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Chapter 4

Compassion

- Conflicted Social Feeling and the Calling to Care

Iain Wilkinson

Introduction

In real life settings and in the everyday flow of moral experience it is often difficult to pin down the substance of our feelings. It might be argued, however, that compassion leaves us in no doubt of its cause and motive. It is widely held to involve individuals in some distressing sensations that are derived from a strong moral identification with an other's pain. It is, moreover, often depicted not only as particularly fiery and intense, but also, and more so as when compared to pity, sympathy and empathy, as a feeling that motivates beneficent actions. It is a profoundly moral emotion. When gripped by sentiments of compassion people are motivated to take actions to combat the pains borne through suffering. In this respect, it has a prosocial orientation. Compassion has the effect of making individuals deeply concerned to take actions on behalf of the safety, well-being and good of others. It is a motive force in the basic acts of kindness and care that create and sustain human social life.

Compassion is a natural part of our most intimate relationships. It is experienced in the bonds of love and affection of good family relationships. It takes root in the ties of friendship whereby we are made duty bound to take care one another. Compassion is also advanced as a public virtue, and there are a range of institutional settings where it is actively cultivated on behalf of the good of society as a whole. For example, it is championed as a desired attribute of health care professionals. Compassion is an essential part of good nursing and of constructive physician-patient relationships. In the contexts of health care, it is even considered to be an important part of the 'emotional work' that promotes healing and recovery (Neff 2003). Compassion is also identified as a vital part of teaching practices that aim to equip children with the self-confidence, courage and social skills to engage in effective learning. By taking steps to create compassionate classrooms, teachers aim to provide pupils with environments that nurture their social adaptability and personal resilience as well as conditions that equip them with life skills to operate as good citizens (Markinek et al. 2006).

Beyond this, compassion is encountered in everyday life as a potent force in our politics, and especially where these are concerned with matters of humanitarian social justice. An appeal

to compassion features large in campaigns for human and animal rights. Indeed, it is often heralded as the primary motive for movements of progressive social change. For a long time now it has been widely recognised that a cultural politics of compassion is a vital part of the arsenal deployed to convince people to lend their support to humanitarian causes. Arguably the existence and influence of organisations such as the International Committee of the Red Cross, Médecins Sans Frontières and Oxfam bears testimony to the strength of its appeal (Berlant 2004). Indeed, such organisations operate as a direct means for people to channel the moral feelings aroused in response to mediatized imagery of the suffering of distant strangers into political action. Moreover, in taking note of the role played by mass communication media in rendering the social world and its problems immediately visible to us on a grand scale, commentators note that our political leaders frequently take great care to appear compassionate when out in public. We are living in a time where many political debates appear to be shaped more by the quality of people's feelings towards others than by matters of sheer calculation or rational principle (Ure and Frost 2014). In this context, individuals operating in the public domain must be adept at displaying compassion whenever this is required from them. Plays on, and displays of, compassion are now a routine part of the exercise of political power.

Compassion is also a hot topic of scholarly debate. This is connected to a widespread understanding that it holds the potential to reveal some of the most elemental truths about human nature and the moral character of human society (Nussbaum 1996). Questioning how individuals are liable to feel compassion for others is taken as a means to engage in the attempt to understand both the moral conditions that make for human well-being and those of society at large. It is further recognized as an emotional disposition and form of experience that holds the potential to provide us with insights into processes of human civilization that are the signature tune of modern identity and consciousness (King 2000). It is generally recognized, moreover, that in the 21st century we are witnessing a significant heightening of many controversies associated with how we might denote the role of compassion in social life and how we should assess its human value (Olasky 2000; Woodward 2002). There are many contrasting points of view on how we should understand the conditions that either heighten or attenuate compassionate sentiments. There is no agreement on what role compassion should play in human affairs or on what this emotional experience does to us. Much dispute surrounds the extent to which the active cultivation of compassion is desirable, or on how, if at all, this should take place (Zembylas 2013).

In part this is connected to the ways in which emotions such as pity, sympathy and compassion are understood to operate as enactments of power relations in which weaker and more vulnerable members of society are dominated by institutionally over-privileged individuals.

Here the ‘ideology of compassion’ is condemned on the grounds that it frequently operates as a form of class condescension or as a force of Nietzschean *ressentiment* (Paley 2002). Some argue, moreover, that sentiments of compassion have a tendency to short-circuit people’s capacity to think critically about the best ways to actively respond to people’s suffering to a point that endangers democracy (Arendt 1963).

The controversies surrounding compassion are further connected to the ways in which it is now often perceived to be left diminished or reduced to a state of exhaustion. It has become commonplace to associate compassion with the possibility that some are particularly prone to experience ‘compassion fatigue’ (Sprang et al. 2007). On this account, it should be studied with a focus brought to institutional arrangements and forms of social interaction that are set to harden people’s sensibilities to a point where they have little capacity to feel for the suffering of others (Hooper et al. 2010). It is also approached as a matter that requires us to attend to the ways in which traumatic encounters with sensationalized portrayals of human suffering, and especially those we regularly come across through our interactions with modern communication media, are serving to render compassion ever more strained and elusive (Moeller 1999). Here it is generally assumed that we are living amidst social and cultural conditions that operate to erode human kindness and the disposition to care, and that these are now being experienced in ever-more intensifying forms.

This chapter reviews the cultural and social history of compassion. It highlights the involvement of compassion in the creation and maintenance of conditions of everyday life in western modernity. It is designed to equip readers with some resources to think critically about the range of moral, political and social interests that are featured in favoured accounts of compassion and its consequences. In later sections, it provides some analytical reflections on contemporary forms of ‘compassion fatigue’. While a repeated emphasis is brought to the fact that compassion always courts controversy, it also aims to underline the potential for this to marshal critical debate towards the institutional configuration and moral character of society.

A Turbulent History

There is a long tradition of philosophical debate over how to understand the moral psychology of compassion, and over how it should be depicted as a human virtue. Its moral character has often been questioned on the grounds that, while compassion may inspire acts of kindness and care, it can also be appropriated on behalf of self-serving interests, or even as a means to carry out an abuse of power. In classical antiquity compassion attracted a considerable amount of debate in connection with its involvement in the cultivation of human decency and sound polity (Konstan 2006; Sternberg 2005). It was taken by ancient Greek tragedians along with Stoic and

Socratic philosophers as a component of moral reason and as an attribute of human moral ‘intelligence’ (Nussbaum 2001). Right from the start, however, it was also recognized as involving us in the difficulty of interpreting the moral motives that lie behind an individual’s capacity to feel for the pains of others, and especially insofar as such sentiment was perceived to have an ‘egoistic dimension’ that was more concerned with self-gratification than with the condition of those suffering (Konstan 2014:180). It was also brought into controversy in connection with the problem of determining the kinds of actions that could be justified on the grounds of a compassionate identification with others. As David Konstan notes, such a high state of emotion was understood by the Roman historian Polybius to be accompanied by the danger that it could serve as the pretext for maniacal behaviours. The virtue of compassion was questioned in light of the fact that there are occasions where, in the heat of the moment, people are so overcome with by the urge to vent their feelings that they are rendered incapable of operating with moral restraint (Konstan 2014:181).

Such debates have accompanied literary accounts of compassion throughout Western history (Paster 2005). It is generally recognized, however, that these are further complicated and intensified when popular understandings and practices of compassion come under the influence of Christianity. Here compassion is attached to a theological concern with redemptive suffering and is praised as a saintly virtue that warrants careful cultivation. The culture of compassion holds a special place for those seeking an affective identification with Jesus’s humanity, his redemptive suffering and his example of charitable care for the sick and poor. It is also especially valued in devotional practices concerned with the compassionate grief of his mother, Mary. Within the writings of the early church fathers through the patristic period (c.100-450 CE) repeated attempts were made to instruct Christians on the appropriate ways to display compassion both in feeling and action (Perkins 1995). Through the middle ages and up to the early modern period many devotional practices were developed that employ literature, art and music as a means to arouse and intensify emotional reactions to the passion of Christ (Lazikani 2015; McNamer 2010). Many of these are now understood to have had lasting impacts on the Western iconography of human suffering and the aesthetics of pain. In this respect, moreover, some identify the cultural politics of modern humanitarianism as operating to adapt these traditions for the promotion of human welfare and projects of social reform (Dromi 2016).

It is important to note, however, that through most of the history of Christendom compassionate almsgiving and charitable care for the sick and dying existed alongside practices that most modern people would now disassociate from acts of kindness and care. More often than not the charitable and devotional compassion of the Christian church has operated with little concern to combat the violent persecution of heretics. From a modern perspective, it may be

particularly disturbing to note the extent to which compassion has been implicated in acts of torture and execution. In efforts to save sinners from mortal damnation or to protect communities from the wrath of a vengeful God, an appeal to compassion has often been used to justify the punishments meted out to those breaking established moral codes or flouting religious custom. The period of the European Reformations is particularly noteworthy for the extent to which the pursuit of religious orthodoxy and uniformity of belief was accompanied by what Alexandra Walsham labels as a ‘charitable hatred’ that resulted in unprecedented numbers of people being scourged, pilloried or burnt at the stake while standing accused of theological dissent, idolatry, sexual immorality or witchcraft (Walsham 2006).

It is against this history that some of the more radical attributions of modern compassion are brought to light. It is widely acknowledged that through the second half of the 18th century, early modern societies witnessed a ‘humanitarian revolution’ and that this has had many lasting and profound impacts on the ways people now negotiate with the problem of suffering and the ethics of care (Pinker 2011). In this context, and partly in reaction against age-old practices of religious intolerance and violence, compassion was heralded as an attribute of a new culture of ‘enlightenment’ and ‘civil society’ (Frazer 2010; Mullan 1988). It appears that the dawning of the so-called age of modernity was accompanied by what the historian Keith Thomas refers to as an outbreak of ‘spontaneous tender heartedness’ (Thomas 1983:173-175). At this point, compassion came to be ever more strongly identified with heightened humanitarian convictions and forms of politics motivated by a pronounced moral revulsion towards a great deal of suffering that was henceforth deemed ‘excessive’, ‘unnecessary’, ‘without moral purpose’ and ‘unjust’ (Wilkinson and Kleinman 2016:25-54).

Here moral sentiments of compassion fuelled campaigns to abolish slavery, movements to oppose the use of torture in criminal proceedings, new-found concerns for animal welfare and crusades for the promotion of women’s and children’s rights (Sznajder 2001). It became commonplace to identify compassion as the wellspring of human care and as the source from which the stream of human kindness flows. In many quarters of ‘polite society’ considerable efforts were taken to craft moral manners and sensibilities whereby one might stand out as a man or woman ‘of feeling’ motivated to set the good of others as his or her prime concern (Barker-Benfield 1992).

At the same time, it is important to recognize that this newly invigorated cult of sensibility was accompanied by a vociferous culture of critical debate. The critical interrogation of compassion was taken to new ground by philosophers such as David Hume and Adam Smith, who surpassed their classical forbearers in their devotion to questioning the moral psychology of compassionate feelings and the extent to which they could be allied, it if at all, with principled

reason (Hume 1734-1740/1929, 1751/1987; Smith 1759/2006). Compassion was further held morally suspect by essayists such as Henry Mackenzie for the extent to which it gave reign to an ‘enthusiasm’ in which people were liable to indulge feelings to the cost of conscience (Mackenzie 1785/2001). Indeed, in this regard many understood it to operate as a succour to promiscuous voyeurism (Halttunen 1995). Mary Wollstonecraft, moreover, was particularly worried by those who used the popular portrayal of women as particularly prone to compassion as a pretext to claim that they were also intellectually limited and had no serious part to play in reasoned public debate (Wollstonecraft 1792/1994).

Following the French Revolution of 1789 and the ferocious retributions of the ‘reign of terror’ (1793-1794), public debates over the virtue of compassion were characterized by more deeply entrenched conflicts of moral opinion (Jones 1993). Some held ever more strongly to the view that, as Hannah Arendt puts it, the ‘passion of compassion’ was the ‘driving force of revolutionaries’ who feel justified to use extreme acts violence as the means to achieve their aims (Arendt 1963). From this perspective, compassion was exposed as excessively dangerous, and in light of its potential to operate as the motivation for fanatical and barbarous actions, it was increasingly advised that steps should be taken to limit its influence over the domains of civil politics and rational policy debate. Indeed, this period of history is now looked back upon as initiating the view that, as far as serious academic inquiry is concerned, moral sentiment should be regarded more as an intellectual pollutant than as an aid to reasoned judgement (Reddy 2000).

At the same time, however, whilst not shying away from the fact that compassion is an inherently unstable emotion that may drive some to adopt violence as the means to express their moral feelings, others continued to celebrate its humanitarian potential. During the 19th century, authors of so-called ‘social novels’ such as Charles Dickens and Harriet Beecher Stowe continued to work at cultivating their reader’s compassion as a means to draw the brutalizing poverty of the new industrial labouring classes and the horrors of slavery into public debate. Indeed, as far as Stowe is concerned Greg Crane reports that she took ‘the eruption of moral sympathetic feeling’ evoked by graphic accounts of the cruelty done to slaves as a ‘sure signal’ that all human beings were entitled to ‘fundamental human rights’ (Crane 1996:177-186). Along with many others campaigners for humanitarian social reform, Stowe could not be moved from the conviction that it was only insofar as people were made preoccupied by the ‘moral-emotional dissonance’ of sentiments of compassion that they could be equipped with the political zeal to oppose social institutions that deliver harm to human life (Crane 1996:177-186).

Such strongly opposed points of view on the virtue of compassion continue through to the present day, and on many accounts these still hold far-reaching consequences for the conduct of contemporary law and politics (Wilkinson 2017). Indeed, it might be argued that in the 21st century we are living amidst cultural processes, with political arrangements and within social conditions in which the controversy of compassion is set to intensify. In recognition of this fact, moreover, it is increasingly being taken up as a matter for sociological inquiry where it is treated as an issue that draws the historical peculiarity of our social character and cultural circumstance into sharp relief.

Problems for Sociology

A great deal of cross-disciplinary inquiry is now taking place across the humanities and social sciences into how compassionate sentiments are acquired and intensified. The history and sociology of emotions have been developed into highly elaborated fields of study. For as long as compassion has been drawn into debate it has also been recognized that its relative qualities and intensities are subject to processes of acculturation and cultivation. In contemporary scholarship, however, there is no agreement on how we should venture to understand the social conditions under which individuals are set to make this a shared concern. Furthermore, much dispute surrounds how these should be assessed. A considerable conflict of interpretations presides over the attempt to relate the history of compassion to generalized accounts of people's social character and to the dynamics governing processes of social change. This is due to the fact that it not only involves us in the difficulty of charting the inter-relationships between material conditions, social arrangements and cultural outlooks, but also, in brokering with divergent political and moral points of view on their human value and consequences.

It is widely observed that the moral dispensation to respond with compassion towards the grievances and hardships of others is moderated by the material circumstances in which we are made to live. It is frequently noted that compassionate feelings are an indulgence for those who are removed from a great deal of suffering and who occupy a materially privileged position from which it is possible to extend care and kindness to others (McCloskey 2004). It is only where people can afford the time and space to both nurture and give reign to their feelings that they are made preoccupied by compassion. In this regard, the heightened moral sensibility of modern people from the late 18th century onwards can be attributed to the fact that here we find increasing numbers experiencing levels of economic prosperity in which the age-old tooth and nail struggle for survival was no longer a condition of everyday life. A considerable amount of scholarly inquiry is devoted to the role played by modern capitalism and the rise of a commercial society in the promotion of compassion as a human virtue and aid to civility (Davis and

Taithe 2011; Haskell 1985a, 1985b). Certainly, it is the case that, at least in the early period of its history, the extension of capitalist social relations across societies and national boundaries, was perceived to be accompanied by a distinct ‘softening’ of manners and conduct (Herman 2001:91-99). It is argued that people realized that it was to their commercial benefit to offer a hand of friendship to strangers, and thereby, that a capitalist market did much to ‘extend the scope of public compassion ... however unintentionally’ (Sznajder 2001:11).

Of course, this begs many more questions about the conditions under which capitalism can be allied with civility. It also invites debate to be brought to the extent to which the moral economy of compassion is liable to be disciplined by class interests or left tailored for largely commercial considerations (Manfredi 2013). Others rightly point out that there are contrasting forms of capitalism and market relations and that many of these are designed to operate, as Max Weber puts it, ‘without regard for persons’ (Weber 1948). Indeed, even Thomas Haskell, who is perhaps most heavily associated with the claim that capitalism has a propensity to create social connections between people that create space for the extension of compassion, is keen to underline the fact that ‘complex institutions like the market have multiple and contradictory effects’, and that many of these are virulently, and perhaps violently, committed to promote forms of social interaction that occlude compassion (Haskell 1987:859).

In the work of Émile Durkheim we have an early acknowledgement of this complexity as he attempts to expose the contrasting psychological and moral effects of the processes of individualization that accompany modern capitalist divisions of labour. Durkheim aims to have us understand that *at the same time* as we might be subject to the pains and confusions of anomie and the selfish impulse of egoism we also have a propensity to be much affected by a ‘moral individualism’ that is possessed by ‘sympathy for all that is human, a wider pity for all sufferings, for all human miseries, a more ardent desire to combat and alleviate them [and] a greater thirst of social justice’ (Durkheim 1898/1973:48-49). Arguably, however, Durkheim’s service to us here lies more in drawing a light to the inherent complexity and frustrations of modern individualism than in providing us with an adequately refined account of how to advance cultural conditions and institutional arrangements that enable the maturation of our compassionate propensities.

In pursuit of this goal, many now look to the work of Norbert Elias as a guide to charting the social arrangements, cultural proclivities and political formations that make individuals more or less disposed towards compassion. Here conditions of modernity are perceived to result from long-term ‘civilizing’ processes that have delivered individuals into forms of society in which they are made to acquire a shared concern to inhibit violent impulses as well as heightened dispensations to relate to one another with sympathy (Elias 1994). The vicissitudes of the

compassionate temperament of modern times are construed as the product of a culture of manners that is also tied to the development and spread of state institutions that regulate society to the rule of calculation. In addition to this, they are also understood to be a part of the creation of social connections between people in which they encouraged to form relationships of mutual self-regard. Elias argues that these are all mutually complimentary processes. From this perspective there is an intimate connection between, on the one hand, the advancement of cold-calculating forces of rationalization, and on the other hand, an enhanced moral preoccupation with moral sentiments of compassion. It is possible, moreover to identify modern campaigns for humanitarian social reform as operating with both these concerns set to the fore. At the same time as they aim to marshal the appeal of compassion as a moral standard for human conduct they are also involved in efforts to extend the disciplinary force of ‘civilization’ upon society. Indeed, from an Eliasian perspective it is argued that these concerns are mutually reinforcing and reciprocally enhancing, even while immersing people in quite contradictory and conflictual experiences of everyday life (Linklater 2010; Sznajder 1997; Vaughan 2000).

Elias also encourages us to reflect on the potential for civilizing processes to be accompanied by de-civilizing trends, and raises the prospect that there may be periods where such trends reshape people’s mentalities and moral sensibilities so that they are more disposed to behave with cruelty and violence. In his later study of the rise of the Nazis in 1930s Germany, he explains how it is possible for de-civilising trends rise to dominate the ‘habitus’ of some sectors of society so that ‘civilizing’ processes are undermined and fall into decline (Elias 1997). Indeed, this is how he accounts for the violence of the German National Socialist movement, the popular appeal of its racist ideology and the events that led to ‘the final solution’ (Dunning and Mennell 1998). Accordingly, even within processes where long-term civilizing trends work to encourage the cultivation of compassionate sensibilities there may be sudden and dramatic shifts in people’s moral proclivities so that, as Elias puts it, ‘the armour of civilized conduct’ can very rapidly ‘crumble’ (Elias 1994:253n).

Cas Wouters has seized on this insight in order to argue that existing alongside processes that operate to ‘formalise’ our manners and conduct there are also movements towards ‘informalisation’. On this account, through the 20th century it is possible to chart significant shifts in the balance between the formalising and informalising processes of our times (Wouters 2007). Wouters claims that, from around the 1960s onwards and particularly following the rise of mass consumerism, the ‘expressive revolution’ that accompanied movements towards people’s sexual liberation and the fuller realization of human rights for women, people of colour and the working classes, we can chart the increasing prevalence of forms of emotional conduct that lack restraint. He contends that we are living through a period where, when compared to most other

times and places, individuals are much more at ease with, and more open about, discussing their feelings. Wouters argues that we are living in an age of ‘emotional emancipation’, but that this is also accompanied by ever more pronounced problems relating to how emotions should be appropriately managed and interpreted. People are faced with increasing social and cultural demands to become ‘reflexively’ oriented towards their emotional conduct as well as that of others. On this characterization of our times, as the bounds of emotional freedoms are extended, we are also set to encounter more elevated anxieties connected to how these should be expressed and understood.

Anxieties of ‘Compassion Fatigue’

It is only in the second half of the 20th century that ‘compassion fatigue’ acquired popular currency as a term to express concerns that we are living amidst processes and in face of events that are liable to exhaust people’s capacity to feel compassion for others. What is particularly unusual here is the normative assumption that individuals are disposed to be compassionate and that we should be worried by evidence to the contrary. A mere cursory review of our history would alert us to the fact that in most other times and places it is by no means common for people to regard compassion as an innate propensity or as a desirable public good (Arendt 1963). Historically speaking, moreover, to openly worry over the condition of compassion fatigue and its prevalence is quite exceptional.

Compassion fatigue first appears in the late 1960s as a term of reference in debates over the forms of developmental aid and assistance that are provided by rich countries to less developed nations, and especially to sections of population designated as ‘refugees’ (Bennett 1969). It was initially used to refer to the apparent waning of public and political support for programmes of humanitarian assistance. Through the 1990s, however, it came to be increasingly associated with a move to blame modern media of communication, and especially those involved in the production and transmission of sensationalized images of suffering, for normalizing people’s awareness of human tragedy, atrocity and disaster to a point where they can no longer summon the energy to react to this with compassion (Moeller 1999). In the 1990s it was further adopted as a term to denote experiences of ‘burnout’ among health care practitioners struggling to cope with the stress borne through the effort to empathize with other people’s suffering (Figley 1995). In these domains, moreover, there has been an increasing tendency to designate compassion fatigue as a ‘secondary traumatic stress disorder’, so that it is now treated as a distinct form of mental illness (Figley 2002).

From the perspective taken in this chapter, one of the more important things to note here is the involvement of worries over the waning or wearing down of compassion in wider anxieties connected to the social reconfiguration of people's relationships with others. For example, in some of the more sophisticated analytical renderings of the involvement of modern communication media in elevated states of compassion fatigue it is argued that the moral and political contradictions that arise for people in connection with the experience of being positioned as remote witnesses of other people's suffering are without precedent. Luc Boltanski contends that the now widely shared experience of being a 'detached observer' of human affliction operates to intensify a shared sense of political powerlessness and moral inadequacy, for we routinely find that we have no morally adequate means to answer the imperative of action – to do something, anything to respond – that the brute facts of suffering impress upon us (Boltanski 1999). Indeed, the observation that this is now a normal part of our moral experience of everyday life is used to argue that the mass dissemination of the imagery of suffering via commercial forms of cultural reproduction and exchange is effecting a major transformation in the experience of social subjectivity. It is likely that we have scarcely begun to piece together an adequate understanding of what this implies for our terms of self-understanding or those by which we relate to others. Some hold that we may now be witnessing the creation of global interconnections and globalized moral consciousness that make possible new 'empathic' forms of civilization' (Rifkin 2009). Others are more inclined to draw a focus to a potential for the 'cultural appropriation' of people's suffering as a commercial news 'infotainment' to unhinge moral sensibility from longstanding ties of human responsibility (Kleinman and Kleinman 1996). Certainly, one might argue that whatever has taken place in the past is no longer a useful guide to instructing how we should navigate a course through the moral landscapes of the possible futures that lie ahead (Höijer 2004).

Similarly, those involved in analysing the treatment of compassion fatigue experienced by health care professionals tend to operate with an open recognition of the fact that they are dealing with new conceptualisations of human health and with new conditions for health care in practice. Most discussions acknowledge that discourses of compassion fatigue are a relatively recent invention, and that these coincide not only with a greater concern to refine diagnostic accounts of traumatic forms of experience, but also, with more widespread worries among health professionals relating to work pressures in environments governed by neo-liberal cost-cutting initiatives. At one level compassion fatigue is taken as a component of the affective worries and distresses borne under the experience of ever intensifying forces of rationalization and control. At another, it is approached as a new 'risk' that, once recognized as such, should

involve health care professionals in ever more concerted movements to advance ‘compassionate care’ as a vocational concern (Dewar and Nolan 2013).

In both these instances ‘compassion fatigue’ is connected to more pronounced anxieties relating to the moral condition of people’s emotional experience of everyday life. It is further taken as a conduit for debates over the moral significance of new frontiers of social and cultural experience. The inherent difficulties involved in taking compassion as a guide to action are compounded by further difficulties connected to how we should interpret and respond to patently new social arrangements and cultural conditions. Here the substance and meaning of compassion are set to be ever more hotly contested matters for political contest and moral debate.

Conclusion

As this chapter has shown, compassion is a ‘social emotion’. It alerts us to the quality of our moral attachments to others and calls on us to attend to how we bear a moral responsibility to relate people with care. It may well be, as Martha Nussbaum puts it, ‘the basic social emotion’, for it is often the case that compassion is implicated in the acquisition of the cultural disposition to relate to ourselves and others as inherently *social* beings (Nussbaum 1996). In this regard, moreover, the assorted controversies of compassion are tied to many contested and conflicting points of view on how we should relate to the conditions that govern our social lives, and especially in connection to how we interpret and respond to instances where these result in human suffering.

In this chapter, I have sought to provide readers with insights into the genealogy of our modern culture of compassion. I have further underlined the ways in which compassion and its controversies hold the potential to provoke a questioning of the values enacted through practices of care in society, and especially in contexts where care for humanity is set as a prime concern. I have argued that anxieties over contemporary forms of ‘compassion fatigue’ represent a new stage in a long history of debate over the bounds and meaning of compassion, and that here it increasingly appears that our lives are being socially and cultural reconfigured so that the moral and political economy of our emotions are made ever more pressing matters of concern. By participating in debates over the controversies of compassion we also made to question the moral meaning of social life and its purpose.

Sociologists committed to understanding the role played by compassion in contexts of everyday life are frequently, and perhaps unavoidably, involved in assessing its involvement in enactments of power relations. It is important to recognise, however, that the study of compassion involves far more than a commitment to exposing its potential to operate in the service of

various political and social ideologies. There are wider issues at stake here that concern the potential for individuals to create humane forms of society. When studying compassion we are made to attend to how individuals are more or less equipped with the motivation to care for one another. In this regard, moreover, it is often the case that it involves us documenting how the boundaries of social recognition are drawn and how the bounds of moral responsibility are set in place. When studying the language, imagery and forms of communication that cultivate compassionate sentiments we are dealing with expressions and representations of substantive human values. These are fundamentally preoccupied with our response to people's social suffering and with the actions we take to promote forms of social organisation to protect people from harm's way. Under conditions of modernity sentiments of compassion are vital elements within the moral configuration of society as a whole.

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