought from the possibilities of the lower classes: nobles and kings therefore lack compassion for those

32 Rousseau (1979), p. 224; I have altered Bloom's translation in several places, in particular substituting "human being" for "man." I have retained "pity" for *pitié*.

33 See *Rhetoric* 1386a22–8, 82b26–7; *Poetics* 1453a5–6; for discussion, see Halliwell (1986) and Nussbaum (1992), pp. 274–5.

beneath them. In a similar way, in our own society, juries often have a hard time sympathizing with the life story of a criminal defendant who is very different from them in class and background; they have even more difficulty if they are provided, at the same time, with a “victim impact” statement from people who are more similar to them.<sup>34</sup> All kinds of social barriers – of class, religion, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation – prove recalcitrant to the imagination, and this recalcitrance impedes emotion.

Finally, the species boundary usually proves difficult to cross in emotion, since the possibilities of another creature for good or ill are opaque to us. Spinoza takes this difference in emotional nature to justify indifference to the suffering of animals.<sup>35</sup> Most major theorists of compassion also draw the species boundary firmly, focusing on human ills alone. Rousseau, by contrast to many, feels that *Émile* will naturally judge the lot of small animals as similar to his own, and will learn compassion best if he begins by focusing on their sufferings.

Why are similar possibilities important? Is the judgment of similarity on a par with the judgments of seriousness and of fault – that is to say, is it a necessary constituent part of the emotion, a part of its very definition? Or is it only a helpful epistemological device, a way of getting clear about the significance of the suffering for the life of the person who has it? The point made by Aristotle and Rousseau seems to be that the pain of another will be an object of my concern, a part of my sense of my own well-being, only if I acknowledge some sort of community between myself and the other, understanding what it might be for me to face such pain. Without that sense of commonness, both Aristotle and Rousseau claim, I will react with sublime indifference or mere intellectual curiosity, like an obtuse alien from another world; and I will not care what I do to augment or relieve the suffering. Spinoza supports this, when he links his denial that humans and animals have a “similar nature” with the judgment that it is all right to cause animals pain. What should we make of this claim?

34 See Bandes (1997), discussed further in Chapter 8.

35 Spinoza, *Ethics*, Part IV, Proposition 37, Scholium I: “I do not deny that beasts feel; I am denying that we are on that account debarred from paying heed to our own advantage and from making use of them as we please and dealing with them as best suits us, seeing that they do not agree with us in nature and their emotions are different in nature from human emotions.”

One can see that a certain sort of stranger cannot help being indifferent and unconcerned: for if he or she has no experiential sense of the importance of these matters, it will be hard even to grasp that suffering *is* suffering, and hard not to be clumsy or callous in dealing with it in consequence. But need this be so? Is this just a point about the limitations of understanding? Could we imagine a divine or perfect being feeling compassion for the sufferings of mortals without an awareness of sharing the same possibilities and vulnerabilities? Frequently, in the classical tradition, the gods are depicted as obtuse and lacking in compassion; this lack is connected to their lack of vulnerability. To a being who cannot feel more than temporary or trivial discomfort, the appalling suffering of a Heracles will be hard to see correctly.<sup>36</sup> But gods (and godlike humans) sometimes do have compassion: Zeus weeps for the death of Sarpedon; the Christian god feels ceaseless compassion for the errors and sufferings of mortals; the Buddhist who has successfully escaped from personal vulnerability and pain experiences compassion for the sufferings of those still fettered. Such cases are tricky to estimate: for usually in one or another way they do after all fulfill Aristotle's requirement that the person acknowledge similar vulnerability, "either himself or one of his loved ones." In pitying Sarpedon, Zeus pities his own son, for whom he also grieves; this personal vulnerability gives him a basis for more general pity of those dead in the war. The Christian god is vulnerable in a similar way, suffering agony and death both in his own person and in the person of his son. The bodhisattva has experienced the ills that he pities, even if by now he no longer expects to do so. Furthermore, the attachment to the concerns of the suffering person is itself a form of vulnerability: so a god, in allowing himself to be so attached, renders himself to a degree needy and non-self-sufficient, and thus similar to mortals. Religious conceptions such as those of Epicureanism, Stoicism, and Platonism, which imagine the godlike condition as strictly self-sufficient, also deny compassion to the godlike.

Must this be? What is really at issue here, it would seem, is the eudaimonistic character of the emotions, as I have defined them. I have argued that in order for grief to be present, the dead person must be seen, and valued, as an important part of the mourner's own life, her

36 See Nussbaum (1992), Winnington-Ingram (1980).

scheme of goals and projects. Similarly, in order for compassion to be present, the person must consider the suffering of another as a significant part of his or her own scheme of goals and ends. She must take that person's ill as affecting her own flourishing. In effect, she must make herself vulnerable in the person of another. It is that *eudaimonistic judgment*, not the judgment of similar possibilities, that seems to be a necessary constituent of compassion. For that judgment to occur, it is not strictly necessary that she focus on the other person's relation to herself. A truly omniscient deity ought to know the significance of human suffering without thinking of its own risks or bad prospects, and a truly loving deity will be intensely concerned for the ills befalling mortals without having to think of more personal loss or risk. (For such a deity, all humans are already children or loved ones, part of its scheme of goals and ends.) But human beings have difficulty attaching others to themselves except through thoughts about what is already of concern to them. Imagining one's own similar possibilities aids the extension of one's own eudaimonistic imagination.

The recognition of one's own related vulnerability is, then, an important and frequently an indispensable epistemological requirement for compassion in human beings – the thing that makes the difference between viewing hungry peasants as beings whose sufferings matter and viewing them as distant objects whose experiences have nothing to do with one's own life. Such a judgment is psychologically powerful in moving other people into one's own circle of concern. Even when we feel compassion for animals, whom we know to be very different from ourselves, it is on the basis of our common vulnerability to pain, hunger, and other types of suffering that we feel the emotion. Even when we feel compassion for precisely those aspects of an animal's suffering that are unlike our own – for example, their lack of legal rights, their lack of power to shape the laws that affect their lives, or (in some cases) their lack of understanding of what is happening to them – it is most often on the basis of a sense of shared vulnerability to pain that we extend our sympathy. We think, how horrible it would be to suffer pain in that way, and without hope of changing it.

This fact explains why so frequently those who wish to withhold compassion and to teach others to do so portray the sufferers as altogether dissimilar in kind and in possibility. In *The Destruction of the European Jews*, Raoul Hilberg shows how pervasively Nazi talk of

Jews, in connection with their murder, portrayed them as nonhuman: either as beings of a remote animal kind, such as insects or vermin, or as inanimate objects, “cargo” to be transported. (Later we shall see how disgust aids that project, bounding off the sufferers from their tormentors.) When by surprise an individual sufferer was encountered in a manner that made similarity unavoidably clear, one frequently saw what philosopher Jonathan Glover, reflecting on a wide range of cases of genocide and evil, calls a “breakthrough,” in which the seriousness of the suffering was acknowledged and pity led to shame and confusion.<sup>37</sup> Sometimes the catalyst of a breakthrough is simple physical proximity. Sometimes it is the reminder of a similar type of family life.<sup>38</sup> Sometimes it may even be sexual desire. A remarkable moment of that kind is shown in the film *Schindler’s List*, when the Nazi camp commandant confronts the beautiful Jewish housemaid. As she stands in her basement room trembling in her slip, he grasps her chin, stares violently into her eyes, and asks, in some strange agony of conscience, “Is this the face of a rat?”<sup>39</sup>

In short, the judgment of similar possibility is part of a construct that bridges the gap between the child’s existing goals and the eudaimonistic judgment that others (even distant others) are an important part of one’s own scheme of goals and projects, important as ends in their own right. Equipped with her general conception of human flourishing, the spectator looks at a world in which people suffer hunger, disability, disease, slavery, through no fault of their own. She believes that goods such as food, health, citizenship, freedom, do matter. And yet she acknowledges, as well, that it is uncertain whether she herself will remain among the safe and privileged ones to whom such goods are stably guaranteed. She acknowledges that the lot of the beggar might be (or become) her own. This leads her to turn her thoughts

37 See Hilberg (1985); Glover (1999), pp. 81, 345–8.

38 Glover (1999), p. 346: Rudolf Höss records how the sight of women and children caused men working in the crematoria to think of their own families. Christopher Browning (1992), p. 113, describes a man who refused to take part in the shooting of Jews “ ‘[b]ecause there were children among the Jews we had brought and at the time I myself was a father with a family of three children.’ ”

39 Rousseau insists that Émile is ready to learn compassion only when budding sexual desire has already turned his thoughts outward toward others. He appears to be wrong about the development of compassion; and desire may lead to objectification as well as to the humanization of the object. Nonetheless, a humanizing effect is also possible.



outward, asking about society's general arrangement for the allocation of goods and resources. Given the uncertainty of life,<sup>40</sup> she will be inclined, other things being equal, to want a society in which the lot of the worst off – of the poor, of people defeated in war, of women, of servants – is as good as it can be. Self-interest itself, via thought about shared vulnerabilities, promotes the selection of principles that raise society's floor.

It is through this set of ideas that compassion is standardly connected, in the tradition, to generous giving. Once again, generous giving could take place without the prudential thoughts of similarity, if the person already cared intensely about the good of the recipients. But the prudential thoughts do frequently assist in this process, as we shall see shortly (section IV).

Compassion, then, has three cognitive elements: the judgment of *size* (a serious bad event has befallen someone); the judgment of *nondesert* (this person did not bring the suffering on himself or herself); and the *eudaimonistic judgment* (this person, or creature, is a significant element in my scheme of goals and projects, an end whose good is to be promoted). The Aristotelian *judgment of similar possibilities* is an epistemological aid to forming the *eudaimonistic judgment* – not necessary, but usually very important.

Finally, let us recall that, like all emotions directed at living beings, compassion frequently either contains or is closely linked to a non-eudaimonistic element of *wonder* (see Chapter 1, section V). In viewing Philoctetes with compassion, as worthy of concern and help, I also consider him as a human being, and I see that humanity itself with an emotion that is likely to be, at least in part, non-eudaimonistic; but the non-eudaimonistic element of wonder strongly reinforces or motivates my eudaimonistic concern. Similarly, when I see with compassion the beating of an animal, a wonder at the complex living thing itself is

<sup>40</sup> Rousseau remarks that the emotion develops most easily where people live highly unstable political lives: thus the Turks, he alleges, are "more humane and more hospitable" than Europeans, because their "totally arbitrary government . . . renders the greatness and the fortune of individuals always precarious and unsteady" (1979, p. 224). One would not wish to draw normative political conclusions from this dubious observation. I have already argued that the perceptions of people who are inured to suffering and ill-treatment are very likely to be deformed by that experience – as Rousseau himself later argues. Maximizing the awareness of risk and vulnerability is not a morally valuable strategy – see Chapters 7 and 8.

likely to be mixed with my compassion, and to support it. (Thus we rarely have compassion for the deaths of creatures, such as mosquitos and slugs, toward whom we do not have wonder.) Wonder's role varies in different cases of compassion, and it is always hard to say whether we ought to see it as a part of the emotion itself, or as a different emotion closely associated with it. (I am inclined to the latter view.) But I think that wonder does often play a very important role in marking the world for our concern, and thence in directing our attention to the sufferings of its members. It shapes, in that way, our conception of *eudaimonia*.

What is the relationship of the cognitive elements to the emotion itself? It is natural to ask at this point whether one could not have all of the judgments without having the painful emotion. One might grant the necessity of these judgments without granting that they are sufficient for having the full emotion<sup>41</sup> – still less, that the emotion itself is a certain sort of acknowledgment of their truth. I see a stranger in the street. Someone tells me that this woman has just learned of the death of her only child, who was run over by a drunken driver. I have no reason not to believe what I have been told. So: I believe that this woman has suffered an extremely terrible loss, through no fault of her own. I know well that I myself might suffer a similar loss. Now I might at this point feel compassion for the woman; but then again, I might not. As Adam Smith says, giving a similar example, the fact that she is a stranger might make it difficult for me to picture her suffering; or I might simply be too busy and distracted to focus on what I have been told.<sup>42</sup> Doesn't this show that I can, after all, have all of the judgments without the emotion?

Notice, however, that the person does not in fact have all of the cognitive elements of compassion, as I have defined it: for she lacks the *eudaimonistic judgment*. She does not see the woman as an important part of her own scheme of goals and projects. Often the judgment of similar possibilities will suffice to value the person as a

41 As in Chapter 1, at this point in the argument sufficiency may be imagined either causally – these judgments produce whatever other constituents are also necessary for compassion – or by saying that these judgments are the only constituents there are. In both cases, however, we are considering the judgments as among the constituents of the emotion, each necessary to its being the emotion it is. I shall go on to argue that there are no further constituents that we should recognize as necessary in compassion.

42 Smith (1976), pp. 17–18.

part of one's circle of concern; but in this case that common psychological connection has not been made, probably because the person is a stranger; or the person might be distanced from the self in some other way. Furthermore, in this case it is not entirely clear that she even thinks the suffering a serious bad thing; she may know that for the woman it is bad, but it is not clear that she has affirmed its serious badness from her own viewpoint. A sadistic torturer knows that his victim's suffering is bad from the victim's point of view, but from his own point of view it is a good thing. In our example, the woman's suffering is probably not seen as either good or bad – because the eudaimonistic judgment is lacking. Here we see how closely the judgment of size and the eudaimonistic judgment are related. If the judgment of size relies on the onlooker's point of view, it will fail if the onlooker is just not very concerned with the fate of the suffering person one way or another.

Another way in which compassion may fail is connected with immaturity: one may have the judgments on authority, and yet not understand their true significance. Rousseau describes an *Émile* who has suffered himself, and who has it on good authority that others suffer too. He sees gestures indicative of suffering, and his teacher assures him that they mean in the case of others what they would in his own. But, Rousseau claims, he does not really believe or judge that this is so, until he has become able to imagine their suffering vividly to himself – at which point he will also suffer the pain of *pitié*. “To see it without feeling it,” he writes, “is not to know it.”<sup>43</sup> By this he means something very precise: that the suffering of others has not become a part of *Émile*'s cognitive repertory in such a way that it will influence his conduct, provide him with motives and expectations, and so forth. He is merely paying it lip service, until he can perform the thought experiment that is, in Rousseau's view, sufficient for being disturbed.

To cast doubt on my claim that the three cognitive requirements are sufficient for the emotion, we need, then, a different kind of example, one where it is clear that the judgment of size is not just parroted but comprehended, and where it is clear that the eudaimonistic judgment has been made. So let us imagine that my own child, an important part

43 Rousseau (1979), p. 222.

of my scheme of goals and ends, has just suffered a serious loss. I know that it is serious, and I know that it was not her fault. Is it possible for me to have all these judgments and yet to fail to have compassion for her plight? Only, I would say, in a case similar to my case of delayed mourning in Chapter 1, where I simply haven't yet taken in what has happened. I may be able to say the words, but their significance has not sunk in. This means, however, that the belief itself has not become a part of my cognitive repertory, in such a way that it will affect the pattern of my other beliefs and my actions. In other words, the example does not show that some noncognitive element, such as an ache or a pain, is required in addition to the three judgments.

But what about the case of an omniscient and invulnerable god – or even a bodhisatva, who has succeeded in severing himself from personal vulnerability to pain? Couldn't such a being have all the judgments involved in compassion without having the upheaval of the painful emotion itself? What this question reveals is that I have arrived at my result only because I have not seen compassion as strictly entailing a judgment of similar possibilities. For Aristotle, such beings would not have compassion; according to my account they do. In my account, unlike his, compassion does not entail personal vulnerability, although the recognition of personal vulnerability is extremely important, psychologically, in getting imperfect humans to have compassion for another person's plight. This means, too, that compassion is not linked to personal fear in my account, as it is in Aristotle's: one may have compassion for another without having anything at all to fear for oneself – although, again, in imperfect humans this link will usually prove psychologically valuable, in promoting concern.

One might then object that what the nonfearful and nonvulnerable person has is not the painful emotion itself, but just some distanced version of it, and that my three judgments are sufficient for, and constitute, that distanced attitude – let us call it humane concern. They are not, perhaps, sufficient for the upheaval of compassion itself. Now there may be some cases where we do want to say that a self-sufficient being has humane concern and not compassion: the Stoic sage is like this, and perhaps, in some interpretations, the bodhisatva as well. But the sage really does not share my three judgments, because he denies that the vicissitudes of fortune have “size.” Marcus Aurelius gives us a good image: we are to think of the sufferings of others as like the

sufferings of a child who has lost a toy – they are real enough, and worthy of our concern, but only in the way that we'd console a child, not because we ourselves think that the loss of a toy is really a large matter. If, instead, we imagine a self-sufficient being who really does care deeply about the vicissitudes of fortune, and who really does think that they are a big thing – the Christian and Jewish images of God, for example – then I think we do want to say that the three judgments are sufficient – not merely for humane concern, but for the upheaval of the emotion itself. Such a being, though not vulnerable to upset personally, has become vulnerable to upset in the person of another. That is how such a being differs from the Stoic sage.

If the cognitive elements are both sufficient for compassion and constituent parts of it, we still need to ask, as always, whether there are other necessary elements as well. Here again, the response will have to be, what might those other elements be? I shall assume that in Chapter 1 we have ruled out the possibility of a general type/type correlation between a given emotion and a specific physiological state, and that we have also cast a great deal of doubt on the claim that feelings of a determinate kind always arise in the case of any given emotion, as constituent parts of it. But that possibility needs to be considered here once again, in the following way. Aristotle mentions pain in his definition: compassion is a particular type of pain. And it seems natural to describe the experience this way. Indeed, the pain seems crucial to compassion's motivational role. But what is this pain? Is it something over and above the thought that something very bad is happening and that it matters for one's scheme of goals and projects? On the one hand, we are strongly inclined to say yes, it is something more. It is a disturbance, a tug at the heartstrings. But that doesn't quite solve our problem, because we know by now that thoughts are some of the most disturbing things there are.

First of all, we must ask whether the pain is being imagined as just a fluttering or a spasm, only contingently or causally linked to the thoughts, or whether it is itself so closely linked to the thoughts that we might call it the affective dimension of the thought, a pain "at the thought of" the bad thing, as Aristotle puts it. If it is the former, a knot in the stomach or a lump in the throat, then, here as elsewhere, it seems implausible to require that any particular such pain be present in order to ascribe compassion to someone. People are extremely variable in the

modes in which they experience their emotions physically, and even phenomenologically. Even if every compassionate person has *some* pain or other, it would surely be arbitrary and wrong to require any particular type of such pain. And the possibility of nonconscious compassion makes us still more skeptical: for surely it is possible to have compassion and not be aware of it – if one is not reflecting on one's own emotions, or if one has been led to suppose that real men don't have such soft sentiments. Then one could well have and be motivated by the thoughts, without being in any noticeable phenomenological state.

If, however, by "pain" we mean something more organic to the thoughts, that is, if the very character of this pain cannot be described without ascribing to it the intentionality embodied in the thought, then it is not clear after all that it is a separate element. At the very least it looks as if a pain of that sort – Aristotle's "pain at" the thought of someone's suffering – is reliably caused by the thought, and does not have much, if any, causal independence. Once we begin to think harder about how to define such a pain, moreover, it appears that it does not have much conceptual independence either: not any old throbbing or tugging will do, but only the sort that is "about" or "at" the misfortune. It is mental pain directed toward the victim that we want, not some obtuse physical spasm; but what is this mental pain, if not a way of seeing the victim's distress with concern, as a terrible thing? Perhaps we could call it the affective character of the thoughts: but the notion of "affect" is notoriously slippery and vague, and it is unclear whether we have really succeeded in defining a truly separate element.<sup>44</sup> In short: if we do discover a separate element in the notion of pain, to the extent that it is separate from the cognitive material it also seems to be too various to be a necessary element in the definition. To the extent that it is closely tied to, or even an element in, the cognitive material, we probably haven't succeeded in introducing a separate element. Certainly, when we are trying to ascertain whether Émile has learned compassion or not, we are satisfied by the evidence of a certain sort of imagination and thought, a certain way of viewing the distress of others. We don't inquire whether in addition he has a throbbing or an

44 See my remarks on Stocker (1996) in Chapter 1, note 62.

aching. This suggests that we really do not think that pain in that sense is a further necessary element.

### III. EMPATHY AND COMPASSION

I have said that compassion is distinct from empathy, which involves an imaginative reconstruction of the experience of the sufferer. Now we must investigate the connection. First of all, how does empathy itself operate? This has occasioned a good deal of debate in the philosophical tradition. Does one actually think, for the time being, that one *is* oneself the sufferer, putting oneself in his or her own place? <sup>45</sup> Does one imagine one's own responses as *fused* in some mysterious way with those of the sufferer? <sup>46</sup>

Such cases might possibly occur. More often, however, empathy is like the mental preparation of a skilled (Method) actor: it involves a participatory enactment of the situation of the sufferer, but is always combined with the awareness that one is not oneself the sufferer. This awareness of one's separate life is quite important if empathy is to be closely related to compassion: for if it is to be for *another*, and not for oneself, that one feels compassion, one must be aware both of the bad lot of the sufferer and of the fact that it is, right now, not one's own. If one really had the experience of feeling the pain in one's own body,

<sup>45</sup> This view is endorsed by Smith (1976) early in his account: "By the imagination we place ourselves in his situation, we conceive ourselves enduring all the same torments, we enter as it were into his body, and become in some measure the same person with him, and thence form some idea of his sensations . . ." (p. 9). This is inconsistent with his observation about the case of the brain damaged person, and is corrected by his later observation that the relevant viewpoint is that of the judicious spectator, not that of the sufferer, which may be ill-informed.

<sup>46</sup> This seems to be the view of Schopenhauer, *Preisschrift über das Fundament der Moral* (trans. Payne, 1995), p. 143 (my translation here): Compassion requires "that in *his* pain as such I directly feel, with suffering, *his* pain as I otherwise feel only my own, and on that account want his good directly, as I otherwise want only my own. This, however, requires that in a certain manner I should be *identified* with him, that is to say, that the entire *distinction* between me and that other person, which is the basis for my egoism, should be, at least to a certain extent, removed." On the other hand, Schopenhauer also distinguishes the identification involved in compassion from a pathological kind that "arises from an instantaneous deception of the imagination [whereby] we put ourselves in the position of the sufferer, and have the idea that we are suffering *his* pains in our person." Thus the type of fusion he has in mind remains somewhat unclear.