

# Compassion without Cognitivism

*Charlie Kurth*<sup>†</sup>

charles.kurth@wmich.edu

## ABSTRACT

Compassion is generally thought to be a morally valuable emotion both because it is concerned with the suffering of others and because it prompts us to take action on their behalf. But skeptics are unconvinced. Not only does a viable account of compassion's evaluative content—its characteristic concern—appear elusive, but the emotional response itself seems deeply parochial: a concern we tend to feel toward the suffering of friends and loved ones, rather than for individuals who are outside of our circle of intimates. In response, I defend a sophisticated, non-cognitivist account of compassion and explain how it avoids the difficulties that undermine existing, typically cognitivist, proposals.

We learn at our mother's knee that we should be compassionate. But what, exactly, is compassion and what moral value does this emotion have? We can start with a gloss: compassion is a feeling of concern for the suffering of another person—a concern that prompts efforts to provide assistance or otherwise alleviate the distress of the person we feel compassion toward. So understood compassion is morally interesting. Not only does it appear to sensitize us to the needs and suffering of others, but it is also an important motivator of beneficent action. Moreover, feelings of compassion (or, at least, fitting ones) also have aretaic and intrinsic value insofar as they both speak to one's concern for others and demonstrate one's acknowledgment of their humanity.

Given this sketch of compassion, we see that it is an emotion that is (roughly) synonymous with pity and sympathy: these affective responses are alike in that they, in some way, present the suffering of another as bad—as a source of concern. In this way, compassion contrasts with empathy and rational

<sup>†</sup> Department of Philosophy, Western Michigan University, USA.

benevolence.<sup>1</sup> More specifically, empathy, as I'll be understanding it, is the general capacity to feel what another feels (be it a positive or a negative emotion) and it needn't come with the concern or connection to helping behavior that is characteristic of compassion.<sup>2</sup> In contrast with empathy, rational benevolence, at least as Kant and others have conceived of it, shares compassion's connection to helping others (though its scope is likely broader than compassion's focus on occasions of suffering). But unlike compassion, rational benevolence is not an emotion. Rather, it is the cognitive or intellectual recognition of the fact that another is suffering or in need of help—one that brings an associated motivation to provide assistance (Kant 1797, Crisp 2008, Bloom 2016).

But while compassion is generally thought to be a morally valuable emotion, some are unconvinced. According to these skeptics—Immanuel Kant (1797), Rodger Crisp (2008), Jesse Prinz (2011a, 2011b), and Paul Bloom (2016) just to name some prominent examples—compassion is a parochial, and so morally dubious, emotion.<sup>3</sup> More specifically, while it's true that compassion sensitizes us to the suffering of others, it also appears that we are systematically disposed to feel compassion toward the suffering of those who are (biologically, socially, physically, temporally) “near” to us. Moreover, when we happen to feel compassion toward those outside of our parish, the motivation to help that compassion brings tends to be thin. Thus, Kant maintains that compassion is “weak and always blind” (1764/1960, p. 58).

Of course, one might reasonably think that compassion's parochialism is something we could correct through moral education aimed at broadening our understanding of whose suffering matters (e.g., Nussbaum, 2001, p. 423-6). But this proposal is problematic on two fronts. First, as an account of compassion becomes more intellectualized in this way (e.g., requiring one to have a rich understanding of things like suffering and moral agency), it threatens to change the subject: we're no longer talking about the *emotion* compassion, but rather the distinct *non-emotional* moral capacity of rational benevolence

<sup>1</sup> For similar distinctions, see Nussbaum, 2001, Chap. 6; Crisp, 2008. For a more general discussion of how compassion contrasts with similar affective responses—especially, empathy—see the papers in, Price & Caouette, 2018; Maibom, 2014; and Coplan & Goldie, 2011.

<sup>2</sup> In fact, empathy may even *decrease* one's willingness to help. See, for instance, Batson et al., 1987, and Eisenberg et al., 1989. Moreover, some have raised doubts about whether the capacity distinctive of empathy—the ability to feel what another feels—actually exists. See Goldie, 2011 and Zahavi & Overgaard, 2011 for different versions of this worry.

<sup>3</sup> While the concerns raised by Prinz and Bloom are principally focused on empathy, their core worries apply just as well to compassion.

(Crisp, 2008; Bloom, 2016, May, 2018, p. 52-3; Kant, 1797, p. 575). Second, why think that compassion is something that we can correct in the first place? After all, not only does compassion appear to be evolutionarily set up to be parochial, but—if we view it as just a basic, brute response to the distress of another—why think that there is anything for learning and instruction to latch on to as a fulcrum for change (Crisp 2008, Prinz 2011a)?

In the face of worries like these, compassion's defenders have typically offered a two-pronged response. They begin by defending a broadly cognitivist account of compassion that takes the emotion to be identical to (or necessarily involve) a belief-like judgment or appraisal. They then argue that a proper appreciation of compassion's characteristic judgment explains why skepticism about its moral value is misplaced (e.g., Nussbaum, 2001; Archer, 2018; Kristjánsson, 2014; Snow, 1991). However, while I think compassion can be defended, I believe this cognitivist approach is misguided. In what follows, I will argue that a sophisticated, non-cognitivist model of compassion not only delivers a more plausible account of the emotion, but is also better situated to address concerns about its moral value.

I begin with a brief overview of compassion, highlighting both the core aspects of cognitivist and non-cognitivist proposals as well as the distinctive challenges that each faces (§1). I then turn to defend a sophisticated, non-cognitivist account of compassion (§2) and explain how it is able to avoid the difficulties that have undermined similar proposals (§3). I then conclude by drawing out three larger insights that follow from the paper's investigation of compassion and its moral value.

### 1. The Case Against Compassion

In debates about compassion, all sides agree about certain basic features of the emotion. For instance, it is generally agreed that compassion is an intentional state with evaluative content: to feel compassion is—in some sense—to see the target of one's compassion *as suffering*. The controversy lies in the details. Is compassion's evaluative content the upshot of a simple, non-cognitive response, a conceptually-laden judgment, or something else altogether? Setting this debate aside for the moment, all parties also agree that compassion comes with both a distinctive affective dimension (or phenomenology) and a characteristic motivational profile: to feel compassion is to have a negatively valenced feeling and to have some tendency to help the target of one's compassion. Again, the details here are controversial, a controversy made more complicated by the

vague characterizations of compassion's affective/motivational dimension that we typically find in the literature. Roger Crisp, for instance, offers a range of potentially conflicting glosses in a single article. On his rendering, compassion is (i) the "*mere pain*...in the presence of the pain or distress of others" (2008, p. 234); (ii) a "*felt distress* at the plight of another" (p. 234); (iii) a "*concern* at the suffering of others" (p. 237), (iv) "a *natural capacity to be moved* by, and *perhaps* feel immediate distress at, the misery" of others (p. 238); and (v) "a species of *kindness*" (p. 244). Though we will return to this vagueness below (§3), the key point for now is the high-level agreement that we find among theorists about compassion's content, phenomenology, and motivational tendencies.

Pressing further, there are two broad ways of understanding compassion's underlying nature—cognitivist accounts and non-cognitivist ones. But skeptics take both options to be deeply problematic. The result, then, is a dilemma for the defender of compassion and its moral value.

Let's start with cognitivist accounts. These proposals take compassion, and emotion more generally, to be identical with (or necessarily involve) a distinctive type of belief, judgment, or similar cognitive assessment (Nussbaum, 2001; Archer, 2018; Snow, 1991; Blum, 1987). So, for instance, according to Martha Nussbaum's influential proposal, for one's emotional experience to be a token of compassion just is for it to be the judgment that another's suffering is (i) serious, (ii) the result of an undeserved misfortune, and (iii) something that touches upon one's own goals and ends (what Nussbaum calls a "eudaimonistic" connection) (1996; 2001, chap. 6).<sup>4</sup>

However, cognitivist accounts of compassion like Nussbaum's face a two-fold difficulty. For starters, though they define compassion in terms of a distinctive judgment, actually making that judgment appears to be neither necessary nor sufficient for one to feel compassion. Moreover, the standard cognitivist responses to this problem appear to make matters worse, not better. And while this pair of concerns causes trouble for cognitivist accounts in general, we will see that the difficulties they raise are *particularly* problematic for cognitivist accounts of compassion. To draw this out, I will continue to focus on Nussbaum's influential proposal since it has received the most critical attention

<sup>4</sup> This characterization of Nussbaum's view glosses over details that will not be relevant for our discussion (e.g., the specifics of her account of the cognitive state that is identical with being an emotion).

(similar concerns, however, could be—and have been—raised about other cognitivist accounts).

First, judgments of the sort that Nussbaum takes to be identical with compassion do not appear to be necessary in order for one to experience the emotion. That is, it seems perfectly possible to feel compassion for another even if one deems their suffering to be *minor* or *wholly deserved* (Weber, 2005; Crisp, 2008; Ekstrom, 2012, p. 160-2). Consider, for instance, the case of a nurse who gives medical assistance to a mass-shooter. The shooter is suffering from wounds that police officers inflicted in their efforts to stop his rampage. While the nurse believes that the shooter deserves his injuries, she nonetheless provides him with assistance and does so from a feeling of compassion.<sup>5</sup> More generally, as Laura Ekstrom notes, Nussbaum's desert requirement is particularly odd in the context of medical cases where compassion seems to be clearly felt in situations where one *also* deems the suffering to be deserved (e.g., cancer in a well-informed but persistent smoker, people who injure themselves doing things they know they shouldn't be doing) (Ekstrom, 2018, p. 114-5).

But the trouble doesn't end there since the three judgments at the heart of Nussbaum's account do not appear to be sufficient for compassion either. After all, it seems that one could make the requisite judgements about severity, desert, and a connection to one's goals but still fail to feel compassion. Though I deem the tornado in Kansas to have brought serious and undeserved suffering to the communities it struck, and though I see their situation as touching on my own life and goals (my family has roots in Wichita), I nonetheless find myself devoid of compassion. Importantly, my lack of compassion doesn't entail a lack of concern or emotional numbness on my part—for though I don't feel compassion, I may still be angered by the suffering that the tornado brought (also see Adam Smith's [1976] discussion of Europeans' indifference to the 1556 earthquake in China that left over 800,000 dead).

Moreover, the standard moves to address counterexamples like these seem to deepen the problem. For instance, one line of argument maintains that avoiding the above troubles requires enriching the cognitive content involved in compassion's constitutive judgments. So, for example, Nussbaum maintains that in making judgments of suffering, one not only needs a rich "conception of human flourishing," but one must also "understand what those facts [about

<sup>5</sup> The case in the text is not a mere hypothetical, but rather one based on the actions of Ari Mahler, the Jewish nurse who treated the recent Pittsburgh synagogue shooter (Flynn, 2018). Thanks to T.J. Broy for bringing this case to my attention.

suffering and desert] mean” (1996, p. 33). Moreover, she adds that in making these judgments one isn’t merely mouthing the words, but rather is “prepared to defend them in argument” (p. 38). However, this move not only seems to over-intellectualize emotional experience, but it also threatens to change the subject: we are no longer talking about an emotion—a felt affective state—but rather something more like the complex, *non-emotional* cognitive state of rational benevolence.

An alternative and less intellectualized line of reply insists that one hasn’t make the requisite compassion judgment(s) unless one “cares” or is “concerned about” the person who is suffering (Nussbaum, 2001, p. 323, 325). But in attempting to address the counterexamples in this manner, one succeeds at the cost of one’s cognitivism. After all, the crucial element of compassion on this proposal is no longer a particular belief or judgment, but rather a *motivationally-laden form of affect*.<sup>6</sup>

Stepping back, and as the discussion of this second line of reply suggests, if the best account of the judgment identical with compassion is neither necessary nor sufficient for one to feel compassion, then compassion’s core must lie elsewhere—it must be something non-cognitive.

In this vein, non-cognitivist accounts reject the claim that compassion is, or even necessarily involves, the type of judgement or belief that is the hallmark of cognitivism. Rather, the non-cognitivist explains compassion in terms of its distinctive affective response or motivational tendencies (D’Arms & Jacobson, 2014a; Crisp, 2008; Kurth, 2019). Thus, to be compassion is to be, say, a feeling of concern at the pain or distress of another (Crisp, 2008) or a state that brings helping behavior aimed at relieving someone else’s suffering (Scarantino, 2015). Moreover, while non-cognitivists typically follow cognitivists in taking emotions to be intentional states with evaluative content, they will insist that efforts to characterize this content should be understood merely as a gloss on the affect- and motivationally-laden evaluation that’s characteristic of compassion (Kurth, 2019).

<sup>6</sup> This problem is most pressing for “pure” cognitivist accounts like Nussbaum’s. Those who take belief or judgment to be necessary, but not sufficient, for compassion (e.g., Snow 1991, Archer 2018) may be less concerned. That said, the problems with the cognitive commitments of even these qualified proposals (i.e., that the requisite judgments don’t actually appear to be necessary) remain unanswered. Moreover, in emphasizing compassion’s non-cognitive dimensions, they also take on, as we will see, the troubles of the second horn of the dilemma.

But while non-cognitivist accounts of compassion are well-positioned to avoid the first horn of the dilemma (i.e., the challenges to cognitivist proposals), they are generally thought to be vastly under-equipped to address compassion's tendency toward parochialism. As Kant's comments about compassion being weak and blind suggest, compassion is an emotion that we are much more likely to feel towards those who are "near"—where this nearness could be (say) physical, temporal, psychological, or social. Moreover, not only is compassion's bias toward the near empirically well-established (e.g., Brown et al., 2006; Stürmer et al., 2005; Xu et al., 2009), but it is also something that appears to have a biological foundation. More specifically, research on compassion's evolutionary origins (e.g., Goetz et al. 2010; Gilbert, 2015) suggests that compassion may be the upshot of a parent-child bonding mechanism that was coopted to serve as a more general tool for building and maintaining in-group cooperation. If that's right, it suggests that compassion is an emotion that's wired-up give preferential attention to kin and clan (Crisp, 2008, p. 245).

This is a problem. For starters, it suggests that compassion is not the broadly other-regarding moral emotion it is often thought to be. Rather, it is a parochial part of our psychology that limits the scope of our concern to just those who happen to be nearby or otherwise familiar. Moreover, a byproduct of compassion's bias for "nearness" is that who we feel compassion toward is (highly) sensitive to random situational features like who happens to be standing next to us (Crisp 2008: 245; c.f., Railton 2014). Importantly, the issue here is not merely the worry that the biological foundations of compassion give it a parochial orientation. Rather, it is the deeper worry that compassion's tendency to be triggered by the suffering of relatives and in-group members is at odds with it being a *moral* emotion. It tracks what's evolutionarily beneficial, not what's morally significant (Crisp, 2008, p. 245; Prinz, 2011b, p. 229).

To make matters worse, there may be little we can do to correct compassion's parochialism. Consider that a—if not *the*—dominant philosophical proposal for cultivating compassion focuses on learning and the development of one's rational capacities. This makes sense. After all, deficits of compassion are principally failures to make the appropriate evaluative assessment—one doesn't help the beggar because one doesn't see him as suffering or one deems him to deserve his predicament. Thus, correcting compassion's tendency toward parochialism is a matter of correcting the underlying evaluations (Nussbaum, 2001, p. 314, 423; Snow, 1991). But if compassion is a (wholly) non-cognitive

state, then there are no cognitive elements—no beliefs or judgments—for reason and education to latch on to. Compassion, in short, *bypasses* the rational mechanisms that could correct its problems (Crisp, 2008, p. 245). Moreover, given all this, in cases where we do seem to see improvements—that is, less parochial compassion—there’s little reason to think compassion (the non-cognitive state) is actually doing any work; something like rational benevolence seems a better candidate (Prinz, 2011a; May, 2018, p. 52-3).

Taking stock, we now see that defenders of compassion’s moral value face a dilemma. If they understand compassion on a cognitivist model, they’re forced into an account of compassion’s content that divorced from facts about how and when we experience the emotion. But if they instead opt for a non-cognitivist construal, they’re saddled with a deeply parochial—not moral—emotion.

There are various ways one might seek to address this dilemma. To date, most of this work has been done by those in the cognitivist camp. Some have aimed to directly blunt the first horn by further refining our understanding of what the compassion-constituting judgments are (e.g., Kristjánsson, 2014). Others have sought to bolster the case for compassion by highlighting overlooked dimensions of its moral value (e.g., Archer, 2018). But given the well-known—and, to my mind, damning—concerns about cognitivist accounts of emotion (e.g., Griffiths, 1997; D’Arms & Jacobson, 2003; Scarantino, 2010), these moves have little appeal. So, in what follows, I explore the prospects for a non-cognitivist defense of compassion.

## 2. Compassion for Sophisticated Non-Cognitivists

There is increasing evidence from emotion science that suggests that emotions like compassion, fear, anger, anxiety, shame, and disgust involve multi-level content and processing (e.g., Griffiths, 2004; Izard, 2007; Kurth, 2018, chap. 2; Levenson et al., 2007).

At a low-level, emotions like these are seen as having course-grained, non-conceptual evaluative content that is intimately tied to feeling and action. So, for instance, to experience anger is to experience the actions of another as *challenge-to-standing-bad*; feelings of shame convey something like *social-rank-asymmetry-bad*; compassion presents its target as *another-suffering-bad*. Here the hyphenated strings are gestures toward the distinctive, motivationally-laden evaluative dimensions of these emotions’ low-level, non-conceptual content. At the high-level, an emotion’s distinctive evaluative content is both



fine-grained and conceptual in a manner that facilitates its use in reasoning. So, for instance, anger toward a comment presents that comment as, roughly, an affront to one's (moral) standing. With shame, one sees oneself as, in some way, having failed to live up to an ego-ideal. In the case of compassion, one sees the target of one's compassion as enduring a serious misfortune that merits one's attention.

Moreover, a single emotional experience (e.g., a token of anger or compassion) will typically involve *both* types of content and engage *both* levels of processing (Griffiths, 2004; Kurth, 2018; Wringe, 2015). This comes out most clearly when, under certain conditions, the two levels pull in different directions.

One family of such examples comes from experimental work on the emotional responses of “repressors.” When these individuals are presented with a threatening stimuli, they display the attentional and physiological changes associated with fear—yet they *deny* being afraid. What we appear to have, then, is an instance of the dissociation of low- and high-level emotion systems: while the low-level processing of repressors generates the action orientation, attentional shifts, and physiological responses characteristic of fear, the high-level processing fails to categorize the situation under the relevant concept (fearsome or danger). Hence the repressors deny feeling the fear that they otherwise appear to be experiencing (Derakshan et al., 2007; Kurth 2018, p. 58-9).

Another set of examples concerns recalcitrance—the persistence of, say, a fear or anger response in the face of beliefs inconsistent with the emotion's characteristic content (the situation isn't dangerous, your foot was stepped on by accident). In the realm of compassion, the case of Huck and Jim from Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* provides an example of this type of conflict. In Twain's story, Huck helps Jim escape from a pair of slave hunters. Huck believes that as a slave—as a piece of property—Jim ought to be returned to his owner Miss Watson. But as he is about to set off to turn Jim in, Jim remarks on his friendship with Huck and his excitement about becoming a free man. Though Huck gives no sign that he reasons through Jim's comments (in fact, he appears to reject them), he nonetheless finds his motivation to turn Jim over sapped. Huck is clearly confused by all this: why does he find himself unable to do what he judges himself to have conclusive reason to do? Our multi-level account of compassion provides an answer: Huck's low-level feelings of compassion for Jim persist and drive his behavior despite his high-level

assessment that Jim's situation is not worthy of his compassion (Bennett, 1974). That is, we can explain the case if we see it as another example of the dissociation of low- and high-level emotion systems.

Now what makes this account of the multi-level structure of emotion interesting for our purposes is that it invites a sophisticated *non-cognitivist* account of compassion and structurally similar emotions (Kurth, 2019). Specifically, the claim is that the low-level, motivationally-laden evaluative content of an emotion *grounds* the evaluative concept(s) distinctive of that emotion's high-level content. So, for instance, compassion's low-level content (namely, *another-suffering-bad*) fundamentally shapes and constrains both one's concept of the compassion-worthy and the associated high-level content one takes a token of compassion to have (roughly, the evaluation that the target of one's compassion is enduring a serious misfortune that merits one's attention). Similarly for analogously structured emotions like shame: shame's low-level content (i.e., *social-rank-asymmetry-bad*) fundamentally shapes and constrains both one's concept of shameful and shame's associated high-level content (roughly, the evaluation that one has failed to live up to an ego-ideal).

Here it's worth emphasizing that this account is *non-cognitivist* in the sense that it takes the non-cognitive content and function of an emotion like compassion to be foundational. The account is *sophisticated* in that it acknowledges that emotions also have a (secondary) dimension that is decidedly concept-laden and cognitive in nature.

The case for this non-cognitivist account compassion builds from three lines of support.<sup>7</sup> First, if research on compassion's evolutionary origins is correct, then this work supports the claim that compassion is underwritten by low-level, non-cognitive mechanisms of the sort noted above. For instance, we see both human infants and non-human animals providing assistance in response to the distress of conspecifics (de Waal 2005, 1996; Warneken & Tomasello, 2006). So we have evidence of the existence of an innate, non-conceptual, other-regarding evaluative capacity. Moreover, archeological evidence suggests not just that our hominin ancestors shared the short-term, fleeting type of concern for the distress of others that we see in non-human primates, but also that (starting at least 1.7 million years ago) they engaged in the *long-term care* of injured kin and non-kin group members (Spikins et al.,

<sup>7</sup> Though I focus on compassion in what follows, I believe versions of the arguments that follow can be made for similarly structured emotions.

2010). In fact, independent research on infants provides evidence that this innate evaluative response is *affectively-loaded*. For instance, infants as young as nine months exhibit vocal, expressive, and physical behaviors indicative of sadness in response to the distress of an unfamiliar person. Moreover, these signs of compassion-like affect early in infancy predict pro-social helping behavior later in life (Abramson et al., 2018; Kienbaum, 2014; Roth-Hanania et al., 2011).<sup>8</sup>

Taken together, these findings support the idea that human compassion engages a low-level, non-cognitive mechanism. In fact, recent brain imaging research on adult humans provides evidence of a “compassion network” that engages brain regions associated with both affiliation and reward (e.g., Klimicki et al., 2014; Preckle et al., 2018; also see §3 below). Moreover, the above examples also suggest that this low-level compassion response has the kind of (hard-wired) evaluative content it would need to have in order to play the foundational role that our sophisticated non-cognitivist proposal takes it have. Consider: if compassion’s low-level content is supposed to shape and constrain its associated concepts and high-level content, then it is not surprising that we find evidence that compassion brings an innate, non-conceptual concern for the suffering of others.

The next two considerations are more theoretical in nature. First, making sense of disagreements about the content of compassion—the characteristic concern or evaluation it involves—seems to require taking compassion to have the priority structure that we find in our sophisticated non-cognitivist proposal.<sup>9</sup> To see this, consider the debate between Nussbaum and Crisp regarding whether compassion is only concerned with *undeserved* suffering. For this to count as a genuine disagreement, there must not only be something that Nussbaum and Crisp contest, but also something that they agree about (otherwise they would just be talking past one another). Now, as we have seen, cognitivism takes the conceptual content of the compassion-constituting judgments to be foundational. As such, making sense of Nussbaum-Crisp-style disagreement about, say, the mass-shooter case from above requires holding a specification of this content fixed (Nussbaum’s proposal, let’s suppose). The disagreement is then understood as a dispute about whether the nurse who

<sup>8</sup> Even more telling for the argument to come, the predictive power of these signs of compassion early in life is more powerful among infants who also demonstrate an early ability to *moderate* the intensity of the distress they are experiencing.

<sup>9</sup> D’Arms (2005, p. 11-14) and Gibbard (1990) develop similar lines of argument.

purportedly feels compassion *really judged* the shooter's suffering to be deserved. But that explanation doesn't go far enough. After all, Nussbaum and Crisp could *agree* about what the nurse believed while nonetheless continuing to *disagree* about the case. And that's the rub—the cognitivist would be at a loss to explain what this *further* disagreement was about.

By contrast, non-cognitivism takes the affective/motivational response, not the judgment, to be foundational. As such, a deep disagreement like what we see between Nussbaum and Crisp is best understood as a dispute about the circumstances under which this *response* is appropriate. Thus, even in cases where the disputants agree about (say) whether the nurse really believed the shooter deserved his suffering, there is still something they can disagree about—namely, whether feelings of compassion are appropriate for someone like the shooter. The upshot, then, is that we are better able to make sense of deep disagreements if we take compassion to have the priority structure of our sophisticated non-cognitivist proposal.

The second consideration builds from the earlier observation that specifying a plausible account of the high-level conceptual content of compassion—that is, a specific claim about what the belief or judgment unique to compassion is—has proven elusive.<sup>10</sup> Consider, again, debates about whether the three assessments that Nussbaum deems essential to compassion—seriousness, desert, and eudaimonistic connection—are jointly sufficient. As we've seen, one strategy that Nussbaum deploys to fend off counterexamples involves denying that the requisite judgment of eudaimonistic concern has actually been made. Rather, she maintains that cases like the tornado example from above are occasions where “one is just not very *concerned* with the fate of the sufferer.” What's missing is that one “really does *care* about the vicissitudes of fortune” of those whose lives have been upended (2001, p. 323, 325, emphasis added; see, Snow, 1991, p. 197, for a similar claim).

But notice what is going on here. Nussbaum's appeal to care and concern to address the counterexample amounts to a move to make affective engagement—specifically, *care and concern toward another's suffering*—essential to compassion. But that means that Nussbaum's strategy for addressing the gaps in her cognitive analysis involves drawing on *non-cognitive* resources—specifically, the affective and motivational tendencies characteristic of low-level compassion. But if cognitivist accounts must collapse into non-cognitivist ones

<sup>10</sup> See D'Arms & Jacobson 2014b for a similar argument focused on fear.

in this way, then we have more evidence of the central, foundation role for non-cognitive content that our sophisticated proposal presumes.

Together these arguments provide three independent lines of support for our non-cognitivist account: while making sense of compassion requires taking the emotion to have both non-cognitive and cognitive dimensions, it also requires taking the non-cognitive elements to be foundational.

### 3. Cultivation without Cognitivism

With a sophisticated non-cognitivist account compassion in hand, we are positioned to see that this proposal has the resources needed to blunt the second (non-cognitivist) horn of the dilemma. Recall the core worry: compassion (or at least its non-cognitive element) has been set up to be a parochial—not moral—emotion. But notice that compassion’s tendency toward parochialism is a problem *only if* there is nothing we can do to cultivate it. In this respect, compassion is no different than other emotions like anger, fear, and pride. We deem these emotions to be morally valuable *even though* they can misfire. And the reason we do this is that we understand that these emotions *can be shaped for the better*.<sup>11</sup>

Recognizing this reveals that the real issue isn’t about compassion’s parochialism. Rather, it’s about whether compassion can be *cultivated* to accentuate its morally admirable dimensions and minimize its parochial tendencies. But here a further worry appears: if compassion is, at bottom, a *purely* non-cognitive response, then there’s no foothold for our cultivation efforts to make use of. However, we can now see (§2) that this worry builds from an empirically dubious account of compassion (and emotion more generally)—one that implicitly presumes that compassion is nothing more than a brute impulse or reflex. That said, there is still the task of showing how cultivation is possible within the framework of our sophisticated non-cognitivist proposal.

To get started on that project, we should first recognize that taking compassion’s low-level content to be foundational still allows that its high-level content can have a role in shaping when and how we feel compassion (D’Arms, 2005). In fact, the above account suggests that this is something we should actually expect. After all, if compassion’s low-level content is both non-

<sup>11</sup> While this idea is most prominent among philosophers working in the Aristotelian tradition (e.g., Sherman, 1989; Annas, 2011; Hursthouse, 2001), it also has broader appeal (e.g., Baxley, 2010; Kurth, 2018; D’Arms, 2005).

conceptual and course-grained in nature (§2), then there will be occasions where it is unclear—even contested—whether someone’s situation merits compassion. Is the hubristic politician’s suffering sufficiently serious? Does the fact that she had some hand in in bringing about her down fall matter?

In cases like these, reflection on what it means for someone’s situation to be compassion-worthy—that is, reflection on what one takes compassion’s high-level, conceptual content to be—can help. For starters, it can provide guidance that suggests an answer to the contested question. More importantly, these reflections can, at least over the long run, have a downward, shaping influence on when one subsequently feels compassion. Moreover, and as we will see in more detail below, the cognitive mechanisms that underwrite compassion’s low-level content and processing are (moderately) malleable in the sense that when, and how intensely, we feel compassion can be shaped by (e.g.) reflection on what it means for a person’s situation to be compassion-worthy.<sup>12</sup> Importantly, the thought that compassion can be cultivated in this way—namely, that rational considerations and high-level cognitive processing can shape the low-level response—is not just a theoretical posit. Nor does it mean that compassion’s non-cognitive core is a mere idle wheel—an evolutionary spandrel, not a foundational element of human compassion. To see this, we can turn to work in cognitive science that has examined compassion training programs (CTPs). This work is important because it provides evidence of our ability to shape compassion for the better. But looking at these programs also sheds light on how this shaping occurs and does so in a way that highlights the central role that compassion’s non-cognitive dimension plays in the process.

Central to many CTPs is a set of exercises inspired by Buddhist meditation practices.<sup>13</sup> Here one of the core techniques builds on the mettā meditation paradigm. In particular, one uses exercises aimed at developing feelings of warmth and concern as one visualizes a series of individuals: oneself, a loved one, a person with whom one has a neutral relationship, a person with whom one has a difficult relationship, a stranger, and—finally—human beings in general. In particular, as one visualizes each individual, one repeats sentences like: “May you be happy,” “May you be free from suffering and danger,” and

<sup>12</sup> There is general agreement that emotions can be shaped (for the better) even among theorists who take emotions to be (in part) evolutionarily hardwired response (e.g., Kurth, 2016, 2018, 2019; Railton, 2014; Kelly, 2011; D’Arms, 2005; Gibbard, 1990).

<sup>13</sup> See Struhl, 2018, for an excellent overview of Buddhism and its relevance for the development of compassion.

“May you live with ease” (Germer & Neff, 2013; Silva & Negi, 2013; Langri & Weiss, 2013; Bronemann & Singer, 2013).

What’s important for our purposes is that empirical research suggests that CTPs like these work—and they work because they engage compassion’s non-cognitive elements. The key to seeing this lies in unpacking what this empirical work tells us about the mechanisms underlying compassion’s distinctive motivational orientation.

To get started, a range of experimental findings indicate that CTPs bring increases in self-reported positive moods and life satisfaction ratings (e.g., Fredrickson et al., 2008). In fact, and of note for what’s to come, related work indicates that while CTPs boost the positive affect (e.g., feelings of warmth) experienced in response to another’s suffering, they leave negative feelings (e.g., distress) unchanged (Klimicki et al., 2014; Klimicki et al., 2013). Relatedly, CTPs have also been associated with reductions in stress-related neuro-chemicals like interleukin-6. In fact, these neuro-chemical changes are “dose-dependent” in the sense that increases in the length of the compassion training program used are associated with larger interleukin-6 reductions (Pace et al., 2009). This dose-dependence is significant insofar as it supports a causal connection between CTPs and stress reduction. More importantly, other research shows that even a brief use of CTPs brings an increase in helping behavior—including efforts to help that come at a cost to the helper (Weng et al., 2015, study 2; Leiberger et al., 2011).<sup>14</sup> Moreover, here too we find evidence of dose-dependence—again implicating the compassion training as the cause of the increases in efforts to help.

Taken together, these findings enrich our understanding of compassion’s affective and motivational profile: compassion isn’t a mere feeling of distress at another’s suffering, but rather a more complex feeling of concern that is *tinged with positive affect*. One upshot of this richer picture of compassion’s affective profile is that it helps us make sense of something we noted in passing above—namely, the vague and convoluted ways in which compassion’s non-cognitive features tend to be characterized in the philosophical literature (§1). More significantly, it also helps us understand the role that non-cognitive feelings of concern play in the cultivation of compassion.

<sup>14</sup> Additional confirming evidence comes from work indicating that individual differences in tendencies to feel compassion predict an individual’s likelihood of providing assistance in response to the distress of another (Weng et al. 2015, study 1).

To better see this, first recall from above (§2) that imaging work in neuroscience provides evidence of a “compassion network” that engages brain regions associated with positive affect, reward, and affiliation (Klimicki et al., 2014; Lutz et al. 2008; Beauregard et al. 2009; Immordino-Yang et al. 2009). Combining this with what we just learned about how compassion training can bring both increases in positive affect and decreases in stress suggests that CTPs work by enhancing the connection between (i) *negative* feelings of distress at another’s suffering and (ii) *positive* feelings associated with acting on one’s concern for others. Thus, what CTPs may be doing when they help one expand the range of individuals one feels compassion for is not just getting one to see—in an intellectual manner—that those outside of one’s in-group are suffering. Rather, these exercises are *also* getting one to develop (positive) *feelings of concern* for these other individuals by extending the feelings and concerns that one already has for the well-being of one’s friends and intimates.

This idea also finds support in work from cognitive science. Of particular note for our purposes is research exploring the cognitive mechanisms that regulate the negative feelings we experience in response to the suffering of others. This research is significant because it compares the effects of CTPs with alternative strategies we can use to manage these negative feelings.

First consider research comparing CTPs with strategies geared toward promoting empathy (Klimicki et al., 2014; Singer & Klimicki, 2014).<sup>15</sup> Unlike CTP’s emphasis on fostering feelings of warmth and concern, these empathy training programs (ETPs) involve exercises that ask participants to focus on resonating with the suffering of others. This work reveals that both CTPs and ETPs bring increases in the associated feelings. More specifically, individuals in CTPs report increased *positive* affect (e.g., feelings of warmth) in response to another’s suffering, though their negative feelings remain unchanged. By contrast, those in ETP report increased *negative* affect (e.g., distress) but unchanged positive affect. Moreover, associated fMRI imaging results reveal that these training programs bolster activity in different brain regions. For compassion, the activity is in regions associated with positive affect, reward, and

<sup>15</sup> Recall the distinction between compassion and empathy from the introduction. Compassion is an emotion that presents the suffering of another as bad—as a source of concern. Empathy, by contrast, is the general capacity to feel what another feels (be it pleasant or unpleasant) and it does not necessarily carry the motivationally-laden concern characteristic of compassion. For further discussion, see the references in footnotes 1-2.



affiliation (this is the “compassion network” noted earlier). But for empathy, the activity is located in areas associated with self-oriented distress and withdrawal/avoidance behavior.<sup>16</sup>

The combination of these findings—the different feelings that the two training programs brought and the functional profiles of the brain regions they activate—suggests that there is an important role for the *non-cognitive* elements of compassion in efforts to shape it via CTPs. More specifically, by adding evidence for a connection between (i) CTPs, (ii) the promotion of positive feelings in response to suffering, and (iii) the engagement of the compassion network, they provide further support for the above picture of how CTPs work: effectively cultivating compassion involves bolstering the connection between *negative feelings* of distress at another’s suffering and *positive feelings* associated with acting on one’s concern for others.

We get more evidence for this picture from research comparing CTPs with strategies that use reappraisal (not ETPs) as a way of regulating the negative affect that we feel in response to the suffering of others. Rather than fostering feelings of concern and warmth (as CTPs do), reappraisal strategies employ a more cognitive technique. Specifically, in order to moderate the emotional impact of seeing another person suffering, one tries to come up with alternative interpretations of the person’s distress. So, for instance, one might view a film clip of a person in distress and then be asked to “think about what was occurring in a way in which the film narrative ended more positively than was immediately apparent” (Engen & Singer, 2015, p. 159). When looking at the results of these two techniques, we see that while CTPs bring increases in self-reported positive feelings, the use of reappraisal strategies brings a reduction in negative affect. Unsurprisingly then, the associated brain imaging work shows that CTPs do—but reappraisals do not—bring increased activation of the compassion network (Engen & Singer 2015).

These findings are significant for two reasons. First, they provide further support for our account of how CTPs work to shape compassion for the better. More importantly, they speak directly to the skeptic’s charge that if

<sup>16</sup> Of further note, related work shows that this “empathy network” displays a nearness bias: witnessing the suffering of an in-group member (e.g., a supporter of your sports team) brings more activation in the empathy network in comparison with seeing the suffering of an out-group member (e.g., a supporter of a rival team) (Singer et al. 2006, Singer & Klimicki 2014). This suggests—pace the compassion skeptic—that the real source of parochial responses to the suffering of others is empathy, not compassion.

cultivation works, it does so by engaging mechanisms of higher cognition that bypass compassion's non-cognitive elements. After all, this work shows that the affect-engaging CTPs—but *not* the more cognitive techniques of reappraisal—were effective in engaging the brain regions associated with positive affect, reward, and affiliation that (as we have seen) have been implicated in the promotion of helping behavior. In short, the engagement of compassion's distinctive affective/motivational dimension is *not* an idle wheel, but rather central to how compassion, and compassion cultivation, works.

Stepping back, we find diverse and converging lines of support for our sophisticated, non-cognitivist account of compassion. To quell concerns about compassion's tendency toward parochialism, we need to show not just that it is an emotion that can be shaped for the better, but also that compassion's non-cognitive core is essential to its functioning as a properly moral emotion. The discussion of the last two sections licenses optimism on both fronts.

#### 4. Conclusions and Three Further Implications

Return to the dilemma from earlier (§1), we can now see that a promising response from the defender of compassion's moral value will involve two steps: a defense of a sophisticated, non-cognitivist model of compassion and an empirically-informed account of how compassion can be effectively cultivated. But the discussion here also suggests a trio of larger lessons. First, the best account of compassion is a non-cognitivist one—though one that also acknowledges compassion's cognitive elements. Second, while there is an important place for belief-like content in an account of compassion, that content does not have the emotion-constituting *metaphysical* role that cognitivist accounts take it to have. Rather, the significance of these cognitive elements is *developmental* in the sense that an appreciation of the different ways we might understand core concepts like the compassion-worthy is crucial to our ability shape compassion for the better. Finally, though our focus here has been on compassion, the lessons that we have learned about its cognitive architecture and developmental profile are like to provide more general insights for understanding of other emotions and their development.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>17</sup> For the beginnings of a general account of emotion along these lines see Kurth, 2019. For more specific thoughts about fear, anxiety, and disgust, see Kurth 2016, 2018, n.d.

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