



An Ethic of Compassion in a World of Technique

Roy Martinez

Volume 54, numéro 1, février 1998

Éthique et corps souffrant

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/401135ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/401135ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Faculté de philosophie, Université Laval

ISSN

0023-9054 (imprimé)

1703-8804 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Martinez, R. (1998). An Ethic of Compassion in a World of Technique. *Laval théologique et philosophique*, 54(1), 83–90. <https://doi.org/10.7202/401135ar>

AN ETHIC OF COMPASSION IN A WORLD OF TECHNIQUE*

Roy Martinez

Department of Philosophy
Spelman College, Atlanta

RÉSUMÉ : *La compassion — la reconnaissance sympathisante de la détresse d'autrui jointe au désir de la soulager — devrait recevoir un traitement thématique plus sérieux au sein du discours moral contemporain. Nous tentons de montrer ici qu'en vertu de son souci de préservation de la dignité humaine, elle mérite d'être considérée comme l'acte éthique par excellence. Ce qui fait de la compassion l'essence de notre être humain.*

ABSTRACT : *Compassion — the sympathetic recognition of "other's distress together with a desire to alleviate it" — deserves more serious thematic treatment in contemporary moral discourse. We attempt to show here that in virtue of its concern for the preservation of human dignity, it qualifies as the primary ethical act. This makes compassion the essence of our human being.*

The distinctive feature or defining characteristic of an ethical act is "to consider its effect on persons."¹ If this is indeed the case, then *compassion* — the sympathetic recognition "of others' distress together with a desire to alleviate it" — deserves more serious thematic treatment in contemporary moral discourse.² In what follows, I shall try to show that compassion, in virtue of its concern for the preservation of human dignity, qualifies it as the primary ethical act. This makes compassion the essence of our human being. For compassion is reason with a human face. Compassion, in other words, is sympathetic rationality.

My inspiration for this project derives from the modern and postmodern periods : from Descartes on indifference (and generosity), Kant on *Schadenfreude*, and Hume on malice ; and Foucault and Lyotard on torture and terror respectively. In an age such as ours, where routine violence threatens to cover up the sanctity of life, these five forms of evil have succeeded in insinuating themselves into our scheme of concepts, settling there with the snugness of familiarity, and operating insidiously in the ordinary course of life. By way of strategy, I'll proceed by highlighting these evils

* For their helpful comments, and for offering encouragement and inspiration during the preparation of this study, I am grateful to my students in Honors Philosophy Seminar (Spring, 1995).

1. Richard M. FOX, Joseph P. DEMARCO, *Moral Reasoning : A Philosophic Approach to Applied Ethics*, Orlando, FL, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1990, p. 5.
2. Webster's Collegiate Dictionary.

with the intention that in doing so, the countervailing urgency of compassion will be more acutely felt.

Compassion, we say, recognizes the other's distress and in the same breath is moved by the desire to alleviate it. It is common knowledge, however, that one can recognize another's misfortune but remain indifferent to it, or can, as in the case of *Schadenfreude*, obtain enjoyment from it. With respect to indifference, as Descartes observes, "it is always open to us to hold back from pursuing a clearly known good, or from admitting a clearly perceived truth, provided we consider it a good thing to demonstrate the freedom of our will by so doing."³ We need to question this "holding back," this *refusal* (for that is how the freedom of the will is being exercised here). For implied in Descartes's remark is that indifference does not mean an absence of feeling or a lack of reaction. Rather, indifference is voluntary: it is "the state of the will when it is not impelled one way rather than another by any perception of truth or goodness."⁴ Although the aspect of indifference to which Descartes refers is primarily concerned with the freedom of the will as a topic of dispute with his contemporaries, "indifference" in this regard pertains to our discussion precisely because it involves the exercise of freedom. Hence, while by this formal characterization Descartes implies that although in the state of indifference the will is not moved by any external force or pressure — religious, moral, psychological, or whatever — it nonetheless deliberates and acts. In the specific context of our discussion, however, the will, when its application extends to the social order, directly affects others in an adverse fashion. In other words, in choosing to ignore the other, indifference aggravates her affliction. Let us explain.

If we agree with Kant that "every man has a rightful claim of respect from his fellow men, and he is also bound to show respect to every other man in return," then it can be shown how *contempt* is inscribed in the central nerve of indifference. Respect is the acknowledgment of the dignity of another human being as such, where dignity means "a worth which has no price."⁵ For this reason, indifference can be considered "the most effective strategy possible for denying a disliked or out-of-favor opponent any role in your surreality, not even giving him or her the recognition of contempt" (Solomon). But let us be more precise. *Indifference becomes contempt when there is mutual recognition that the intention of the one is to convey an impression of insignificance, nay, of being nothing, in the other.* In other words, the content of the message is that the person is "too insignificant to be hated, even too insignificant to be despised or treated as subhuman or human; rather, nothing at all." Hence, when we turn our backs on those in misery, those who expect attention, assistance, or relief from us, we are in fact telling them that they do not deserve our sympathy because they have no worth. And judging something to have no worth, Kant says, *is*

3. René DESCARTES, *Philosophical Letters*, translated and edited by Anthony Kenny, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1981, p. 160.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 169.

5. Immanuel KANT, *Ethical Philosophy*, translated by James W. Ellington, Indianapolis, Hackett Publishing Company, 1983, p. 127.

contempt.⁶ That is why a person who abets and perpetrates such evils almost always arouses our indignation. For “when we observe a person in misfortunes, we are affected with pity and love ; but the author of that misfortune becomes the object of our strongest hatred, and is the more detested in proportion to the degree of our compassion.”⁷

Little wonder that Hume considered the passions of respect and contempt as contrary to each other.⁸ After all, is not the intention of contempt the reduction of the other’s being to nothingness ? But human dignity defies perversion or destruction. Every project undertaken to deprive others of their human dignity merely reflects the agent’s own misguided disrespect for the human in herself. And in so acting, she renders herself unworthy of the respect claimed by the human way of being. It is in this sense that we should understand Descartes when he asserts that “(e)very man is...bound to do what he can to procure the good of others, and a man who is of no use to anyone else is strictly worthless.”⁹ This worthlessness is due in large measure to the fact that a person is maximally herself (and resembles God) when she exercises her free will in accordance with the evidence provided by reason. Such a reasonable and salutary use of free will translates into self-esteem and is accordingly termed “generosity.” More, whoever employs freedom in this way cannot but recognize it in others. Thus, in Descartes, generosity, as we shall see, is contrasted with contempt.

In the Cartesian scheme of things, “nothing lies entirely within our power except our thoughts,” and they are in our power because of their total dependence on our free will. And as the Fourth Meditation teaches, it is free will that singularly approximates us to God. It follows from this that our dignity as human beings is measured by the manner in which we treat this divine resemblance. That is why Gilson explains that “the esteem we have for ourselves, insofar as we are considering ourselves as making good use of this supreme control given to us over our volitions, is the virtue of generosity.”¹⁰ And true generosity, Descartes asserts, enables a person to esteem herself as highly as is legitimately possible.¹¹ Indeed, in *The Passions of the Soul*, Descartes observes that generosity consists of two factors which qualify it as “the key to all the other virtues and a general remedy for every disorder of the passions” (Art. 161) : (1) the person is fully aware that her freedom is her foremost possession, and (2) she feels intrinsically a “firm and constant resolution to use it well” (Art. 153). If our most valuable asset as human beings is our personal “freedom” — that inestimable quality which we share with God — then we are only a quick illative

6. KANT, *Ethical Philosophy*, p. 127.

7. David HUME, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, edited by L.A. Selby-Bigge, Oxford, The Clarendon Press, 1967, p. 389.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 393.

9. René DESCARTES, “Discourse on Method,” in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vol. I, translated by John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch, Cambridge/New York, Cambridge University Press, 1985, p. 145.

10. Étienne GILSON, *René Descartes. Discours de la méthode. Texte et commentaire*, Third edition, Paris, J. Vrin, 1962, p. 248, quoted in René DESCARTES, *The Passions of the Soul*, translated by Stephen H. Voss, Indianapolis, Hackett Publishing Company, 1989, p. 97, n. 70.

11. Descartes, *The Passions*, Art. 153, p. 104.

away from discerning the unreasonableness of not ascribing the same thing to other humans.¹² For the two components of generosity mentioned above are autonomously generated by the soul itself; “they do not depend on someone else” (Art. 154). And since this is the case, it is practically impossible for someone who is motivated by generosity to hold others in contempt. The reason for this is that when others do wrong, the generous person is “more inclined to excuse than to blame them and to regard such wrong-doing as due rather to lack of knowledge than to lack of a virtuous will” (Art. 154). Here, the generous person, ever mindful of the weakness of human nature, also practices humility, for which reason, as was just mentioned, she cannot hold others in contempt.

The generosity we see in Descartes is lacking in Sartre. “I can choose myself as looking at the Other’s look and can build my subjectivity upon the collapse of the subjectivity of the Other.”¹³ In plain language, I see the desperate plea in the eyes of my fellow-sufferer, but instead of offering a sympathetic response, I coyly reject it as coming from one who is not worthy of my concern. That is how we should construe the phrase, “the collapse of the subjectivity of the Other.” In refusing to get involved, I cast a blind eye on the other as a *sufferer*, and see her plaintive gesture, nay, her very self, as a “form which pass(es) by in the streets.” I am fully aware, however, not only of her suffering, but also of her appeal for relief. Yet, “(t)his comprehension is simply what I myself determine to hide from myself.” By thus attempting to extricate myself from those who need my sympathy, “I practice then a sort of factual solipsism” because “I act as if I were alone in the world.”¹⁴ The problem, however, is that I am *not* alone in the world. So, by encapsulating myself in this frozen isolation — dismembered and degenerate — I create the illusion of being totally free, when in fact I merely prove myself to be the victim of the kind of self-will represented in Dostoevsky’s world by Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment* and Verhovensky in *The Possessed*.

Now, as indifference contributes to the misery of the unfortunate other by its contempt and withholding of succor, *Schadenfreude* intensifies the pain by the very enjoyment of it. If we provisionally translate *Schadenfreude* by the term “malice,” then “(m)alice,” writes Hume, “gives us a joy in the sufferings and miseries of others, without any offence or injury on their part.”¹⁵ Perhaps because *Schadenfreude* is unprovoked, Kant refers to it as a “viciousness which is of the devil.” And he goes on to say that this vice is devilish because it implies “a direct inclination to evil.”¹⁶

At this juncture, a distinction between *Schadenfreude* and “malice” is warranted. For the meanings of these terms can become blurred quite easily since they both em-

12. I borrow the phrase “we are only a quick illative away” from Richard A. MCCORMICK, s.j., *Notes on Moral Theology: 1965-1980*, Lanham, MD, University Press of America, 1981, p. 288.

13. Jean-Paul SARTRE, *Being and Nothingness*, translated by Hazel Barnes, New York, Washington Square Press, 1966, p. 465.

14. *Ibid.*

15. HUME, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, p. 372.

16. Immanuel KANT, *Lectures on Ethics*, translated by Louis Infield, Indianapolis, Hackett Publishing Company, 1963, p. 219.

phasize the unprovoked aspect of this evil. In malice, a person chances upon another in distress, and instead of offering to help, merely takes pleasure in the situation. The vice here consists in the *refusal* to intervene sympathetically. This act of refusal assimilates malice to indifference. *Schadenfreude*, on the other hand, not only discovers someone in distress, but actively participates in its perpetuation. Here, the pleasure intensifies in proportion to the duration of the misfortune. The evil consists in the *determination* to subject another to unnecessary pain in order to enjoy it. *Schadenfreude* also has the peculiar trait that besides rejoicing in the suffering of others, it outrageously *exhibits* this delight to the victim. "*Schadenfreude*" *thrives on the mutual recognition that the pain of the one coincides with the pleasure of the other. As such, it is an indulgence in exuberant contempt.*

So far as my knowledge goes, the most notorious example of this genre of malice transpired on Golgotha when Jesus of Nazareth was crucified. The crowd's vitriolic remarks in the guise of teasing, taunting, jesting, jeering, and mocking — especially when he was offered rancid wine instead of water to quench his thirst — were accompanied by an ostensible glee which Jesus could not have failed to discern. And when finally Jesus died, the centurion who stood near him came to the tremendous realization that the object of all this wicked behavior was no other than God Himself. Of course, from a purely secular standpoint it can be suggested that Jesus, by challenging the status quo and attempting to subvert sacredly-held views, provoked his own condemnation. And since this is the case, then the consequence of finding him guilty was punishment by the law. Hence, we ought not to characterize the situation as an instance of *Schadenfreude*, but rather as an act of retribution. Granted ! The case is in our favor, however, to suppose that in the gathering that showed up to witness the public execution, there were those who, without having been adversely affected by Jesus' daily transactions, nevertheless rejoiced in his suffering. Finally, it is even worth speculating whether the soldier would have shown some compassion had his realization occurred earlier. In consequence of the preceding, it should be clear that the term "malice" has a more extensive connotation than *Schadenfreude*. For whereas *Schadenfreude* is *ipso facto* malice, not every act of malice is an instance of *Schadenfreude*.

But suppose someone were offended by another. Is it not natural, and even right, to aim at that person's harm in order to take pleasure in her misfortune ? Would not the injured party be entitled to some form of redress ? Shouldn't she avenge the wrong she has suffered ? That would be *revenge*. Like *Schadenfreude*, revenge obtains enjoyment from the suffering of others, but whereas *Schadenfreude* is unprovoked, revenge aims to redirect misery to its efficient cause. Revenge is driven by a passionate desire to harm another person for the sole reason that one has been injured by that person in the first place. Unlike retribution, which is animated by a sense of justice or a principle of moral balance, revenge is motivated by a malicious will to engender suffering in another. Thus, revenge should be distinguished from the idea of *lex talionis*, whose aim is "to put a lid on the extravagance of passion by stipulating

that for any given harm no greater may be inflicted in return.”¹⁷ Both revenge and retribution seek punishment. But are they morally justifiable acts? “No one,” writes Kant, “has the authorization to inflict punishment and avenge a wrong suffered from men except him who is also the Supreme Moral Lawgiver. And this one alone (namely, God) can say ‘Vengeance is mine; I will repay’.”¹⁸ Yet, punishments are regularly and systematically meted out self-righteously by individuals and legally by the State apparatus. And with such cruelty! Listen to Montaigne: “I could hardly be convinced, until I saw it, that there were souls so monstrous that they would commit murder for the mere pleasure of it; hack and cut off other men’s limbs; sharpen their wits to invent unaccustomed torments and new forms of death, without enmity, without profit, and for the sole purpose of enjoying the pleasing spectacle of the pitiful gestures and movements, the lamentable groans and cries, of a man dying in anguish.”¹⁹

Or, consider torture as a technique of pain and as a form of punishment. “To be torture,” Foucault writes, “punishment [...] must produce a certain degree of pain, which may be measured exactly, or at least calculated, compared and hierarchized; death is a torture in so far as it is not simply a withdrawal of the right to live, but is the occasion and the culmination of a calculated gradation of pain: from decapitation (which reduces all pain to a single gesture, performed in a single moment — the zero degree of torture), through hanging, the stake and the wheel (all of which prolong agony, to quartering, which carries pain almost to infinity; death-torture is the art of maintaining life in pain [...] by achieving before life ceases ‘the most exquisite agonies’.”²⁰

But back to malice *per se*. It is noteworthy that malice, in sanctioning unnecessary suffering, is itself unnecessary. This realization induced Artaxerxes, as Montaigne reports, to soften the “harshness of the ancient laws of Persia by ordaining that the lords who had failed in their charge, instead of being whipped, as was the custom, should be stripped, and their clothes whipped in their place; and that whereas they used to tear out their hair, they should only take away their high headgear.”²¹ The suggestion here is that whatever the level of one’s frustration, and whatever its source, it is not necessary to take it out on others. Inanimate objects can serve the same therapeutic purpose. Likewise, even those individuals whose occupation was the manufacture of death — those legally involved in carrying out capital punishment — seemed to have felt an inkling of sensitivity to the suffering of condemned criminals. The history of the techniques of putting them to death shows an ever-increasing concern with minimizing the duration and intensity of pain. For example, in 1760 a

17. Gregory VLASTOS, *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher*, Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 1991, p. 182.

18. KANT, *Ethical Philosophy*, p. 125.

19. Michel DE MONTAIGNE, *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, translated by Donald M. Frame, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1971, p. 315.

20. Michel FOUCAULT, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, translated by Alan Sheridan, New York, Vintage Books, 1979, p. 33.

21. MONTAIGNE, *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, p. 315.

hanging machine that was tried in England "made use of a support, which opened under the feet of the condemned man, thus avoiding slow deaths."²² Then, about thirty years later, the guillotine was introduced in France as a perfect vehicle to reduce death to a "visible, but instantaneous event." For the cardinal virtue of the guillotine consisted in the fact that it "takes life almost without touching the body [...]. It is intended to apply the law not so much to a real body capable of feeling pain as to a juridical subject, the possessor, among other rights, of the right to exist."²³

Even more, "(t)oday a doctor must watch over those condemned to death, right up to the last moment — thus juxtaposing himself as the agent of welfare, as the alleviator of pain, with the official whose task it is to end life...When the moment of execution approaches, the patients are injected with tranquilizers." Foucault snidely refers to this practice as "A utopia of judicial reticence : take away life, but prevent the patient from feeling it ; deprive the prisoner of all rights, but do not inflict pain ; impose penalties free of all pain."²⁴ Foucault's observations disclose that even power seems to be paradoxically endowed with the wherewithal, with enough acumen, to temper its blind pursuit of self-aggrandizement in order to take stock of, and repair, *der Schaden, le mal*, the damage, indeed, the havoc, that it wreaks. Or, is it rather that in this context, power is merely intimidated by the demonic predilection with which it feels itself infused ? Has power lost its grip on itself, allowing its intrepid soul to cower and be appalled by its nefarious deeds ? Is this a moment when power buckles under the strain of its imperial ambition to acquire and maintain illimitable domination ? In accordance with the tenor of our theme, we prefer to be generous and believe that the men who were legally in charge of the ritual of dying, of the practice of extracting the final breath of life from the condemned, were simply becoming sensitized to the dignity that defines the human mode of being. It is in our interest to believe that they were moved by compassion.

For if capital punishment is administered in the name of the law, and the law is not ethically inspired, then we are at a loss to dissociate such an act from simple unadulterated revenge. It is more plausible to think that the effort to lessen the suffering of those who have done wrong or committed a crime, of whatever magnitude, is governed by the principle that "evil is expiated in the ineluctable consequences that it carries with it,"²⁵ which, in turn, obviates the need to aggravate the woe. This would then be consonant with our thesis that an act, to be qualified as ethical, *must* consider its effects on people, the aim being to prevent injuring them, or if they are already in distress, to alleviate their misfortune.

Contrary to the received view, to be *human* is not determined by the sheer rational distinction of the species, but rather by its ability to share the suffering of others, and its willingness to relieve them of it. Take "Auschwitz." Why do we insist

22. FOUCAULT, *Discipline and Punish*, p. 12.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 13.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 11.

25. Nicholas BERDYAEV, *Dostoevsky*, translated by Donald Attwater, Cleveland, The World Publishing Company/Meridian Books, 1957, p. 93.

that there is *no reason* for Auschwitz, that Auschwitz is too reprehensible to be associated with reason? Auschwitz is clearly and distinctly conceived, meticulously calculated and planned, systematically executed and mellifluously justified by its agents. It does not suffice to dismiss Auschwitz as the product of a reason gone haywire, like Dostoevsky's Raskolnikov who, after deciding to kill the old pawnbroker woman because she would be better off dead than alive "learns [...] that his crime has been the product of a *deranged rationality*."²⁶

Reason, when devoid of compassion, and used teleologically to carry out a specific design — never suffers deprivation, never falls short of clarity of vision and steadfastness of purpose, never loses sight or track of the consecution of logical sequence or inference that constitutes it as cognition. Reason is sure of itself and *knows* what it does. Auschwitz, to our horror, knows quite well what it does. In plain idiom, Auschwitz spurns solidarity with the human good because Auschwitz is evil *per se*. The operative factor in Auschwitz is terror: the fear of death. "Nazism," writes Lyotard, "requires nothing from what is not 'Aryan,' except for the cessation of its appearing to exist. On the other hand, it requires from every 'Aryan' (its sole addressee) to meet his or her obligation to the purity of his or her racial origin, in particular by suppressing all that is not 'Aryan'." Notice that the *human* good is held in contempt. "If there is terror in Nazism," Lyotard continues, "it is exerted internally among the 'pure,' who are always suspected of not being pure enough. They cleanse themselves of suspicion by excepting themselves from all impurity through oaths, denunciations, pogroms, or final solutions."²⁷ This myth of a social bond based on "excising" a pure race from the rest of humankind is regulated by terror, *i.e.*, by constantly threatening those who are directly addressed into compliance, and by promising destruction to those who are excluded. "The question of the social bond, when it is put in political terms, has always been raised in the form of a possible interruption of the social bond, which is simply called 'death' in all of its forms: imprisonment, unemployment, repression, hunger, anything you want. Those are all deaths."

The countermeasure to these "deaths" is, on our accounting, "compassion," which treats persons as always worthy of concern, and is quick to restore a sense of self-respect in those who are despised and condemned. Compassion recognizes the affliction of the needy, and attempts to alleviate it. For *compassion is suffering yearning for its own expiration*.

26. William BARRETT, *The Truants: Adventures Among the Intellectuals*, Garden City, NY, Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1983, p. 174.

27. Jean-François LYOTARD, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, translated by Georges Van Den Abbeele, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1988, p. 103.