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Michael Dukakis was evaluated negatively by Americans when he responded too calmly in a debate in 1988 to a question about how he would react if his wife were murdered. Yet we sometimes are told that our foreign policy ought only to be guided by a cold calculation of national self-interest, and not by any compassionate excess incited by, say, pictures of Albanian refugees. There were commentators who said that Prime Minister Begin erred in agreeing to trade Arab prisoners for captured Israeli soldiers because of his sympathetic response to an interview with the captives' distraught relatives. Compassion, it was said, led him to betray a cardinal principle of Israeli politics: do not negotiate with terrorists.

In this essay I will address some of the issues that moral philosophers have raised about two particular emotions—compassion and sympathy. I do not think these two emotions are identical, as I plan to demonstrate. But they are similar, and I often will speak about one of them when I am really speaking about both. This is to avoid tiresome repetitions.

This essay will be divided into three parts. The first will say a little about emotions in general, and then some about what are called the 'moral emotions.' I then will try to characterize sympathy and compassion as distinctive moral emotions that embody certain beliefs and desires. There is little argumentation in the first part, and I am mainly concerned with giving a perspicuous description of these two emotions. But I think my account already makes clear why we think they are valuable emotions that we want to instill in our children, and in ourselves. In the second and third parts of this essay I will look at some of the philosophical arguments about sympathy that have been generated by Kant's approach to ethics. In both parts I am looking at sympathy and compassion and comparing them to the motive that Kant exclusively praised—the sense of duty. In part II, I will examine three arguments that Kant and his followers put forward to establish that sympathy is morally inferior to the sense of duty. In part III, I will examine an interesting argument put forward by some of Kant's opponents that tries to show that, on the contrary, sympathy is sometimes morally superior to the sense of duty as a motive. My verdict, which is tentative at certain points, is that neither side wins and that the two motives are both valuable, and neither is clearly more valuable in the

relevant comparison cases. A second point that I will emphasize from time to time is that sympathy and compassion have to be understood as emotions that have a certain important place in a person's character. However, they cannot be conceived of as the entirety of moral character, nor as the only morally important emotions.

As a final preliminary point, I will be largely looking at sympathy and the sense of duty as forms of motivation. By that I mean that I will look at them as psychological states that lead a person to act intentionally. Emotions have a passive aspect, which is captured in the older term for them, 'the passions.' This term emphasizes the respect in which we undergo—or are passive—in feeling an emotion. I do not deny that this is a feature of emotions. Some emotions, like grief, are only passive. But I will focus on the situations where compassion and sympathy lead a person to act, as they are known to do.

I

I begin with some remarks about the nature of emotion in general, and then turn to the so-called moral emotions.[1] Emotions constitute a diverse set of psychological states, and it is not easy to mark them off from the related phenomena of moods, instincts, attitudes, preferences, desires and dispositions. Common examples are fear, anger, pride, hatred, embarrassment, sadness, jealousy, pity, hope, and joy. Some philosophers would count amusement, friendship, love, and awe as emotions, but others would not. There is no generally accepted philosophical definition of emotion, but I think most philosophers would recognize the following significant aspects of them.

First of all there is usually a *belief* related to an emotion. (This bald statement needs certain qualifications that I will pass over.)[2] For example, fear usually involves the belief that one is in danger, or that someone whom one cares about is in danger. Sadness involves the belief that something bad has occurred. But, obviously, emotions involve more than beliefs, since it seems quite possible, for example, to believe that one is in danger without being fearful.

desire do not constitute an emotion, because these could be experienced, as it were, coldly and without emotion. Suppose that I walk

a strict and a loose sense. Moral emotions in a strict sense incorporate a belief that explicitly uses a moral term. Guilt is a moral emotion in this sense, since guilt incorporates a belief that one has done something wrong, or is at least prepared to do wrong. Moral emotions in the loose sense use more general value terms, like 'good' and 'bad' or certain concepts closely related to moral concepts, like 'benefit,' 'harm,' and 'well-being.'[5] Shame, for example, might be thought to be a moral emotion in a loose sense, since one can be ashamed of a non-moral fault like poverty as well as a moral one like stealing. Thinking in this way, we would characterize sympathy and compassion as moral emotions in a loose sense, since they only involve the belief that someone is (undeservedly) suffering, perhaps along with the belief that this is a bad thing, or bad for her.[6] Other than this one distinguishing characteristic, moral emotions are emotions in exactly the same way that fear and anger are. They incorporate characteristic desires, often involve distinctive sensations and experiences, may be pleasant or painful, and are associated with physiological changes, facial expressions, and types of intentional action. While there are moral philosophers who have criticized or condemned certain moral emotions like envy and even sympathy, perhaps only the Stoics ever condemned such emotions altogether. For all their other differences, the main schools of moral philosophy agree in holding that morally good people are disposed to experience some moral emotions in some circumstances.

Let's turn now to compassion and sympathy. These seem to refer to related but distinct emotions. Pity, which might be thought to be a third emotion, seems simply to be an older term for compassion that is becoming less popular, perhaps because of its slightly condescending overtones. Sympathy and compassion involve a belief that another person is (undeservedly) suffering or badly off.[7] Compassion seems the appropriate term if we believe that the suffering or misfortune is great; whereas, one can have sympathy for people who are merely in an embarrassing pickle. These emotions also involve a desire, which may be of varying strength, to relieve the suffering for the sake of the sufferer. This last clause—"for the sake of the sufferer"—is vital, because one might desire to relieve the suffering of someone only because one expects some return for oneself. The desire to help that is

ments, and was recently elaborated on by Martha Nussbaum. One way to explain their point is to contrast sympathy with empathy. Empathy is thought of as a simple psychological mirroring of another's reaction: happiness in the observed person is duplicated—perhaps less intensely—in the observer; unhappiness likewise is duplicated. (Also, it is sometimes said that in empathy we imagine being the other person.) But sympathy does not differ from empathy only because sympathy is elicited by suffering or misfortune, whereas empathy can respond to another's happiness. A second difference is that sympathy is modulated by our moral convictions in ways that empathy as such is not.

We have just seen that we do not tend to feel sympathy for misfortunes that we believe are deserved. Smith and Nussbaum note that sympathy, furthermore, reflects the observer's moral outlook by incorporating her understanding of what constitutes misfortune in the first place. If a child cries hysterically over a broken toy, even the most sympathetic parent will not feel similarly upset. And if a dictator is angry and distraught because her lackeys do not grovel sufficiently before her, no one will feel sympathy. This shows that the sympathy felt by an observer reflects her own sense of what really goes into making up well-being and what really detracts from it. Empathy—conceived of as a simple mirroring in an observer of another person's feelings—is something quite different and much less discriminating. Indeed, once this distinction is made, it becomes unclear to what extent empathy really exists. It is also interesting to note that Smith's view has the consequence that even if a person is not suffering, an observer can feel sympathy for her. This can happen if the observer regards the other's condition as a *misfortune* that does not incorporate suffering. For example, one could feel sympathy for a

enced, and even more than we believe we are *capable* of experiencing. This is not to deny that people find it *easier* to understand what they have experienced, and that this presents real obstacles to the development of a wide-ranging sympathy.

This concludes my general discussion of sympathy and compassion. I have emphasized that they are distinctive moral emotions, and do not represent an all-sufficient set of moral motives. I think it is clear that I find it hard to deny that they are morally admirable and represent some of the emotional dispositions we rightly would hope to develop in ourselves and others. Many people would find it puzzling to discover that respected moral philosophers have criticized these emotions and the people who act on them. Yet, it is so. Aristotle, for one, does not criticize these emotions as much as neglect them. His *Nicomachean Ethics* is strikingly silent about compassion and sympathy, though he does discuss them in the *Rhetoric* and elsewhere.[14] In the modern world, Nietzsche is perhaps the best-known critic of compassion. His indifference to human moral equality has certain similarities to Aristotle. It is more surprising to find a great defender of human moral equality, Kant, also critical of sympathy. I find this even more surprising, when recalling Kant's moving tribute to the profound influence that Rousseau, a great admirer of pity, had on him.[15] And Kant has some impressive contemporary followers who are prepared to endorse his critical remarks about sympathy. In the second section of this essay, I want to discuss these interesting and important arguments. The issue in part II is whether compassion and sympathy are inferior as motivation to the sense of duty.

II

In Kant's great work *The Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals* there is a well-known discussion of sympathy and sympathetic people. His point is to show that the motive of sympathy has no special moral value or worth, and that it is deficient when compared to what he calls the motive of duty. The 'sense of duty' (or 'motive of duty')

also seems to be thinking that the agent will understand *why* the action is right.)[16] This, I am confident, is something with which we are all familiar. Kant claimed that being moved by sympathy is morally inferior to being moved by the conviction that one's action is right. Here are his words (in English):

> and beyond all comparison the highest—namely, that he does good, not from inclination but from duty.[17]

Kant is taking it as given that we have duties or obligations to help other people. We can assume the situations giving rise to these duties largely occur when another person is suffering. He notes that some people are inclined to help in such cases, and do not find doing so burdensome. But some people are temperamentally not so inclined, and others may lose the inclination when, as he shrewdly notes, they become preoccupied with their own problems. But both kinds of people can still help. How? His picture is that they can realize that they are obligated to do so and act, as he says, merely from the understanding that they are obligated to do so. What point exactly is Kant making here about the sense of duty as a kind of motivation that contrasts with the emotion of sympathy? I think that the most plausible interpretation of the passage is as follows. Sympathy involves a desire to help another person that constitutes part of our natural psychology, a psychology we share, presumably, with certain animals. The sense of duty is not a *desire* at all, and our being moved by it represents motivation by reason alone. And to be moved by reason alone is to be moved by something incomparably higher than any desire we share with other parts of nature. I take it that there is a further point being alluded to here. If our ability to perform our duties had to rely only on natural desires, like those involved in sympathy, then we would be at a loss in those cases where it didn't exist. But in situations where sympathy is temporarily or even permanently dead, we have within ourselves another source of motivation, a source that is always available; namely, our reason. Reason commands us to help those in need, and reason alone can bring us to do so. It is important to emphasize Kant's belief that we have duties to help others, and his position does not rest on any denial that other people as such have moral claims on us. The issue concerns our *motivation* for helping others when that is morally required.

This famous passage has generated debate from Kant's own day down to our own. It is by no means clear that it represents his complete or final word on emotions like sympathy. In a later, and less-read work, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, for example, he writes as follows:

> ...While it is not in itself a duty to share the sufferings (as well the joys) of others, it is a duty to sym-

pathize actively in their fate; and to this end it is therefore an indirect duty to cultivate the compassionate natural...feelings in us, and to make use of them as so many means to sympathy based on moral principles and the feeling appropriate to them. It is therefore a duty not to avoid the places where the poor who lack the most basic necessities are

mitted to act. So the sense of duty as a motive has two roles to play in

action that is (as it happens) right, it cannot give an interest in its being right.[22]

a moral obligation.[23] The long passage I quoted from Kant does seem to suggest that he thought that the sense of duty is always available. I would contend that there is other evidence—that I won't mention here—that suggests that Kant did not believe that it is always available. Considered as a thesis in its own right, it is doubtful that we always *can* act from the sense of duty when we believe we have some

ly permissible. They are mistaken if they think this shows that acting from compassion has no value.

Finally, there is Herman's contention that sympathetic characters have no concern for morality as such, and their actions, if right, are only right accidentally. Here is my answer. The sort of action that compassion ordinarily moves us to perform is, as we say, helping. If someone were helping from the sense of duty, she would be thinking of her duty as logically resting on the fact that helping is morally required in the circumstances. The rightness of her action is *due to* the fact that it helps someone in need. Therefore, it is unconvincing to hear the action of the compassionate person described as "accidentally right." The compassionate person is focussing on the very same natural characteristics that the dutiful person is, but she is presumably not thinking of them as morally required. Compare these two examples. I decide, after consulting a horoscope, to give $100 to the fourth person who walks into the room, and it turns out that this person needs the money to pay for some medical care. Here it would seem proper to say that my action is accidentally right. But now consider a case where I understand that a person has those medical needs (and can't pay herself, etc.) and compassion moves me to help her. It is odd to say that my action here is accidentally right. Now, an action from compassion could be accidentally right in some cases. If a juror decided to vote for whichever side in a law case she felt the most compassion for, then it might be that her vote was accidentally right. The compassion here is not focussing on the morally relevant factors. But if someone helps another person who is suffering, where it is precisely the suffering that makes her helping morally right, then I cannot see that her action is accidentally right.

III

Where do these arguments and replies leave us? Kantians argue that action from sympathy is morally inferior to action from the sense of duty. I have contended that these arguments are unsuccessful. When sympathy leads to the relieving of undeserved suffering it is not necessarily worse as a motive than the sense of duty. But could the opposite case be made? That is, could it be argued that action motivated by sympathy is at least sometimes morally *superior* to action

from the sense of duty? This has, in fact, been argued. In this third section I want to consider the opposing case made by the critics of Kant who turn the tables on him and make this claim. I confess to you at the outset that I am somewhat uncertain about what to say on the issues I will now present.

others in need, and he asks us to consider an agent who has the maxim, or principle, never to help others, but to “let everyone be as happy as Heaven wills or as he can make himself.” Kant claims that such a principle could not be willed as a law of nature that is followed by all rational creatures. This shows, according to his moral theory,

affection for. So, to make a fair comparison between the two forms of motivation, we have to strip away other features of the agent like affection for the recipient. We can then imagine that one recipient interacts with a given agent at two different times, and reckons that the agent is motivated by compassion on one occasion and the sense of duty on the other. Or we can imagine that one recipient interacts on one occasion with two agents, otherwise comparable, where she infers that one of them is motivated by compassion and the other is motivated by the sense of duty. It might be asked why we have to suppose that the recipient *recognizes* the difference in motivation. But the argument we are considering compares how welcome to the recipient the two types of motivation are, so this supposition seems necessary to test the claim that compassion is more welcome.

Furthermore, in comparing the two motives, we need to keep constant whatever else is being provided to the recipient. It seems likely that average recipients of help would prefer receiving a new home from compassion to receiving a glass of water from the sense of duty. And, finally, we need to keep constant the agent's understanding of the recipient's condition. Lawrence Blum claims that sympathy as a character trait can make a person more acutely aware of the needs that

So, let's consider this scenario. You are walking by yourself in a strange city when you suddenly become violently ill. You pass out on the sidewalk. When you come to, there are two people looking after you. They provide thoughtful care to you in about equal measure. It becomes clear to you that one of the two is being moved by compassion, while the other is moved by the sense of duty. Would you feel more grateful, more fully assisted and cared for, by one rather than the other? If I try to fully imagine such a test case for myself, I must report that I find no difference in how I imagine feeling about the two people and their actions.

Some of you might respond that I am missing the profound point that Williams is making when he speaks of needing a "human gesture." My example supposed that the needs in question were, as we say, physical. The picture we form is that we need, say, a drink of water or support for our head. And our reaction is that they would be just as welcome if provided by compassion as they would if provided by the sense of duty. But, Williams is asking, what if the very thing you need is *a compassionate gesture*? Here I think of an episode that has been called "baseball's finest moment." (It does not involve Mark McGwire.) It occurred when Jackie Robinson was playing his first year in the major leagues. Game after game, he was subjected to the jeers and cursing of racist fans, and often was the target of thrown bottles and rotten fruit. Here is the passage from Robinson's autobiography in which he recounts something that his Brooklyn teammate, Pee Wee Reese, did.

> In Boston during a period when the heckling pressure seemed unbearable, some of the Boston players began to heckle Reese. They were riding him about being a Southerner and playing ball with a black man. Pee Wee didn't answer them. Without a glance in their direction, he left his position and walked over to me. He put his hand on my shoulder and began talking to me. His words weren't important. I don't even remember what he said. It was the gesture of comradeship and support that counted. As he stood talking with me with a friendly arm around my shoulder, he was saying loud and clear, "Yell. Heckle. Do anything you want. We came here to play baseball."[32]

It was a simple, but also a morally grand, gesture. It was what I think

imagine that it was precisely what Robinson needed. (Obviously, the gesture also was directed at the Boston players. We might even say that it was what *they* needed, too! But let's set this aspect of Reese's action aside, and focus on its meaning to Robinson. Also, Reese's gesture bespoke a friendliness that we saw is not at issue. But the example is—if you'll pardon the expression—in the ballpark.) The critical question, then, is this: could Robinson's needs have been met just as well by an action motivated by the sense of duty?

I think we are inclined to answer, "No, Robinson's needs would not have been met as well if Reese had been moved by the sense of duty." But this answer calls for critical examination. After all, it is not as though someone motivated by a sense of duty can't put his arm around another person. So perhaps our thought is that, if this gesture had been performed from the sense of duty—from the sense that it was the morally right thing to do—it would not have been as *natural*

might think about the issue in a different way. Reese's action, we could say, was an *expressive* action, and his help to Robinson consist-

with the pleasantly symmetrical assertion that compassion and sympathy are no *worse* than the sense of duty as a form of motivation, but no *better*, either.[37]

Endnotes

1 The best general accounts of emotion by philosophers are those of Ronald De Sousa, *The Rationality of Emotion* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1987); William Lyons, *Emotion* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1980); Robert Gordon, *The Structure of Emotions* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987); O. H. Green, *The Emotions: a philosophical theory* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1992). Also see the stimulating and idiosyncratic Robert Solomon, *The Passions* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1976). *Explaining Emotions*, ed. Amelie Rorty (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980) is a broad collection of essays, mainly by philosophers.

2 In the philosophy of art this contention has been questioned. It has been noted that we may, for example, fear that a character in a fictional work is about to fall off a cliff, and yet we don't believe that she is going to do this, because we don't *believe* that she exists! On the issues in art, see the essays in Pt. I of *Emotion and the Arts*, ed. Mette Hjort and Sue Laver (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997). For other qualifications concerning non-fictional contexts see Patricia Greenspan, *Emotions and Reasons: An Inquiry into Emotional Justification* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 17-20; Robert Roberts, "What an Emotion Is: A Sketch," *The Philosophical Review* 97 (1988), 183-209, at 195-201; and Michael Stocker, "Emotional Thoughts," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 24 (1987), 59-69. These writers hold that a belief is not required for emotions like fear, and that a mere thought can suffice. On the other hand, some writers hold that even a thought is unnecessary for emotions like fear, since animals and infants who have no thoughts at all can still feel it. See John Deigh, "Cognitivism in the Theory of Emotions," *Ethics* 104 (1994), 824-54, at 839-42; Jenefer Robinson, "Startle," *The Journal of Philosophy* 92 (1995), 53-74.

3 Roberts, 184; 208-9.

4 On the moral emotions in general, see Lawrence Blum, *Friendship, Altruism and Morality* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980); Justin Oakley, *Morality and the Emotions* (London: Routledge, 1992); Gabriel Taylor, *Pride, Shame and Guilt: Emotions of Self-assessment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985); Michael Stocker with Elizabeth Hegeman, *Valuing Emotions* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Greenspan, *op. cit.*, and *Practical Guilt* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), Part II. There is a large literature on guilt and shame and their supposed differences.

5 If Lyons' theory is right, all emotions are moral emotions in this loose sense. See also the interesting article by Bennett Helm, "The Significance of Emotions," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 31 (1994), 319-31.

6 The significance of the parenthetical qualification about undeserved suffering will be discussed below.

7 Throughout I am indebted to Blum, "Compassion," in Rorty, ed., *op. cit.*, 507-18. Martha Nussbaum, "Compassion: The Basic Social Emotion," *Social Philosophy and Policy* 13 (1996), 27-58, is helpful. See also Clifford Orwin, "Compassion," *The American Scholar* (1980), 309-33.

8 Stephen Darwall, “Empathy, Sympathy, Care,” *Philosophical Studies* 89 (1998), 261-82, at 263, 276-77.
9 E.g., Nussbaum.
10 Leon Kass vigorously emphasized this in a paper for the Maguire Center.
1l Yet, interestingly, we do not feel compassion for those who have already undergone the misfortune of death, at least if we regard their existence as terminated.
12 Nussbaum, *op. cit.*, 34, quoting *Emile*

The Practice of Moral Judgment (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), 1-22; "Integrity and Impartiality," Ibid., 23-44; Marcia Baron, *op. cit.*, esp. chap. 4.

20 Herman, "On the Value," *op. cit.*, 14-15.

21 We might say that Herman is utilizing for her purposes the point I made above when I called sympathy a moral emotion in only a loose sense.

22 Herman "On the Value," *op. cit.*, 5.

23 Blum, *Friendship*, *op. cit.*, 30f.

24 I discuss these issues in "Kant, Non-accidentalness and the Availability of Moral Worth."

25 Henry Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics*, seventh ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1981), 223.

26 Bernard Williams, "Morality and the Emotions," in *Problems of the Self* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 227.

27 For Blum, see *Friendship*, *op. cit.*, 142f.

28 Michael Stocker, "The Schizophrenia of Modern Ethical Theories," *The Journal of Philosophy* 73 (1976), 462. See also his "Friendship and Duty: Some Difficult Relations," in *Identity, Character, and Morality*, ed. Owen Flanagan and Amelie Rorty (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1993), 219-34.

29 *Groundwork*, tr. Paton, *op. cit.*, 90-1, emphasis added.

30 Herman, too, in a response to Williams, more or less explicitly concedes that it may be reasonable to want to be helped by someone moved by an emotion, rather than the sense of duty. "Integrity," *op. cit.*, 29-37.

31 Blum, *Friendship*, *op. cit.*, 136, slightly modified. See all of 129-37 for the entire argument.

32 Jackie Robinson, as told to Alfred Duckett, *I Never Had It Made* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1972), 77. The characterization of this as "baseball's finest moment" comes from Roger Kahn, as quoted by Bob Herbert in *The Raleigh News and Observer*, March 17, 1997, A9.

tial. Or at least she says this with regard to bodily feelings which, of course, are a different matter. "Compassion," *op. cit.*, 38.

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Occasional Papers

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