

Introduction

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Compassion is a response to suffering, be it before our eyes or imagined at a distance: in seeing an afflicted person, hurt physically or otherwise, we are moved to suffer with the sufferer, whether or not we act on that feeling. It slides on various scales: it can figure the response of an individual or of a nation. This emotional sharing, variously hailed or rebuffed throughout history, provides an extraordinary prism through which to see at similarly multiple perspectives. It is sometimes hailed, even pushed on us, as an anti-politics: we should show *compassion*, voters in both Britain and the United States were told in 2016, for those who voted in ways that displeased us. In this exhortation's figuring of the emotion, compassion knows no borders: it erodes the distance between us. But compassion also provides a way to read or sometimes reinforce social and political fault lines, as 2020's response to the pandemic suggests: in asking us to attend to suffering, it also draws attention to inequities, including our unequal capacities for response.

We write at a time when public capacity for compassion appears to be severely reduced; in writing of emotion in an early modern world riven by crises over religious and racial difference and facing the large-scale migrations that stemmed from them, it is hard not to think of our own response to such scenarios today. Perhaps the study of historical compassion always invites such comparisons: for Lauren Berlant, scholarly work on compassion will always be a history of the present because 'the word *compassion* carries the weight of ongoing debates about the ethics of privilege'.¹ One of compassion's latter-day privileges has been to regard itself as a private and sentimental response. In our contemporary culture compassion is universally and often facilely hailed as a good, a cheap shot for politicians looking to buffer their image but often failing to bring about any substantive relief. In response to that trumpeting of public emotion, scholars have proffered critiques of contemporary compassion, tracing the compassionate vocabularies that veil and sustain immigration's repressions² or censuring what

Lauren Berlant calls the ‘reparative compassion’ that allows US liberalism to tune out a violently racist history: ‘Compassionate liberalism is, at best, a kind of sandpaper on the surface of the racist monument whose structural and economic solidity endures.’³ Berlant’s rejection of compassion recalls that of Hannah Arendt, who thought compassion’s attention to the singular case or contingent sufferer made compassion ungeneralisable, and no fit basis for political action: ‘Because compassion abolishes the distance, the worldly space between men where political matters, the whole realm of human affairs, are located, it remains, politically speaking, irrelevant and without consequence.’⁴

Early modern texts can throw a different light on these concerns. For seventeenth-century theorists of the emotions, compassion could be surprisingly akin to anger: Nicolas Coeffeteau, for example, defines mercy as ‘a Griefe or feeling which we have of another mans miseries, whom we hold worthy of a better fortune’ and views it as the flip-side of indignation, which ‘proceeds from the discontent we receive to see the wicked flourish’.⁵ Compassion’s capacity for judgement, that is, partakes of a fiercer quality than that usually imagined. If Arendt worried that compassion, in attending to singular cases, shut down any larger political capacity, many texts from other traditions and times suggest that compassion can multi-task: it makes room for *both* an attention to individual pain and a larger reading of social structures. Taking compassion seriously means taking seriously its capacity for change.⁶

Modern views of compassion often draw on eighteenth-century secular views on the social roles of compassion. Eighteenth-century debates about compassion were central to larger considerations of the social sphere, and they rewrote the classical and Christianised vocabulary of the early modern period into a new and seemingly transparent lexicon: the term ‘sympathy’ takes precedence in this period, referring not only to the sharing of misery but to the larger sharing of any sort of emotional state. Many Enlightenment deliberations considered the emotion’s role as a building block in larger relational structures, be they private or public: for David Hume in the *Treatise on Human Nature* (1739–40), the tracing of sympathy’s structural relations allows for an appraisal of the ways different selves relate spontaneously to one another; for Jean-Jacques Rousseau in the *Discourse on Inequality* (1755), a spontaneous and natural pity cancels out our human tendency to self-regard, and is thus central to political community (although in his *Letter to D’Alembert* he worried that such an emotion could be displaced by the false emotion we feel at the theatre); in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), Adam Smith similarly imagined

compassion at the heart of human society. These eighteenth-century discussions are often drawn on in discussion of compassion today – see, for example, Luc Boltanski's discussion on media and emotion in *Distant Suffering*, which takes its model of compassion from Rousseau – but their secular structures of sympathy look quite different from the forms we trace in this book. Instead of drawing on an Enlightenment intellectual history to understand compassion's power, we suggest that digging into compassion's early modern entanglements provides a different way for thinking through emotion today.

Compassion: A History

Before we turn to these early modern entanglements, we look briefly at compassion's shapes and practices in the classical and medieval periods. Compassion was a contested concept in classical literature and philosophy. In ancient Greece and Rome, the capacity for compassion – principally known by the Greek *eleos* and *oiktos* and the Latin *miser cordia* – was often considered necessary to humanity. Across such diverse texts as Homeric epic, Roman tragedy and the treatises of Aristotle, pity appears as a morally right response to another person's suffering, while a lack of pity is a sign of a base character.⁷ In Stoic philosophy, however, pity is seen as a dangerous passion considered irrational, painful and as incompatible with justice.

These contrasting judgements on the value of compassion in society are shaped, in part, by a difference in definitions. Aristotelian pity is more objective, cognitive and less overwhelming. Although he describes pity (*eleos*) as 'a kind of pain', Aristotle does not envisage it as involving shared suffering.⁸ As David Konstan explains, 'the subject and object of pity do not merge but rather maintain distinct emotions – that of the pitier is precisely pity'. The observer is not a participant in the feelings of the other, but regards the pain of others from the outside.⁹ Perhaps influenced by the rhetorical context in which he wrote, Aristotle sees pity as a strongly cognitive emotion. It is preceded by an evaluation: only when the suffering person did nothing to warrant their grief does the observer experience pity. And lastly, Aristotelian pity is kept within bounds because it is initially a self-directed feeling. The person perceiving the suffering needs to recognise him or herself in the sufferer in order to be able to feel pity. The emotion hinges on a similarity: of age, character, disposition, social status and family. For this reason, pity and fear are coupled in Aristotle's description of catharsis: we pity the other's suffering precisely because we fear that such a situation might also befall us.¹⁰ An Aristotelian audience would for

example not experience pity for the suffering of slaves, since they didn't share their social situation.¹¹

The Stoics, on the other hand, viewed compassion as a dangerous feeling. They made a fierce moral distinction between *misericordia* and *clementia* (clemency), seeing the former as 'the vice of a petty mind that collapses at the sight of the misfortune of others'. (These distinctions return throughout the history of philosophy: like the Stoics, Kant too made the distinction between a rational and necessary emotion that he called sympathy, and what he saw as a more worrying contagious compassion.) Pity is, in this analysis, a disturbance of the mind, and Seneca gendered it as feminine, considering it a passion typical of old women. Whereas clemency is considered a virtue, *misericordia* is dangerous because it does not involve a cognitive judgement: 'pity looks to the condition, not the reason, whereas clemency assents to reason'.¹² This does not mean the Stoics would not respond to the suffering of another person: they would endeavour to remove the cause of suffering, and could thus be said to act compassionately, but these actions would not spring from a sense of shared suffering. This Stoic resistance to compassion lies firmly behind the many early modern authors who worried about compassion as infection or contagion, and behind the figure of the judicious male compassionate, apportioning emotion reasonably, who so often figures in their texts.

If Greek and Latin philosophers urged emotional distance and decorum, early Christian authors in the fourth to the seventh century reassessed the need for positive emotions such as love and compassion. Susan Wessel argues that the beginnings of 'an affective compassion – of deeply sympathizing with another person's suffering' can be traced to the early Christians.¹³ The first uses of the word *compassio* also date from this period.¹⁴ Early Church fathers used the Latin *compassio* to translate the Greek *sympatheia*: both these words literally mean 'feeling or suffering with'.¹⁵ In the Gospels, compassion was central to Jesus' ministry, and figured as an embodied experience often referred to as '*splanchnizomai*', deriving from '*splanchna*', meaning 'guts' or 'entrails'. Even more central than Christ's compassion with the sick and the poor in this reassessment of the moral and ethical function of compassion was the idea that the Son of God became human and suffered in the flesh.¹⁶ Compassion in early Christianity became a mode of mediation between human beings and their God. As Karl Morrison notes, 'in the developing humanist tradition represented by Aristotle and Cicero, fellow feeling had been a human affair, closed at the highest ranges, as Aristotle observed, since gods did not have friends'.¹⁷ In Christian doctrine, compassion and mercy were

Introduction

5

central to the relation between the believer and God, through the meditation of Jesus. The notion of Christ's bodily suffering was pivotal for the early development of a theology of compassion. Compassion was not an unproblematic affective response, however. Christian authors inherited Stoic philosophy's rejection of *miser cordia*, and struggled to view bodily, affective compassion as a virtue. 'Compassion as an emotional response was rarely, if ever, taken for granted', Wessel writes.¹⁸

In the high Middle Ages, attention to Christ's bodily suffering was at the heart of the cult of affective piety. Whereas in the eleventh century Christ on the cross was still represented as a triumphant saviour, from the thirteenth century onward a different image of Christ, *Christus patiens*, became dominant: 'naked and disfigured, covered with blood, Christ ha[d] become a vulnerable human victim'.¹⁹ The idea that Christ experienced bodily pain on the cross as a human being was central to late medieval devotion. His kinship with mankind enables both the meditator's compassion with Christ's suffering and Christ's compassion with man.²⁰ Late medieval piety was therefore characterised by a 'heightened experiential awareness of the humanity of Christ'.²¹ Indeed, as Jan Frans van Dijkhuizen writes, 'because Christ's anguish is so physically graphic and outwardly visible, it lends itself so well to sustained meditation, and . . . is open to human participation'.²² The devotee's concentration on the physical and mental suffering of Christ was intended to kindle an intense experience of compassion.

We may wonder whether this co-suffering with the crucified Christ is the same emotion as Aristotle's *eleos*, since it occurs in such different contexts, involved different practices and shaped a different bodily experience. In meditations, prayers and reading, devotees were encouraged to concentrate on vivid images of Christ's suffering or the grief of his mother, Mary, in order to feel their pain as their own. Recall that Greek *eleos*, especially as we find it in Aristotle's writings, is characterised by an emotional distance between the pitier and the pitied. In affective devotion, in contrast, devotees are urged to enter into the suffering of Christ, to feel it as their own. For Aristotle, the sight of one's son being led to death is not pitiful, but terrible, since a son is so closely related that we would feel as if we were in danger ourselves.²³ Yet in late medieval affective devotion, it is precisely this familial situation that kindles compassion. Gendered feminine, it is predicated on the love of a mother for her son and of a female spouse for her beloved.²⁴ The drawing of the boundaries between 'us' and 'them' shifts across different historical contexts.

In analysing the social and political roles of compassion, we therefore insist on the significance of such historical differences. The cultural archive of compassion can help us to think beyond modern definitions of pity and compassion. Lauren Berlant's observation, for example, that 'in operation, compassion is a term denoting privilege: the sufferer is *over there*', applies more to Greek *eleos* than to late-medieval compassion. In the following section, we signal how conflicting historical traditions of thinking about and practising compassion come together and are reinterpreted at the time of a volatile mix of Neo-Stoicism and religious Reformation, and suggest how a richer engagement with the early modern period might bring us to a more complex understanding of compassion's operations today.

Early Modern Compassion

In the early modern period, the feeling and practice of compassion were recalibrated in a pressure cooker of social, religious and political changes. The rich philosophical heritage of classical ideas about the role of pity in virtuous citizenship and prudent statesmanship and the embodied practices of late-medieval affective meditation on compassion with the suffering of Christ jostled against new contexts of civil war, colonisation and capitalism. Cities such as London, Paris and Amsterdam expanded into metropolises, absorbing migrants from abroad as well as from the surrounding countryside. Notions of neighbourliness, charity and compassion became elastic as communities changed shape. With the opening of Exchanges in major European cities and an accompanying growth of credit culture, the beginnings of a capitalist economy shaped new economic relations among citizens that were experienced as conflicting with Christian ideals of compassion. Early empirical science gnawed at the foundations of humoral theory and its notion of bodily compassion when it confronted occult notions of sympathy between natural elements. Encounters with others, and exploitation of them, in travel, trade and imperial expansion invited a recalibration of the Christian circle of concern in the exercise of compassion; sometimes, disturbingly, they asked Europeans to imagine their violence against others as a form of compassion in itself.

Compassion's traditional practices and institutional affordances were revoked or reshaped in the context of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, while authors all over Europe sought to reconcile Christian views of compassion with the revival of Stoic philosophy's problematisation of its social and political role. A seventeenth-century English sermon

Introduction

7

suggests how compassion ought to be experienced: ‘hee must both haue compassion inwardly; and hee must shew it too outwardly: *Affectu*, and *Effectu*; pitying them in his heart, and helping them with his hand. It is not enough for him to see the Blinde, and the Lame, and the Poore; and to be sorry for them: but his compassion must be reall. Hee must lend his eyes to the blinde, to direct them; and he must lend his feet to the lame, to support them; and he must pitie the Poore as a father doth his children, so pitie them, that hee doe something for them.’²⁵ The sermon’s distinction between inner emotion and exterior action is typical of debates in the wake of the Reformation that marked changing understandings of the path to salvation. If the discourse of a fervent inner emotion was in the first decades of the Reformation a peculiarly Protestant domain, Catholic responses to the Reformation later began to trouble that distinction. The growing Counter-Reformation interest in charitable practice, stemming from an understanding of the importance of the works of mercy to salvation, was also accompanied by a new emphasis on discourses of *caritas*. Both Protestants and Catholics argued the tension between abstract considerations of compassion and an exhortation to assistance, but the ways they conceptualised or drew distinctions between ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ were often different. Although both Catholics and Protestants drew on a rich textual tradition of compassion – reading the Stoics, Saint Augustine and sometimes even works of medieval piety – they often responded to it in different ways as their understanding of Christian charitable action shifted. Attention to the shifting scales of compassion, pity and fellow-feeling grants us a new look at the changes of the early modern period.

Our cover image, a detail from *Visiting the Sick*, part of the Master of Alkmaar’s multipanel painting *The Seven Works of Mercy* (Rijksmuseum, 1504), suggests something of the changing practices of compassion in the context of the Reformation. The painting is assumed to have been commissioned by the regents of the Holy Spirit Almshouse in Alkmaar, who may be represented in the foreground (with Christ among them). An inscription on the frame encouraged charitable donations, promising that the reward for practising compassion with the sick ‘will multiply eternally’. During the iconoclasms of the 1560s and 1570s in the Netherlands, the painting was severely damaged. Faces as well as the gifts carried by depicted figures were scraped away with knives, and the painting was later described as ‘pitifully’ damaged with black paint. With their removal of the proffered gifts, the iconoclasts seem to have targeted specific pre-Reformation practices of compassion, critiquing the outward performance of compassion in charitable donations.²⁶

It was not only paintings that were changed. The Reformation brought about an anxious delineation of community, subject to constant redraftings. Where we tend to think of compassion as a warm or embracing emotion, the early modern emotion, drawing on Stoic tradition and anxious about the differences wrought by the Reformation, often stemmed from a series of restrictions. If compassion appeared as what John Staines terms for seventeenth-century England ‘one model for public politics’, then that understanding of the public was often hemmed in by enclosure or constraint.²⁷ Early modern compassion was also shaped by an extraordinary degree of confessionally marked violence across Europe. Katherine Ibbett has argued, for instance, that the restrictive form of compassion that marks seventeenth-century writing in France stems from the sectarian rhetoric of the ‘pitiful spectacle’ that marked the verbal storm accompanying the Wars of Religion, in which compassion was meted out within fiercely confessional structures of desert and worthiness, and those on the other side were deemed uncompassionable.²⁸ For others, as one disturbing example from France suggests, wartime atrocity brought about only a horrified sense that although onlookers might feel compassion, they could do little to intervene. The military man Henri de Campion, seeing the rape of local women by soldiers, writes that it made him feel ‘a pity that I cannot express, but we couldn’t do anything to stop it taking place’.²⁹ The large-scale devastation and suffering of conflict could make the compassionate gesture seem negligible. But, as many examples demonstrate in these chapters, compassion was also lived at the most intimate and neighbourly scale; sometimes it involved surprising reaches to those outside a narrowly defined community, sometimes it managed only to define that community more tightly still.

Early Modern Compassion and the History of Emotions

Our view of early modern compassion as entangled in a web of traditions, practices, sites and communities offers us a fresh way into a number of debates in emotion history. As Susan Matt has written, doing the history of emotions by tracing particular emotion words presents certain difficulties: ‘We may have different words or no words for emotions and concepts that earlier cultures thought central, and vice versa. Even within a single society, at a given moment, the meaning of those words and the feelings they describe may be understood differently by different individuals.’³⁰ If we focus on the early modern English example of the word ‘compassion’, the complexity of the issue immediately becomes clear. The *Oxford English*

Introduction

9

Dictionary stages an account of compassion that tells a particular seventeenth-century story. The word changes meaning in this period: its sense of ‘suffering together with another, participation in suffering; fellow-feeling, sympathy’ disappears from the dictionary around 1625.³¹ In its newer and still current sense, ‘compassion’ refers not so much to a shared suffering, but to the feeling when a person is moved by the suffering of another, and by the desire to relieve it. Around the same time, the words ‘sympathy’ and ‘fellow-feeling’ begin to take flight as cognates of compassion. The noun ‘sympathy’ is first used to refer to shared suffering in the 1590s.³² Also around the turn of the seventeenth century, the word ‘fellow-feeling’ is introduced into the English language to refer to the ‘participation in the feelings of others, sympathy’.³³ Thomas Hobbes’s writing testifies to the intermixing of these cognates in the period: he writes that ‘griefe for the calamity of another is Pitty, and ariseth from the imagination that the like calamity may befall himselfe, and there fore is called compassion, and in the phrase of this present-time a fellow-feeling’.³⁴ As David Konstan also notes for antiquity, ‘the notions conveyed by such terms as compassion, sympathy, pity, forgiveness, clemency, . . . are not neatly bounded, and there are broad areas of overlap and combination’.³⁵

Faced with this diversity in definitions and usages of compassion and its cognates, emotion historians have used various strategies to demarcate their source material. In his cross-historical study of sympathy Eric Schliesser took a conceptual approach to his object of study. He chose to define five underlying features ‘incorporated in or presupposed by most usages of the term “sympathy”’.³⁶ Sarah McNamer, on the other hand, wonders if such a cross-cultural approach is possible, as she finds significant differences between ancient Greek *eleos* and late-medieval Christian compassion. ‘Does “compassion” have an irreducible essence?’ she asks, and therefore ‘can these variations even be considered iterations of the same emotion?’ Other historians base their selection of material on the use of a particular word. Seth Lobis, for example, focuses on the word ‘sympathy’ in seventeenth-century England, warning against ‘semantic lumping – treating “pity”, “compassion” and “sympathy”, among other terms, as virtual fungibles – [since it] can yield a false sense of conceptual coherence’.³⁷ He signals that while sympathy and compassion are close cousins, their histories cannot be collapsed into one.

And yet, early modern authors were not too careful about the distinctions between compassion and its cognates. In early modern dictionaries, compassion, pity, fellow-feeling, commiseration, mercy, ruth/rue, yearning

and other cognates are often defined as each other's synonyms. In his *World of Wordes*, John Florio translates the Italian *compassione* as 'pitie, compassion, or ruthe', *misericordia* as 'mercie, pittie, ruthe, compassion' and *pietà* as 'reuerent loue, naturall affection or zeale, reuerence, remorse, conscience, pitie, ruth, mercie, compassion, commiseration or compunction of anothers harme'.³⁸ Thomas Cooper's *Thesaurus Linguae Romanae et Britannicae* translates *misericors* as 'Merciful: pitifull: that hath pitie or compassion: that is sorie for an others ill: tender hearted: ful of compassion'.³⁹ At the beginning of the seventeenth century, Randle Cotgrave renders the French *pitié* as 'pitie, ruth, compassion, commiseration; charitie, kindnese, or tendernesse of disposition; also, grace, clemencie, mercifulnesse'; at its end, also in France, Antoine Furetière sees compassion as a 'Movement of the soul which brings us to have some pity'.⁴⁰ These often exhausting cross-references serve to remind us that, in contrast to the seamless definitions laid out by thinkers such as Arendt, early modern compassion (pity, mercy and so on) trips up constantly as it tries to set out semantic similarities and differences. Several contributors will return to the question of distinction and etymology in this volume's exploration of the diversity of compassion.

More broadly, early modern treatises on the passions can also sometimes be seen to question the desire to apply neat distinctions between quickly altering and ephemeral passions. Thomas Wright's *The Passions of the Mind in General* seems to mock the very idea of dividing the passions into categories. After introducing Aquinas' model of eleven passions (which include love, fear and sadness, but not compassion), he writes: 'If every diversity or change we finde in passions, were a sufficient reason to encrease their number, without doubt I could adde welnie eleven more; as, Mercy, Shamefastnesse, Excandescencie, Envy, Emulation, Anxitie, Confidence, Slouthfulnesse, Zelotypia, Exanimation, Iactation or Boasting, with many more.'⁴¹ Wright's indeterminacy points to the precarious status of compassion: in many texts, compassion appears less like the early modern understanding of a passion that buffets the body, and something more like a virtue drawing on a set of classical exemplars; in still others, it looks more like a willed social practice. Where scholars often draw overly neatly on passion theorists to establish a norm for early modern emotional terms, this volume seeks to explore the confusion and diversity of compassion.

Early modern compassion was shaped by a broad range of different situated practices in early modern Europe. The present volume is neither a cross-historical exploration of one concept, nor a study of one emotion