

Learning to Map Compassion: A Project Rooted in the Humanities

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Abstract:

To understand the nature of compassion, I trace an arc from the Christian Scriptures, which are “saturated” with compassion, to the “eclipse” of compassion in modern political philosophy in Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Locke. Rather than stopping at that point, however, the dialogue recommences with a comparative approach to three figures. (1) In Kant’s view, deeds of compassion ought to be guided by rational moral principles. Why? Because principles are much more reliable than feelings. (2) Rousseau’s *Emile*, however, gives a privileged place to feelings of compassion for others. (3) In the film, *La Reine Margot*, we catch a glimpse of how compassion for others might be learned, when Marguerite of Valois experiences a crisis of conscience and rescues Henry of Navarre from the soldiers sent to kill him. (4) A concluding section asks about the contribution the visual arts to “mapping compassion,” and what an ethics of compassion might look like at the micro, meso, and macro levels.

Keywords: Ethics of compassion, Refugees, Exodus, Flight into Egypt, Rousseau

A Biblical Model of Compassion (I): *The Book of Exodus*

The central event in the memory of the Hebrew people is the *Exodus* from Egypt. (Ferder and Heagle 2009, 52-56) The Hebrews were being treated in a barbaric way by Pharaoh and his slave drivers. They were forced against their will to labor for their masters, and there was no reason for them to think that their lives – if we can *call* that “living” – would ever be any different. However, at a key moment in the third chapter of *Exodus*, the direction of the story is radically changed. The Lord says: “I have *seen* the misery of my people; I have *heard* their cry on account of their task-masters. And I have *come down* to deliver them from the Egyptians.”

The Lord’s message to Pharaoh is astonishing: “Let My people go!” However, Pharaoh’s reaction to the message is entirely predictable: “Who is this god that I should listen to him?” So, God leads His people out of Egypt with signs and wonders, “with a mighty arm and an outstretched hand.” (Hoffmeier 1986, 378-387) That is how the *Exodus* became the prism through which the people of Israel interpret their history. Throughout the centuries, when they celebrate Passover and re-enact that fateful sequence of events, they continue to reflect on what God did for them and what that experience means for the way they should treat others. (Assmann 2016, 187-201)

We might even say that *Exodus* 3 provides a paradigm for human acts of compassion. First, compassion involves seeing, rather than averting one's gaze: God *saw* how the Hebrews were being mistreated by the Egyptians. Secondly, compassion involves listening, rather than turning a deaf ear to someone: God *heard* the cry of His people. And then thirdly, true compassion leads to action, rather than doing nothing: God *came down* to deliver them from their oppressors, to break the yoke of bondage. So, compassion involves knowing, feeling, and doing. First, we become aware of another person's distress (cognitive level), then we feel emotionally moved by what we see (affective level) and thirdly, we decide to take action to restore justice (volitional level). (Ryan 2010, 157-174)

A Biblical Model of Compassion (II): The New Testament

The narratives of the *New Testament* place the teaching, feeding, and healing, ministries of Jesus in a context of compassion. (Navone 2002, 242-247) In *Matthew* 15, after the crowds have come out to hear his teaching, Jesus summons his disciples and says to them: "I feel compassion for the people, because they have remained with Me now three days and have nothing to eat; and I do not want to send them away hungry." So, he multiplies the loaves for them and the disciples distribute the food. In *Matthew* 25:31-46, what is it that counts most? Deeds of compassion for those who are hungry, sick, or imprisoned.

When St. Thomas discusses the virtue of mercy (*Summa Theologica*, II-II.30), he draws upon two seemingly opposed traditions. (1) Aristotle says in his *Rhetoric* that it is not in the natural way of things for us to feel pity for those who suffer because of their own wicked actions. We are much more likely to feel pity for those who suffer through no fault of their own. (2) On the other hand, *Matthew* 9:36 says that Jesus felt compassion for the crowds: "At the sight of the crowds, his heart was moved with compassion for them, for they were troubled and abandoned, like sheep without a shepherd." It is likely that the people in the crowd were troubled and vexed by their own sins. By a strict Aristotelian interpretation, the people in the crowd might not be deserving of pity. That is not how Jesus sees them, however. (Keaty 2005, 181-198) Jesus heals the sick, feeds the hungry, forgives their sins, and teaches them in the way they should go. And then his disciples are given the very same tasks: "Go. Preach, saying: The kingdom of heaven is at hand. Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out devils..." (*Matthew* 10:8).

St. Thomas also describes the Christian as *homo viator*, a wayfarer or pilgrim journeying through this world to the heavenly city. (Elliott 2014, 101-121) All along this journey, we are being invited to accept the gift of deeper friendship with Jesus, to be welcomed as honored guests at his feast. At the same time, we are vulnerable to the temptations of "worldliness" - an excessive attachment to wealth, status, honors, prestige, and power. These are forms of exclusion that work against the friendship with God that is described in the gospels. (Porter 1989, 197-213) The *New Testament* refers to this problem as "hardness of heart," and the gospels challenge us to transform the hardened hearts of the world, beginning with our own.

The Eclipse of Compassion in Modern Political Thought

According to Niccolò Machiavelli (1469-1527), however, a ruler can become more effective by breaking free from religious considerations and leaving them behind. In *The Prince*, he seeks a thoroughly empirical and secular foundation for governing the *polis*. Machiavelli's Prince will not be subject to the restraints imposed by Christian Scripture, nor will he be afraid of God's judgment. (Maddox 2002, 539-562) Rather, he will base his decisions on what he has learned from the examples set by the ruthless leaders of ancient Rome, for above all else, politics is about power. If you do not have power at this moment, how will you obtain it? Once you hold the reins of power in your hands, how will you maintain your grip? What means are you willing to use to reach those ends that you find most desirable? Rather than requiring the Prince to shape his actions according to the objective standards of virtue, the equation is reversed by Machiavelli: whatever actions happen to contribute to the Prince's political success, these are praised as virtuous. The moral standards by which his deeds might have been judged in the past have either disappeared, or they may be safely ignored.

Machiavelli's political thought is especially vexing for anyone who has a desire to show *true* compassion to others in the public realm. In Chapter 16 of *The Prince*, Machiavelli argues that genuine compassion for others would only scatter the resources of the Prince and blunt his sense of purpose, making him more vulnerable to his enemies. There is a good reason, however, for the Prince to make a show of liberality so that he will be *perceived* as generous by his subjects. He may very well find it necessary to ensure the continued cooperation of his countrymen by making promises that he will look after their needs, but it would be most prudent for him to keep those promises by paying for them with someone *else's* money rather his own. (Orwin 1978, 1217-1228) That is one reason why Machiavelli's Prince is so ready to send his military forces to invade other countries and conquer them. He very much wants to keep the flow of riches moving in the "right" direction, into his own republic.

The prospects for international expressions of friendship, compassion, and generosity are even bleaker when we consider the political philosophy of Thomas Hobbes (1588 –1679). Hobbes wrote *Leviathan* in the midst of The English Civil War. *Leviathan's* most basic assumption is that the best way to keep a society from ever again descending into that kind of disastrous bloodshed is by strengthening the hand of the Sovereign against all forms of dissent. Otherwise, human life is at risk of becoming little more than *bellum omnium contra omnes* - a war of all against all.

In such condition, there is no place for industry; because the fruit thereof is uncertain: and consequently no culture of the earth; no navigation, nor use of the commodities that may be imported by sea; no commodious building; no instruments of moving, and removing, such things as require much force; no knowledge of the face of the earth; no account of time; no arts; no letters; no society; and which is worst of all, continual fear, and danger of violent death; and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short. (Hobbes 2009, 66)

Since Hobbes could see how much of the conflict sprang from religious disagreement, he argued that such disagreements could be prevented by making the Sovereign head of both Church and State. (Pabel 1993, 335-349) Hobbes sets up a strictly binary distinction between the friends and the enemies of the state. A person is either “with us” or “against us.” Within our borders, whatever the Sovereign says becomes Law. Outside of our borders, anarchy reigns, and if the people in another country are starving or suffering from disease, that is their own misfortune and need not concern us. Successful states are those that strike the “posture of Gladiators; having their weapons pointing, and their eyes fixed on one another.” (Hobbes 2009, 66)

In the philosophy of John Locke (1632-1704), there are several trajectories that are especially relevant to the question of “a politics of compassion.” Locke was acquainted with a number of refugees who had been forced to flee their home countries on account of religious persecution. He had considerable compassion for their plight, and this concern played a significant role in his commitment to religious toleration. That is one of the reasons why Locke urged that the scope of the government’s power needs to be proscribed, limited. Governments should not be allowed to favor one religion over another, nor should they have any interest in persecuting anyone for their religious convictions. We should also note, however, that for most of Locke’s followers, religious “convictions” are construed as being entirely *private*, so that the government may feel it has little reason to pay attention to the prophetic voice of a group of believers. (Perry 1992, 289-323; Calhoun 1992, 289-323) This can make it very difficult for a church to be an effective advocate for public expressions of compassion.

Another important theme emerges in Locke’s *Second Treatise of Government*, where he writes that “men are naturally more desirous of accumulating more property than they need,” and that this is “morally unobjectionable as long as nothing goes to waste.” (Macpherson 1980, xvii-xviii) In economics, just as in religious matters, Locke is very keen on limiting the role of government. The government has no duty to perform other than to protect life, liberty, and private property. If we follow Locke down this path far enough, there will never be any space for a public discussion about altruism, nor is it likely that we will show compassion for anyone outside of our own families or our close circle of friends.

Riches do not consist in having more gold and silver, but in having more in proportion than the rest of the world, or than our neighbours, whereby we are enabled to procure to ourselves a greater plenty of the conveniences of life, than comes within reach of neighbouring kingdoms and states, who, sharing the gold and silver of the world in a less proportion, want the means of plenty and power, and so are poorer. (Locke 1824, 13)

Locke sees nothing remarkable in our desire to have more “conveniences,” even while many others in the world do not have the necessities of life. And if anyone should raise the question, “When will enough be enough?” the answer is, “Never.” (Scott 2013, 487-505)

In the second chapter of the *Book of Ecclesiastes* there is a perfect portrait of Locke's acquisitive individual. Perhaps we are meant to imagine that it is King Solomon.

I accomplished great works. I built houses for myself, and planted myself vineyards. I made for myself royal gardens and parks, and I planted in them all sorts of fruit trees. I made for myself pools of water to irrigate the forests of growing trees. I even bought male and female slaves; even some were born to me in my house. I had also great possessions of herds and flocks more than any who had been in Jerusalem before me. I also gathered for myself silver and gold and treasures of kings and provinces. I obtained singers, both men and women, and the delights of the sons of men, and many concubines...

The list of things he has been able to buy - *for himself* - is quite impressive, but he is more frustrated and lonely now than when he first began to spend his money on these projects. Nowhere in *Ecclesiastes* is there any indication that he would have been willing to share these good things with anyone else in the world. (Sacks 2014, 30-47)

Kant's Principles, Rousseau's Feelings, *Queen Margot's* Actions

We noted that in the texts of the *New Testament*, there is a special relationship between *feelings* of compassion and *actions* of compassion. For Immanuel Kant, however, the connection between moral emotions and moral action is more problematic. In *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant asks us to reconsider how...

...we should understand those passages of Scripture which command us to love our neighbor and even our enemy, for love as an inclination cannot be commanded. But beneficence from duty, when no inclination implies it and even when it is opposed by a natural and unconquerable aversion, is practical love, not pathological love. It resides in the will and not in propensities of feeling; in particular principles of action and not in tender sympathy; and it alone can be commanded. (Kant 1959, 14-17; see also Radcliffe 1994, 50-71)

For Kant, feelings of compassion are unreliable, and it makes more sense to focus on a reasoned approach to discern our *duty* to perform acts of compassion. The rational principles that apply to helping others are more important than our inclinations or emotions. (Green 1992, 261-280)

For Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), however, compassion is better understood as a natural impulse to help others. It is rooted, he says, in the repugnance we feel when witnessing the suffering of others. In Rousseau's book, *Emile*, he outlines a "curriculum" that builds on this natural impulse. (White 2008, 35-48) *Emile* has been carefully shielded from the corrosive effects of society for most of his young life, but gradually he will be allowed to see suffering. The wise educator will be careful not overwhelm a young person with too many scenes of suffering. There is no need to go from hospital to hospital just to gaze on those who are in pain. (Rousseau 2009, 136)

Too much exposure might have the wrong effect, and harden a young person's heart toward the suffering of others. All that is needed is for Emile to see enough so that he begins to reflect – What if I were the one feeling what that person feels now?

In Book V, Emile and his teacher are received hospitably into the humble home of Sophie and her parents. When they are eating together, Sophie's father tells his guests how difficult life was and the great loneliness he felt before he met his wife. Emile has already heard from a neighbor that since they were married, the little family has become a great blessing to the district. Emile's heart has been prepared for just such a transformational moment. (Loder 1982) He finds himself touched by the story of this man's life, and he senses, too, that a deep bond is forming between him and Sophie. It is the kind of mutual affection that leads Emile to help others. From this point on, we find him engaged in all kinds of activity with his new neighbors. He helps the local farmers discover new methods in agriculture. When a poor man is being harassed by a rich person, he comes to the defense of the weaker one. He visits the sick and consoles a mother who has lost a child. He acts as mediator in a dispute between two friends so that they are reconciled with each other. If a neighbor's roof needs to be rethatched, he makes sure that the work is paid for. If he learns that someone has lost a cow or a horse, he provides a replacement without thinking twice. (Rousseau 2009, 275)

Rousseau's description of Emile's compassion for others is so vivid that we have to remind ourselves that he is only a fictional character. His resources – the money and the time he devotes to others - appear to be unlimited. The neighbors he encounters eagerly listen to his words and readily follow his advice. His efforts to help them always come to fruition and his own emotions are always calm and reasonable. Any political figure who deals with real people as they sometimes are - demanding, angry, frustrated, stubborn, suspicious, desperate - would no doubt be tempted to trade his or her own constituency for the good people of Emile's district. (Ost 2004, 229-244) Yet, in spite of all the naiveté, the many flaws, and the inadequacies we can find in Rousseau's account, there is something that is intuitively right about the goal he sets for Emile's development: an education in compassion. (Marks 2007, 727-739) What point would there be in an education that encouraged young people to think only of themselves and never consider the needs of others? (Rashedi, Plante, and Callister 2015, 131-139)

We can catch another glimpse of what an education in compassion might look like by following the transformation of Marguerite of Valois in the film *La Reine Margot*.¹ The historical setting for this film is The St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre, which took place over several days in Paris, in August 1572. Tension between Catholics and Protestant had been mounting for roughly forty years, and already there had been several wars between the two sides. Catherine de Medici hoped to improve the prospects for peace by arranging for her daughter Margot to marry Henry, the Protestant Prince of Navarre. Many Protestant leaders had come to Paris in anticipation of the wedding, which they regarded with cautious optimism. Most of the Catholics in Paris, however, regarded it as an alliance that jeopardized both the peace of their earthly city and their spiritual

safety. Catholic kings had always taken an oath to protect France and the Catholic faith, and Catherine's bid at a compromise threatened to undo the fabric of society as they knew it.

As for the character of Margot, before the wedding, she is portrayed as a shallow person, interested mainly in fashionable clothes, drunken parties, and meaningless sexual encounters. Her only thought is to continue with that kind of life, answering to no one but herself. As the wedding draws near, she realizes that she cannot escape the plans her family has made for her, but she makes it clear that she has no love for Henry, nor does she have any intention of having a family life with him.

After the ceremony, however, word spreads through the city that Admiral Coligny and other prominent leaders of the Protestants have been assassinated. A wave of violence sweeps through the streets of Paris. Armed and violent men are pursuing Henry, and somehow he finds himself at the door of Margot's bedchamber. Margot realizes that she must make an immediate decision. Will she take this opportunity to rid herself of Henry, or will she try to save him? If she does not open her door to him, she will join the ranks of the killers. With no time to spare, she decides to admit Henry into her rooms, and she hides him there, protecting him from those who seek his life. In that very moment, her character is transformed. (Humbert 2002, 223-235) When the sun rises the next day, she goes out into the streets, looking for survivors of the massacre. When she finds them, she tends to their wounds and speaks kindly to them. Though she may be surrounded by violence and hate, she chooses the way of compassion. There is a very clear difference, we might even say an "instructive difference," between the way of violence and the path that Margot chooses.

Compassion for Refugees and Migrants: A Paradigmatic Example

In 1952, when Europe was still trying to decide what to do with millions of refugees in the aftermath of World War II, Pius XII drew special attention to the Church's duty to help them in *Exsul Familia Nazarethana*: (Guerra 2015, 403-427)

The émigré Holy Family of Nazareth, fleeing into Egypt, is the archetype of every refugee family. Jesus, Mary and Joseph, living in exile in Egypt to escape the fury of an evil king, are, for all times and all places, the models and protectors of every migrant, alien and refugee of whatever kind who, whether compelled by fear of persecution or by want, is forced to leave his native land, his beloved parents and relatives, his close friends, and to seek a foreign soil.

"The Flight into Egypt" is a rich tradition in the visual arts. Jacopo Bassano painted several versions of The Holy Family fleeing from the violence of Herod and his soldiers. (Brown 2011, 193-219) Giovanni Domenico Tiepolo created twenty-four variations on this theme. Taken together they have the quality of a documentary showing the difficult path of refugees across time and space. (Ives 1971, 195-203)

But as Sebastião Salgado says of his humanitarian photographs, “If the person looking at my pictures only feels compassion, I will believe that I have failed completely. I want people to understand that we can have a solution.” (Salgado 2001)

It is not uncommon for lawmakers to pass measures that would make it more difficult to help refugees and migrant workers. (Fonseca 2009, 291-316) In 2004, John Paul II asked the Catholic Church to renew its commitment to this ministry, and emphasized the urgency of working for “family unification, education of children, housing, work, associations, promotion of civil rights and migrants’ various ways of participation in their host society.” (*Erga Migrantes Caritas Christi*, No. 43) John Paul II also emphasized the importance of compassion and solidarity. When the Nazis occupied Poland in World War II, he witnessed their politics of hatred, exclusion, and mass murder. After that war ended, the Soviets seized power in Poland, and he experienced firsthand the oppressive regimes of the left and their use of violence and fear. Having lived under both forms of totalitarianism, John Paul II consistently worked for a very different kind of society, which he described as a “civilization of love” and a “culture of life.” “Man’s need for truth and love,” says John Paul, “opens him both to God and to creatures...to other people, to life ‘in communion’ and in particular to marriage and the family.” (*Letter to Families*, No. 8)

John Paul II felt keenly that “the civilization of love” needed to be defended in the public square. In *Sollicitudo Socialis*, he said:

Solidarity is not a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people, both near and far. On the contrary, it is a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is to say to the good of all and of each individual, because we are all really responsible for all. This determination is based on the solid conviction that what is hindering full development is that desire for profit and that thirst for power... These attitudes and “structures of sin” are only conquered - presupposing the help of divine grace - by a diametrically opposed attitude: a commitment to the good of one’s neighbor with the readiness, in the gospel sense, to “lose oneself” for the sake of the other instead of exploiting him, and to “serve him” instead of oppressing him for one’s own advantage. (*Sollicitudo Socialis*, No. 38)

For his part, Pope Francis has continued to teach Christians about the need to connect feelings of compassion and deeds of effective solidarity. Pope Francis visited the Castelnuovo di Porto refugee center near Rome on March 24, 2016, on Maundy Thursday. Remembering how Jesus had washed the feet of his disciples, Pope Francis washed and kissed the feet of Muslim, Christian and Hindu refugees. (Carr-Lemke and Glatzer 2018, 267-284)

If we want to inquire further about “where” this kind of compassion can be shown, we might follow a model that works of three levels, the micro-level, the meso-level, and the macro-level. (1) At the micro-level is where I ask myself: In my face-to-face encounters with people, am I prepared to show compassion to those who need it? To my family, friends, and neighbors, and those who are alone? Have I made a commitment to feeding the hungry and sheltering the homeless? (2)

At the meso-level, the level of advocacy, do I support and speak out for mediating institutions that contribute to the common good, and not only to the good of those who look like me? Who speaks my language? Who lives in my part of the city? (3) At the macro level, am I seeking a politics in which the poor are no longer recipients of someone else's benevolence, but equal participants in the quest for justice and mutual respect? (Jaspal, Carriere and Moghaddam 2016, 265-276)

It may be that "too many words" about compassion turn it into something morally bland. "Enough talk already!" And yet, we all know the sting that lingers with us when we have been treated *without* compassion by a medical professional, by a teacher, or by a religious leader. Just as common are those experiences – we have not yet forgotten them all! – in which we ourselves failed to respond generously to a person in need, even though it was in our power to do so. Psalm 95 encourages us and says that we do not have to be overcome by these failures: "If today you hear His Voice, harden not your hearts."

Endnotes

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