The Moral Status of Compassion in Bioethics: The Sacred and the Secular

Compassion is a word used with frequency in the moral lexicons of Catholic Christians and secular humanists. Both invoke it to support the actions they deem morally valid in response to human suffering, especially when it involves the origins, sustenance, and ending of human life. But there is a chasm of difference in the moral weight each gives to compassion and the way each responds to its urgings.

On the one hand, we have the inspiring meditation on human life in Pope John Paul II’s encyclical, Evangelium Vitae. The Pope’s words are filled with Christ’s compassion for the sick, the dying, the unborn, and the aged. He calls us to be compassionate as Christ was compassionate, to relieve suffering but always with respect for the inviolable sanctity and dignity of all human life however fragile, young or old, sick or well. On the other hand, there is the claim of secular humanists that they are the possessors of true compassion for suffering. For them, suffering is the greatest evil and the relief of suffering, the greatest good. Compassion justifies taking the life of the sufferer, helping him to take his own life, or taking the lives of others to relieve suffering by aborting the unwanted or genetically imperfect fetus, creating embryos for research purposes, and using aborted embryos for tissue transplantation.

Between the Christian and secular interpretations of compassion, there is an intractable moral and conceptual dissonance. For the secularist, the sentiment of compassion has moral weight of its own. It is, itself, a virtue which entails relief of pain and suffering as a major end of moral life. For the Christian, sentiment cannot function as a reason for moral choice, sentiment is not a virtue unless ordered by reason, and suffering has a distinct meaning in human lives. As Evangelium Vitae so richly attests, the resulting dichotomy leads in opposite directions—to a “new culture of life” on the one hand, or to the culture of death on the other.

Compassion—the Sentiment and the Virtue

Christians and secular humanists both begin at the same place. Each recognizes the ubiquity of the feeling of compassion which is an emotion experienced by all but the most depraved humans in the presence of another person’s suffering. Thus, compassion is an affective state, feeling something of another’s suffering, suffering along with another, and making some of another’s suffering our own. Compassion differs from mercy, which inclines to kindness where severity might be deserved, and from pity, which means feeling sorry for another. Neither mercy nor pity entails the intimate sharing of pain and suffering encompassed by compassion.

Although both feel compassion, Christians and secular humanists part company when it comes to assessing its moral status, the weight it should carry in justification, and whether it is a virtue per se. For the Christian, the sentiment of compassion may be laudable, but it is not self-justifying. It needs to be under the control of reason if it is to be a virtue and not degenerate into vice. For the secularist, the sentiment, itself, is a warrant for action, and a virtue per se to which reason can add little.

The Secular Religion of Compassion

The modern secular meaning of compassion arose with the sentimentalist philosophers of the Eighteenth Century who postulated a moral sense that made humans compassionate. Rousseau (1712-1778), for example, thought this natural sentiment was a better guide to virtue than Christian teaching. David Hume (1711-1776) held that reason should be a slave to the passions and is, of itself, incapable of motivating moral acts. They, and others, offer in place of Christianity, a substitute natural religion in which original sin is abolished, agreeable and useful sentiments become virtues, and the source of all meaning for suffering is demolished.

In this natural religion, the feeling of compassion is, itself, a virtue without the need for guidance by reason. In that religion, suffering becomes the greatest of evils and its alleviation the greatest human good. This natural religion is the religion of today’s conscientious secular humanist. It exalts the sentiment of compassion to a self-justifying principle. As long as a thing is done out of genuine compassion, as long as it “feels good,” it is morally good and, even if taken to an extreme, morally requisite. On this view, much of contemporary moral life consists in the relief of suffering, which is, in any case, meaningless according to the canons of natural religion.

For the Catholic, compassion is a supernatural virtue which is a gift from Christ, the only life worth living. For the secularist, compassion is a natural virtue that made humans compassionate. The Pope’s words are filled with the sentiment of compassion which is an emotion experienced by all but the most depraved humans in the presence of another person’s suffering. Thus, compassion is an affective state, feeling something of another’s suffering, suffering along with another, and making some of another’s suffering our own. Compassion differs from mercy, which inclines to kindness where severity might be deserved, and from pity, which means feeling sorry for another. Neither mercy nor pity entails the intimate sharing of pain and suffering encompassed by compassion.

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Compassion is torn, therefore, from its roots in the Christian tradition with two results: (1) outside the Christian ethic the only life worth living is a life without suffering, and (2) suffering expands to include every untoward event in life since someone “suffers” from every perceived deprivation in the quality of the life he or she lives.

In terms of natural religion, to be compassionate is to eliminate suffering by whatever means and in whatever sense suffering is interpreted. This has come to entail killing or assisting in the suicide of the chronically ill or comatose adult who does not die easily enough, killing or failing to provide sustenance to the badly handicapped infant whose prospects for a quality life are dim, aborting the inconvenient pregnancy, artificially insinuating the infertile woman, “assisting” in the death of severely depressed persons whose life has lost its satisfactions, or hastening death for those “suffering” patients too obtunded mentally to be able to consent to their own demise.

It is undeniable that all of these persons suffer in one way or another. They elicit our compassion. But compassion torn from its roots in the Christian tradition leads to the Culture of Death. Flannery O’Connor, the Catholic novelist, said that the logical outcome of tenderness separated from its source in Christ is terror. Compassion as an emotion demands to be served, to have its source removed—the suffering of the observer—as much as the suffering of the patient.

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Compassion as a Christian Virtue

When compassion becomes a habitual disposition, a consistent willingness to share in, and to relieve, another's suffering, it becomes a character trait. This character trait becomes a virtue when it inclines a person to make good moral choices among the means used to relieve suffering. To make choices, the sentiment of compassion must be ordered by reason to the good for humans. When it is ordered to the natural good of human life, e.g., human fulfillment, it is a natural virtue. When it is ordered to the supernatural ends of human life, then it is infused by charity and becomes a Christian virtue.

For the Christian, compassion per se, simply as an emotion, is neither a virtue nor a vice. It is not a self-justifying principle. It is the way we choose to act with reference to the emotion that makes it a virtue or a vice (cf. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1105b 25). Christian compassion reunites the human sentiment of compassion with its source in Christ in his Incarnation. As a virtue, Christian compassion disposes us to do all we can to relieve the natural course of suffering, but only in a way that also helps the sufferer to attain the ultimate good for which humans were created—union with God. To be sure, Christian compassion calls upon us to relieve pain, but also to recognize that suffering comprises more than pain. It calls upon us to discern the many spiritual causes of human suffering—alienation from healthy people; anger with God; feelings of guilt for being a burden to others; shame at one's physical appearance; weakness; and the anguish of avoidance and rejection by the world of the healthy. Christian compassion recognizes the spiritual crisis at the source of the ethical issues surrounding human life. It cannot respond by elimination of the sufferer. To do so would violate the sanctity of life and the sovereignty of God. Rather, Christian compassion relieves suffering as zealously as does the secular humanist but more effectively within the ethical constraints of natural and divine law. As the new *Catechism* states, "[C]harity demands beneficence" (no. 1829)—a healing, not a person-eradicating, beneficence.

Christian compassion recognizes charity as the well-spring without which the emotion of compassion can so easily justify the remedy of death and oblivion for any indisposition we take to be suffering. Charitable compassion gives us insight: it enables us to see Christ in our suffering neighbor. Without this insight, we experience the emotion but cannot direct it to healing rather than extinguishing the sufferer along with the suffering. Without charity, compassion ceases to be a virtue and becomes a vice that blinds us to the true needs of the suffering person.

The fact that a neighbor suffers is his claim to our compassion—not just the feeling, but the virtue. This insight helps us to avoid the hubris of compassion to keep it from becoming a self-aggrandizing experience, a way to assuage guilt or to relieve ourselves of the presence of a suffering person whose proximity causes us anguish. To kill the sufferer is to interrupt his or her way of the cross, his or her journey to salvation. It is to frustrate that final abandonment of body and spirit into the will of the Creator.

Christian compassion helps us to see that humans do not lose their dignity because of pain, physical incapacity, helplessness, or disfigurement. When people speak of the loss of dignity of the dying person, they are really talking about their own reaction to the appearance of the sick person. A human being possesses dignity always as a creature of God—that dignity can never be lost. A human death is always the death of a person with dignity.

Compassion for suffering is an emotion felt by all decent human beings. In all conscientious persons, it motivates the desire to alleviate suffering. In this, Catholic Christians and secular humanists can agree. But the way this desire is expressed in beneficent action results from moral choice. With each choice, the feeling of compassion becomes the subject of reason and of revelation. Without these, compassion can become an instrument of death. The only answer to suffering lies in the Gospel of Life. As Pope John Paul II tells us, this is the only antidote to the nihilism, self-delusion, and despair of a society in which oblivion and death are the panaceas for human ills.

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