Liberalism and the Problem of Compassion in Rousseau, Smith, and Tocqueville

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ABSTRACT

LIBERALISM AND THE PROBLEM OF COMPASSION IN ROUSSEAU, SMITH, AND TOCQUEVILLE

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Liberal democracy has historically owed its attractiveness to the promise of a more compassionate society structured around pluralistic and tolerant principles. Yet recent events in western democracies seem to indicate a lack of compassionate social bonds. Why has a politics of compassion failed to materialize and what must be done to make good on the original promise of liberal democracy? To answer these questions, I provide a historically and theoretically grounded account of compassion as a principle of liberalism, with special attention to the political thought of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Adam Smith, and Alexis de Tocqueville. In particular, I seek to understand why these thinkers, remarkable for their emphasis on other-directed sentiments, expressed uncertainty regarding the efficacy of compassion. I argue that the fundamental commitments of liberalism, as articulated in modern political philosophy, necessarily bring compassion to the forefront of our moral consciousness, but in a way that is insufficient to offset the more dissociative tendencies of liberal democracy. In order for compassion to foster strong, equitable, and charitable bonds in our political life, it must be augmented with external moral resources that may be hard to come by in liberal modernity. The thinkers examined here attempted to provide such resources with varying degrees of success, providing us with a useful template as we attempt to navigate the crisis of liberalism in the early twenty-first century.
LIBERALISM AND THE PROBLEM OF COMPASSION IN ROUSSEAU, SMITH, AND TOCQUEVILLE

BY

LEWIS HOSS
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION: COMPASSION AND POLITICAL LIFE

Compassion enjoys a privileged place in American political society and, indeed, in the broader political culture of liberal democracy. To any casual observer of public or private discourse it is readily apparent that compassion is conceived of generally as something needed and valued in our political life.¹ This shared sensibility is evidenced in the remarkable fact that politicians who hold radically different principles are keen to insist that they are on the side of compassion.² The rhetorical goal on both sides of the political aisle is to convince everyone else that our policies contribute something toward compassion or have something of compassion in them. The underlying assumption behind this rhetoric is that the goodness of our society is intelligible in terms of compassion. To the extent that our society manifests compassion, it is deserving of our esteem. To the extent that our society is uncompassionate, we citizens, and especially citizens of the ruling class, have a duty to recognize and remedy that fact, and thus render our society more estimable.


² For a clear example of this, witness the 2017 Senate nomination hearing for Tom Price, who was appointed by President Donald Trump to the Cabinet-level position of Secretary of Health and Human Services. At one point the hearing descended into a brief debate between Bernie Sanders and Rand Paul, senators with fundamentally divergent principles, over whether America is a compassionate society; both senators paid homage to the value of compassion but insisted that their own ideological leanings were more hospitable to the cultivation of compassion. United States Congress, Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions, Nomination of Tom Price to Serve as Secretary of Health and Human Services, Hearings, January 18, 2017. 115th Congress, 1st Session (Washington: U.S. Government Publishing Office, 2018), 12.
Among a people that is increasingly skeptical about any claims regarding what is truly “good,” “just,” or “right,” compassion has ascended to the rank of a cardinal virtue. The word itself seems instantly to arouse warm feelings while bringing to mind such paragons of selflessness and altruism as Jesus or Mother Teresa. It functions as a label of approbation attached to those we might once have denominated “righteous.” Little wonder then that compassion frequently enters our public discourse as a criterion for what is politically right or to use a loaded phrase, “politically correct.” The social psychologist Jonathan Haidt has found that the sentiment of compassion not only functions as one of five psychological subsystems that comprise the “moral foundations” of political opinion, but it is generally the most salient one other than fairness.³ While slightly more prominent among left-leaning progressives, Haidt’s research indicates that compassion is more evenly distributed among individuals across the ideological spectrum than any of the other four moral foundations he identifies. In other words, partisan animosity does not appear to stem from any significant disagreement over the fundamental value of compassion.⁴

In the context of contemporary electoral politics, compassion is held to be a virtue belonging especially to the politician or political ruler. One who publicly demonstrates a capacity to apprehend, at a deeply emotional level, the peculiar situation, needs, trials, and tribulations of a particular constituency is judged as better qualified to rule than one who is deficient in this regard. “Someone I can have a beer with” functions as a political idiom signifying the voter’s

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judgment of this capacity for fellow-feeling on the part of the politician. Commonplace phrases like “down to earth” or “out of touch” may be taken to reflect favorable or unfavorable judgments as to whether an elected official can truly have compassion for those he seeks to represent. As one would expect, political scientists have found that American voters generally treat compassion as a highly desirable character trait in their elected officials, a fact that is reflected in a mass of empirical evidence accumulated since the 1970s. To take just one example from the relevant polling data, voters, when evaluating candidates, have been found to lend more weight to their perceptions of “compassion” than to those of “intelligence,” “integrity,” or “leadership.” The temporal trends indicate that the expressed partiality of American voters toward compassion remains remarkably steady amidst the general ebb and flow of public opinion and shifting preferences. Even as citizens grow more cynical toward the rulers they have elected, they continue to profess a strong attachment to the qualities they deem lacking in the halls of government.

Given the value that is generally attached to compassion, contemporary politics often manifests itself as an ongoing struggle between politicians who compete for a popular reputation for compassion, in relation to citizens who themselves compete to become the objects of

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compassion. In recent years it has proved much easier to mobilize a mass public by appealing to a shared sense of compassion for some unfortunate persons or groups than by appealing to a shared sense of pride or joy for some fortunate ones. Most politicians seem to understand this and to adjust their political rhetoric accordingly. Witness Bill Clinton’s trademark utterance “I feel your pain,” or Barack Obama’s repeated claim that “the essential deficit that exists in this country” is “an empathy deficit.” Donald Trump, accepting his primary nomination at the 2016 Republican National Convention, framed his intention to “Make America Great Again” in terms of compassion: “I have visited the laid-off factory workers, and the communities crushed by our horrible and unfair trade deals. These are the forgotten men and women of our country. People who work hard but no longer have a voice. I AM YOUR VOICE… We are going to be considerate and compassionate to everyone. But my greatest compassion will be for our own struggling citizens.” Ironically for Trump, in the aftermath of his victory compassion frequently served as a preferred rallying cry among those in the political opposition.

It is not only in the ideational realm of public opinion and political rhetoric that we can observe the centrality of compassion in our political life. Political leaders do not rest content to present themselves as compassionate, but so also their public policies, programs, agendas, and administrations. As one eminent theorist of compassion has observed, the very notion of the modern welfare state represents nothing less than the endeavor to institutionalize the sentiment

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8 Barack Obama, “Ebenezer Baptist Church Address,” Atlanta, GA: January 20, 2008. The relationship between compassion and empathy is described below.


of compassion.\textsuperscript{11} Whether or not it makes sense to ascribe a personal sentiment to the impersonal bureaucratic apparatus of the state, such is the common way of speaking about compassion at least since the time of Lyndon B. Johnson’s Great Society. The lofty promise of that policy agenda, in Johnson’s own words, was the realization of “a compassionate government,” for “through compassion for the plight of one individual, government fulfills its purpose as the servant of all the people.”\textsuperscript{12} If the legacy of the Great Society was to encourage a tendency to associate compassion with the policies of the American left, that tendency was shaken by the rise of “compassionate conservatism” near the end of the twentieth century. Upon taking office, George W. Bush described the central aim of his domestic policy agenda as “lead[ing] the federal government to take bold steps to rally America’s armies of compassion,” while stipulating that “the paramount goal must be compassionate results, not compassionate intentions.”\textsuperscript{13}

It may appear benign at first glance, but the ubiquity of compassion in our political discourse and rhetoric, and the desire among citizens to find compassion in their rulers or in the ruling apparatus of the state, points to a perceived lack of compassion in our society. We are led to question whether all of this is mere lip service that masks an underlying dearth of compassion among citizens themselves; whether, that is, we seek in our politics that which is lacking in our civil society. Indeed, if conventional opinion teaches us that compassion is a universally esteemed value, it is nevertheless hard to shake the suspicion that compassion remains quite


elusive in our present condition. Despite our professed reverence for compassion, we increasingly appear to be living in what Charles Taylor has described as a “fragmented society,” where “bonds of sympathy” are weak or nonexistent.\textsuperscript{14} Liberal democracy has historically owed its attractiveness to the promise of a kinder and gentler society in which warm relations arise from pluralistic and tolerant principles. But confidence in the long-term viability of that project has been shaken by recent developments in liberal democracies worldwide that would seem to indicate a general lack of compassion. In the United States, the surge of nativist populism, the rising intensity of partisan polarization, greater incivility, and the regrouping of individuals behind the dividing lines of old and new social cleavages correspond to a more general loss of faith in the principles of liberal democracy.\textsuperscript{15} These developments have led many scholars and commentators to search for a way out of liberalism’s apparent crisis, while others have concluded that the liberal democracy experiment has simply failed.\textsuperscript{16}

I would suggest that what is reflected here is a real tension in the nature of liberal politics that deserves our consideration. Liberalism needs compassion to contribute positively to political life, but it does not furnish the necessary resources for compassion to do so. Compassion is needed because liberalism’s fundamental commitment to securing the private enjoyment of equal


rights and individual liberty encourages or at least enables a selfish indifference to others that is problematic from the perspective of human happiness and social flourishing. If a healthy society is one where individuals are actively concerned for the good of others and of the community, and if enlightened self-interest fails to motivate such concern, we must look to sentiment or affect to pick up the slack. In this regard, compassion, for good reason, seems an especially promising sentiment. But sentimental compassion, left to its own devices, is not sufficient to combat the liberal tendencies toward egocentrism and social fragmentation. Nor is it capable of structuring and guiding political life, for compassion of itself is practically unreliable and morally neutral, while that which structures and guides political life can never be so. Properly speaking, compassion can only function as a reliable moral sentiment within a broader framework of moral opinion or belief that liberal morality does not necessarily establish for us. Beyond considerations of its utility, our attraction to compassion is in part something that we have inherited from the Christian tradition. Yet whereas Christianity was able to make a virtue of compassion by grounding it in a comprehensive system of moral beliefs, secular liberalism has attempted to do so without any metaphysical grounding. Whether we are consciously aware of it or not, by treating compassion as a standalone moral sentiment we are attempting to carry forward the other-directed morality of Christianity while leaving behind the attendant religious baggage. But perhaps somewhere in that baggage was a source of essential nourishment that is necessary for an ethic of compassion to flourish, and perhaps this has something to do with our failure to make our liberal society a compassionate one despite decades, even centuries, worth of effort in this regard. In the end, the problem we are faced with is that a healthy liberal society seemingly demands that compassion play a moral and political role that it is not entirely suited for by nature. If this is the case, as I intend to argue, then to get the most out of compassion in
our political life, we must set aside technical questions of policy and procedure and first grapple with the question of whether and how we might establish an appropriate moral framework in which compassion is made capable of contributing reliably to the good of society.

In pursuing this line of inquiry, we have recourse to the great political thinkers of the past who thought most carefully about compassion’s place in liberal democracy, and we would do well to take our bearings from them. Compassion was not always embraced as a politically significant sentiment; this development came about only in the modern era as a result of the more worrisome tendencies of liberalism. In this study I focus on three modern thinkers in particular—Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Adam Smith, and Alexis de Tocqueville—who devoted considerable attention to the role of compassion in modern political life. My aim in examining their views on this point is twofold. First, I seek to understand why they focused on compassion. Each of these thinkers believed, like many of our contemporaries, that liberal democracy would stand in need of compassion. Accordingly, I attempt to discern what it is about liberalism and the morality that it fosters that makes compassion appear so necessary to those of us living in liberal societies. Second, I seek to understand how they envisioned compassion functioning as a counterpoise to the more pernicious effects of liberalism. Answering this question is especially important insofar as these thinkers thought differently than we are inclined to do about what it would take for compassion to fulfill its needed function. They held that compassion alone is a weak and amoral sentiment, conducive perhaps to the negative aim of tempering excessive displays of selfishness, but quite limited in its ability to bridge the spaces between individuals and thus support a commitment to the common good. The subsequent question they grappled with is whether or not compassion might be transformed into a strong moral sentiment, such that it contributes to the positive aim of fostering deep and meaningful ties of affection among disparate individuals.
across the political community. They saw that this kind of robust compassion did not arise spontaneously in liberal society, and that it could therefore exist only with the helping hand of artifice; yet they also suspected that putting compassion to work at the level of society or polity was more than a technical matter of crafting the right policies or institutional arrangements. Rather, compassion would have to be cultivated from the ground up, beginning with the heart, mind, and character of the individual human being. Crucially, they came to the conclusion that this could only be accomplished if individuals themselves had recourse to a moral horizon extending beyond the confines of liberal morality. The efficacy of compassion, in their estimation, was ultimately dependent on the moral beliefs held by individuals. Accordingly, each of these thinkers employed a moral rhetoric intended to shape the moral outlook of liberal modernity in a fashion more conducive to robust fellow-feeling. While they do not appear to have been entirely successful, or for that matter overly hopeful about their prospects for success, their efforts on this front nevertheless warrant our attention.

A careful study of these thinkers yields important suggestions for how we might navigate through the contemporary discourse surrounding compassion and politics. In the first place, Rousseau, Smith, and Tocqueville help us to grasp with clarity compassion’s status in contemporary political life. More precisely, they help to explain why compassion features so prominently in our public discourse and political rhetoric, attesting to the hold that compassion has over the liberal mind and the need that liberal society has for compassion. Thus, they help us to see that compassion holds a privileged place in our hearts and minds not simply because it is a natural sentiment, or the touchstone for a universal natural morality, but because our liberal regime enhances our affinity toward it. Comprehending why and how compassion emerged out
of the liberal project may provide us with some much-needed perspective as we confront the present.

Second, and related to this last point, engaging with these thinkers on the issue of compassion provides us with the tools to refine our conceptual understanding of compassion, and to correct for certain deficiencies in our common modes of thinking about this sentiment. The lessons to be gleaned from their teaching serve to caution us against demanding more from compassion than its natural limitations will allow for. Those limitations consist primarily in compassion’s narrow reach, which is dictated by its dependence on proximity and intimacy. Rousseau, Smith, and Tocqueville all believed that the strength of compassion wanes as it is extended to encompass those who are distant—spatially distant, historically distant, socially or culturally distant—from ourselves. Thus, if compassion is useful in tempering some isolated, egoistic tendencies, it is of quite limited value in bridging social cleavages and fostering strong social bonds among disparate individuals, bonds that could support a strong commitment to the good of others or the common good. The thinkers examined here encourage us to consider that in order to get the most out of compassion, a prejudice in favor of localism, far being an obstacle, may well be preferable to one in favor of universalism, insofar as the latter may lead us to demand that compassion be internalized and manifested at higher levels of abstraction—the political or institutional level—where general principles modeled on narrow personal sentiments cannot fail to be mutated and distorted in unpredictable ways.

Finally, each of the thinkers examined here argued that compassion’s natural limitations are to some extent exacerbated by the political conditions of liberal modernity. For this reason, they suggest that we are mistaken to treat compassion as a moral resource external to the social and political forces that animate liberal democracy and generate its various ailments. Sentimental
compassion is endogenous to political life, meaning it is influenced and often corrupted by the same causes we would like it to combat. On its own, it is unlikely to furnish us with the raw material for any significant moral reformation in the context of liberal democracy. If compassion is to live up to the demands that we are tempted to place on it, it must first be situated within a moral order that abstracts to some degree from liberal commitments, one that acknowledges the primacy of higher-order goods that transcend self-interest and sentiment alike. Together Rousseau, Smith, and Tocqueville show the distance that would need to be covered in order to accomplish this. Each of them presents a kind of proposal for salvaging compassion by rhetorically situating it within a broader framework of belief intended to transform the sentiment into a virtue. It would seem that those proposals were unsuccessful in the final analysis, but that does not mean that they are without value for us. Insofar as we are concerned about the prospect of a society that is perpetually fractured and atomized, the thinkers examined here challenge us to carry our considerations far beyond compassion or any other sentiment, to encompass the moral condition of our society as manifested in the beliefs that individuals hold about the moral order in which they exist.

From a broader point of view, the question of compassion and its relationship to liberalism, which constitutes the pervasive theme of this study, raises deep questions about the fundamental nature of liberal democracy. At a time when the longevity of liberal democracy is no longer taken for granted, it is all the more important that we examine potential sustaining mechanisms such as compassion with the clarity of perception brought to bear by the great thinkers of the past. I will attempt to provide such an examination in what follows. Before proceeding, however, I must first say more about what compassion is and how it is generally
treated by contemporary scholars as a proper antidote to the characteristic ills of liberal democracy.

Compassion and Contemporary Political Theory

“Compassion” is derived from the Latin *compassio*, or “suffering with,” to signify the sentiment a person feels when moved by the pain, suffering, or misfortune of another. In scholarly literature, it has been defined as “feeling sorrow or concern for the suffering of another person, coupled with the desire to alleviate that suffering.” The experience of compassion is mediated by the imagination, which allows us to identify, grasp, and comprehend the experiences of others in a way that arouses a felt response in ourselves. This broader imaginative capacity of the mind which helps to facilitate compassion is known to us as “sympathy,” or the “sympathetic imagination.” We might say that sympathy is the mental process that enables us to feel the sentiment of compassion by rendering us sensitive and receptive to the subjective thoughts, feelings, and experiences of other people. In the modern era, sympathy took on a more specific meaning as the vicarious sharing in someone else’s emotions, whether positive or negative;

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17 In some contexts, this sentiment is referred to as “pity.” Throughout this study I treat pity and compassion as synonymous, although I make a conscious effort to stick to the latter, a term that is more ubiquitous in our time and does not carry connotations of “piety” as the former once did; on this last point, see chapter 2 below.


19 “Sympathy” is derived from the ancient Greek συμπάθεια (*sympatheia*), which translates literally as “fellow-feeling” or “community of feeling.” Throughout the history of pre-modern philosophical and scientific thought, *sympatheia* was a quasi-mystical concept used to signify a wide variety of mysterious physical relations in which the apparent effects of a cause were manifested at some distance, including the action of magnets, the transmission of contagious diseases, the force of gravity, or the resonance of musical strings. Nevertheless, the word was still used in reference to interpersonal fellow-feeling, or the intimate correspondence or concord of personal affections, as early as Plato. For the evolution of sympathy as an explanatory concept, see Eric Schliesser ed., *Sympathy: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).
placing oneself “in someone else’s shoes” and feeling what they feel or experiencing the world as they experience it. This idea gradually evolved into the contemporary notion of “empathy,” the study of which has become something of a fad in many academic disciplines.\(^{20}\) Unfortunately, a great deal of confusion has been caused by the failure of scholars to maintain clear distinctions between these interrelated phenomena, and it is not uncommon to see compassion, sympathy, and empathy used interchangeably.

While it is often conflated with these similar concepts, compassion is at once narrower and broader than sympathy or empathy properly speaking. It is narrower because its focus is limited to a particular subset of human experiences, namely those that are painful. The object of compassion is another person’s suffering or misfortune, not their joy or accomplishment. It is broader because it implies something more than empathy in the strict sense of “perspective taking,” or pointedly imagining yourself in someone else’s situation and vicariously sharing their feeling or experience. This kind of conscious exercise of empathy may be involved in any particular experience of compassion, but it’s not necessarily a requirement. When I am made aware of a starving person, I do not feel hunger and weakness. I do not literally share their pain, yet I am still capable of being moved by it. I do not necessarily need to close my eyes and think hard about what it would be like if I were in their situation. Through my imagination, I can quickly conceive that what they are experiencing is terribly unpleasant, and this conception might arouse a variety of distinct feelings in me—sadness, distress, anxiety, perhaps even

\(^{20}\) Owing to its popularity, empathy has recently been defined and deployed in such a variety of ways as to be nearly devoid of clear meaning. For accessible introductions to the problematic proliferation of empathy that also insist upon the distance between empathy and compassion, see Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined* (New York: Penguin Books, 2011), 571-578; and Paul Bloom, *Against Empathy: The Case for Rational Compassion* (New York: Harper Collins, 2016), 15-22.
anger—that might ideally culminate in a desire to alleviate their pain or remove the cause of their suffering. This multi-layered experience is the sentiment of compassion.\textsuperscript{21} Properly speaking, compassion is a composite sentiment that progresses through multiple stages; it starts with a general sensitivity or openness to others’ situations that is facilitated by the sympathetic imagination, and it results in a particular, intentional concern or interest in others’ situations. Thus, compassion is an “other-directed” sentiment insofar as it steers our active concern toward another person.

Herein lies the apparent promise of compassion from a social or political perspective. By virtue of its being directed toward others, it establishes affective links between individuals. It takes self-referential feelings and transforms them into other-directed concerns. It draws us out of ourselves and places a part of our interest in the wellbeing of someone else. It bridges the chasm that otherwise separates the private interest of each individual. Best of all, compassion is said to accomplish all of this, at least in principle, without the rigorous external force of moral or legal sanction, for it is a part of human nature, innate and universal. In his theory of human evolution, Charles Darwin posited that compassion was the primeval basis of human morality, a natural impetus to altruistic action that once operated in the complete absence of politics, religion, or law.\textsuperscript{22} Given that we live in a time of widespread cynicism toward these latter institutions, perhaps it is unsurprising that we are drawn more than ever to the apparent promise of compassion.

\textsuperscript{21} Throughout this study it is worth keeping in mind Nietzsche’s astute observation: “All of this, and other, much more subtle things in addition, constitute ‘compassion’: how coarsely does language assault with its one word so polyphonous a being!” \textit{Daybreak} 133.

\textsuperscript{22} Darwin, \textit{The Descent of Man} IV.
In the current crisis of liberalism, many in the social sciences are inclined to call for more compassion as the one thing most needed, suggesting that compassion, regardless of its currency in our discourse and rhetoric, has not in fact been internalized in our moral character.\(^\text{23}\) It is widely believed that compassion, if only it can be cultivated and manifested properly, is uniquely fit to help remedy the most pressing social and political problems in contemporary liberal democracies, which are said to fall generally into one of two categories. On the one hand, many of those problems are conceived as the characteristic side effects of liberal individualism: a crude materialism, a cold and calculating pursuit of narrow self-interest, and a general indifference or apathy toward our fellows and our community, all of which culminate in a crippling state of social atomism in which individuals are unable or unwilling to extend the horizon of their concern beyond the confines of private life. On the other hand, many problems seem to derive not from individualism and the loss of community, but from persistent tribal group dynamics facilitated by the continued existence and even deepening of social cleavages along the lines of race, religion, gender, wealth, or, increasingly, political ideology. Given this common characterization of the disparate sources of our present discontents, it is not hard to see why compassion appears to be a remedy naturally suited to the challenges of our time.

With a view to these challenges, many contemporary scholars have devoted considerable attention to defending and advancing compassion’s claims to a place of primacy in our moral consciousness. Foremost among these is Martha Nussbaum, who has extensively praised

compassion as “the basic social emotion,” the single innate human faculty that functions primarily as “a central bridge between the individual and the community.” Nussbaum’s work is predicated on the belief that compassion can be strong where liberalism is weak, that it can be harnessed to temper the excesses of both individualism and tribalism. She therefore argues that figuring out “how to produce it and how to remove obstacles to it” ought to be our primary political goal. For Nussbaum, political liberalism (in the Rawlsian sense, as contrasted with “comprehensive” or “metaphysical” liberalism) can be realized and sustained if we can actualize a political compassion that goes beyond “personal and community relationships,” such that compassion is internalized in “the political structure of a state that is both democratic and liberal” and subsequently manifested in “compassionate institutions.” Building on Nussbaum’s work, more recent political theorists have continued to articulate liberalism’s need for a “politics of compassion.” Some insist that with the right administrative approach, compassion can be institutionalized to guide public officials toward identifying systemic or institutional causes of

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26 Nussbaum (2001), 401, 403. Unfortunately, Nussbaum does not provide a clear vision for how this might be accomplished. She suggests that public reforms in education and the media might render these institutions more reliable inculcators of citizen compassion; and that legal reforms might better incorporate compassion into our jurisprudence and criminal justice system (426-435; 441-453). What these reforms would entail and how they would take effect remains vague. Such reforms, moreover, presuppose that compassion is already prevalent among political leaders, judges, and lawyers, as Nussbaum herself indicates at times (438, 441).

suffering.\textsuperscript{28} Others argue that compassion is the best moral resource for offsetting the rampant individualism bred by exchange-based market relations,\textsuperscript{29} or for fostering an authentic appreciation for cosmopolitanism and liberal pluralism.\textsuperscript{30} Similarly, compassion has emerged, albeit less centrally, in the communitarian tradition of political theory that seeks to recapture an appreciation for rootedness in community as against the pernicious effects of liberalism’s uprooting of the individual.\textsuperscript{31}

Taken together, these recent treatments of compassion in political theory reveal an ambiguity that is reflected in the fact that a “politics of compassion” seems to mean different things to different people. On the one hand, a politics of compassion might be conceived in terms of a fundamental commitment to improve the material wellbeing of citizens and to overcome human suffering through practical political action directed toward this end. Yet if this is the case, then we have de-personalized compassion and, in a sense, are no longer dealing with compassion properly understood. What passes for “compassion” here is not a personal sentiment felt by an individual and directed toward other discrete individuals, but an abstract and impersonal attitude that reflects frustrated desires to be free from suffering or from the constraints of natural necessity. On the other hand, a politics of compassion might be conceived in terms of a personal sentiment that can be enlisted to foster social bonds between otherwise isolated or antagonistic


\textsuperscript{29} Lola Frost, “Compassion as Risk,” in Ure and Frost (2014), 51-62.


individuals and groups of individuals, to open a channel through which we might come to understand and respect others and thereby cease to perceive them as an “other.”

The first conception is what we might call “social compassion.” It reflects a general posture toward political life that understands the purpose of human life itself in terms of the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain, and the purpose of political society or government as a means for advancing this pursuit. It speaks to the rational project of eliminating suffering, which does not necessarily require the heartfelt sentiment of compassion, as such a project could just as easily be the work of a cold-hearted bureaucrat as of a compassionate saint. The second conception remains within the bounds of “sentimental compassion,” as it involves the actual sentiment of compassion proper, as experienced by individuals for other individuals. While the two conceptions are easily and frequently conflated, they are not the same thing; nor, however, are they are unrelated. Although I focus primarily on sentimental compassion in this study, I also aim to show how both conceptions emerge from Enlightenment liberalism in the modern era. More precisely, I suggest that our way of thinking about sentimental compassion in the present can be understood fully only in light of the more abstract, impersonal, unsentimental version of “compassion” that is really a human quest for mastery over nature and chance, as will become clear in the following chapter and beyond.

What is shared in the recent treatments of compassion in political theory is the belief that liberalism stands in need of compassion, but compassion does not come readily enough; therefore, individuals in their private and public capacities must be awakened and educated to compassion. For many of these scholars, this ultimately turns into a question of internalizing compassion in political institutions and processes, transforming it from a personal sentiment into something like a generalized administrative principle. All things considered, the way in which
compassion is treated by contemporary political theorists lends further support to the conclusion that compassion’s place in modern liberal democracy is uncertain and ambiguous, owing to the tension between our attachment to it and our inability to actualize it. If compassion is generally held in such high esteem, why does it remain so elusive? If so many agree about its desirability, why need so many others argue on its behalf? Is there some error in our assumptions about compassion that makes it difficult for us to realize a politics of compassion? I would suggest that there is. Noticeably absent from these discussions is the consideration of whether and how compassion may ultimately depend on the moral character of individuals, which in turn is shaped by their deepest moral beliefs. The way that we think about compassion betrays an underlying drive to use that sentiment as a substitute for morality, and in this I believe we are mistaken. Rousseau, Smith, and Tocqueville did not fall prey to this error. They understood that compassion must be subservient to morality, not vice-versa, in order to become a salutary and reliable virtue. By examining the arguments they made to support this claim, we can arrive at a better understanding of the paradox of compassion that plagues liberal democracy, and perhaps begin to correct our mistaken way of thinking that helps to perpetuate that paradox.

Beyond its explicit aim of better understanding compassion’s place in our political life, this study offers fruitful contributions to the extant scholarly literature in three additional ways. First and most narrowly speaking, the chapters on Rousseau, Smith, and Tocqueville will be of particular interest to those who specialize in the study of modern political thought. This is especially true in the case of the latter two thinkers, whose thoughts on compassion have not been fully appreciated. While there is a vast scholarly literature focusing on the broader theme of sympathy in Smith, his treatment of compassion as a specific subcategory of sympathy has not received much attention. Similarly, Tocqueville’s treatment of the relationship between
compassion and democracy remains underexplored in the study of his political thought, as does the distinction he makes between sentimental compassion and the virtue of charity. My own efforts to provide novel contributions to the study of these particular thinkers will be made clear in the respective chapters devoted to them.

At a broader level, this study contributes to the growing literature on the role of the passions and emotions in political life. In recent decades the cognitive science revolution has had the effect of bringing emotion to the forefront of the social and political sciences.\(^\text{32}\) This is especially true among political theorists, many of whom have attempted to shift the attention of the field away from rational deliberation and toward the study of emotion and its political implications.\(^\text{33}\) Recent contributions in the history of political thought have focused on sympathy, and my own study augments these by adding compassion to the mix.\(^\text{34}\) The more specific claims advanced here complement the work of two scholars in particular who have had an enormous influence on my own understanding of compassion. First, Ryan Patrick Hanley’s recent study of the idea of love and its reconceptualization during the Enlightenment establishes a useful


framework that supports some of my main conclusions about compassion.\textsuperscript{35} Hanley argues that the modern turn toward other-directed sentiments was fundamentally a turn away from premodern conceptions of love as \textit{eros}, \textit{philia}, or \textit{agape}. Their crucial differences notwithstanding, these premodern conceptions of love were all “founded on a belief that human beings were capable of transcendence,” possessing the ability “to go beyond the limits of the self, and thereby to gain access to a realm that is dedicated to or oriented around certain goods recognizably superior to the goods of basic self-interest.”\textsuperscript{36} The Enlightenment, by contrast, sought “to demonstrate the illegitimacy of transcendence as an ethical category,” and at the same time to retain love in the form of emotions or sentiments.\textsuperscript{37} Suspecting that something essential to human flourishing has been lost in this theoretical reorientation, Hanley calls for a recovery of the older tradition of love and its transcendent aspirations. My findings here point to a similar story that helps to explain the weakness of compassion as a unifying or binding force in our political life. Second, Clifford Orwin’s seminal essay on compassion has served as a standard point of reference for subsequent work on compassion in political theory, and an invaluable source of inspiration and guidance in my own research.\textsuperscript{38} A number of the conclusions that I draw from my study of Rousseau, Smith, and Tocqueville provide further support for suggestions that are offered in that article, namely that modern compassion is best understood in view of its status as a post-religious phenomenon, and that attempts to institutionalize or

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{36} Ibid., 4, 6.
\item \textsuperscript{37} Ibid., 15.
\item \textsuperscript{38} Orwin (1980).
\end{itemize}
politicize compassion may be more problematic than beneficial. In many ways, my inquiry here is an attempt to continue further down the trails that Orwin has blazed.

Finally, this study speaks to larger concerns regarding the nature of liberal democracy and the prospects for its continued existence, and thus should be of general interest to those with whom such concerns resonate. As indicated above, liberalism is currently facing a crisis of confidence. Criticisms of the classical liberal doctrine continue to mount from the political left and right alike, and the once fashionable idea that the worldwide spread of liberal democracy represents the end of history now seems hopelessly naïve. On the one hand, those who are inclined to be suspicious of liberalism may find its revaluation of compassion as yet another indictment to be added to a long list of charges. On the other hand, those who are true friends of liberalism may find themselves anxious to determine how contemporary liberal society might make best use of all available moral resources, including the sentiment of compassion. It is my hope that this study will offer considerations that individuals of either persuasion may find fruitful and will contribute at the broadest level to our self-understanding as modern liberal democrats.

Overview of the Study

In what follows I attempt to provide a historically and theoretically grounded account of the fraught relationship between compassion and liberalism by drawing upon the history of political thought, focusing especially on three modern thinkers who devoted considerable attention to understanding compassion and its political implications. In doing so I advance two interrelated claims. First, compassion is in many ways a uniquely modern moral value. Current
understandings of it bear little resemblance to the manner in which compassion and other sympathetic sentiments have been conceived in the contexts of classical, Christian, or non-Western political thought. Thus, the first goal of this study is to better understand why it was not until the modern era, during the ascendancy of western liberalism, that compassion was incorporated into political theory in any significant way. Second, compassion’s normative place in early modern political thought was ambiguous. Those who thought most seriously about the role that compassion might play in modern political life reached conclusions that were equivocal at best. Accordingly, the second goal of this study is to better understand the reasons for this equivocation. In particular, I aim to understand why Rousseau, Smith, and Tocqueville expressed certain concerns regarding the efficacy of compassion in political life, and how their efforts to grapple with these concerns might better inform contemporary discourse about political compassion. Their attempts to overcome the more problematic aspects of compassion point to a third goal of this study, which is to determine how we might adjust our conceptual understanding of compassion in the present day and reconsider its value as a guiding principle of liberal democracy.

The first goal is pursued in chapter 2, which begins by establishing the fundamental differences between how compassion was conceptualized in modern and premodern traditions of political thought. In classical and Christian thought in particular, compassion, like all sentiments, held a relatively low status within in a hierarchical ordering of human goods, such that it was always subordinated to higher moral considerations that constrained and guided its exercise. Whatever moral significance compassion held was derived not from its absolute nature, but from its relative position within the moral order as determined by nature or by God. In the modern era compassion rose quickly to a place of prominence in political thought thanks to the emergence of
liberalism, a new philosophical paradigm that untethered compassion from its premodern constraints by elevating the status of the passions while levelling all human goods to a single plane defined by the needs of the body and its preservation. Drawing upon the thought of Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Montesquieu as three important architects of modern liberalism, I interpret the liberal project as one that was consciously undertaken with the goal of securing a softer, gentler, and more commodious way of life, a goal which necessarily placed compassion at the forefront of modern moral considerations. In pursuit of this goal liberal thinkers denigrated the moral claims of immaterial goods like virtue, honor, glory, or divine righteousness, while elevating those of lower, ordinary sentiments and inclinations that were said to be readily apparent and universally shared, and thus not likely to become the causes of violent dispute. As a result of this philosophical project, compassion could be reconceived as a freestanding moral faculty, a natural source from which to derive moral action without reference to any transcendent idea of the good. Put simply, compassion was elevated in modernity in part because moral horizons were lowered.

Yet while liberalism enabled the unleashing of compassion in theory, it did not produce a robust ethic of sentimental fellow-feeling in practice. Instead, societies that embraced liberal principles exhibited human relations that were cold and distant, grounded in mercenary calculations of self-interest rather than sentimental affection. This realization compelled eighteenth-century thinkers to give more attention to compassion, and chapters 3 and 4 are devoted to the efforts put forth in this regard by Rousseau and Smith respectively. Despite the fact that they disagreed fundamentally in their conceptions of human nature and their assessments of liberalism, Rousseau and Smith engaged in a similar project of attempting to salvage compassion by dignifying and empowering it in the context of liberal modernity. For
both thinkers this meant situating compassion within an elevated moral order that might be said
to transcend the quotidian goods prescribed by the liberal morality of rational self-interest.
Significantly, both of their treatments of compassion, despite some important differences,
culminated in appeals to a natural religion that might provide a kind of moral anchoring outside
the boundaries of liberal morality yet accessible to individuals living within the boundaries of
liberal society. The normative teachings on compassion that emerge alongside the descriptive
accounts in Rousseau and Smith are highly rhetorical. They are presented not in the
philosophical thought of these thinkers but are conveyed through embellished fictions intended
to arouse and educate the compassion of their readers, in part by persuading them to think of
compassion as belonging to a moral order that renders it a function of virtue rather than material
interest and subjective sentimentality.

While Rousseau and Smith may have succeeded at bringing compassion to the forefront
of modern thought, their efforts to facilitate a more effectual kind of compassion were less
fruitful. To demonstrate this and to understand why their interventions on behalf of compassion
did not have the intended effect, chapter 5 explores Alexis de Tocqueville’s account of how
democracy complicates compassion. While liberalism was not yet synonymous with democracy
when Rousseau and Smith were alive, it was becoming so in Tocqueville’s time. Tocqueville
understood liberalism itself, along with its revaluation of compassion, to be the product of a
deeper and more mysterious cause, namely, the universal trend toward democracy—manifested
in the equalization of conditions and the homogenization of society—that appeared to operate
upon human history as if by a providential force. In Tocqueville’s view, equality facilitates
compassion, rather than vice-versa, but it also renders compassion weaker and more ephemeral.
Like his predecessors Tocqueville saw that compassion, in order to be rendered effective, must
draw strength from a higher realm of human possibilities encompassed in moral or religious beliefs. In this chapter I show that Tocqueville’s proposed alliance between democracy and Christianity can be understood in terms of his belief that sentimental compassion simply cannot substitute for the divine virtue of Christian charity from which it was divorced in early liberalism.

In the concluding chapter, I reconsider the place of compassion in contemporary political life and political theory with a view to the focused treatments of compassion found in the work of Rousseau, Smith, and Tocqueville. Together they provide a critique of the common tendency toward overestimating the strength of compassion or relying on it too much in the context of political theory, and they also explain why it is that we are inclined to do so. The practical suggestions that can be drawn from their teachings are nuanced, reflecting the complexity of the social and psychological forces at work in liberal democracy, and thus frustrating our desires to find a parsimonious, all-encompassing solution for contemporary political problems in the moral sentiments alone. On the one hand, they indicate that contemporary liberalism cannot simply dispense with compassion as some prominent liberal thinkers have suggested that it should. On the other hand, in their realistic assessments of compassion’s limitations, Rousseau, Smith, and Tocqueville suggest the need to temper our expectations for what that sentiment can accomplish at the social or political level. Among other implications, these thinkers call into question the usefulness or point to the limitations of incorporating the passions and emotions into political theory, as has been the recent trend, particularly where the moral foundations of political life are concerned.
CHAPTER 2

LIBERALISM AND THE UNLEASHING OF COMPASSION

Compassion is a remarkably modern phenomenon. Of course, as a natural sentiment compassion is in some sense universal, existing across times and places, yet human understandings and expectations of this sentiment have varied considerably throughout history. In this chapter I explore the conceptual revolutions that compassion has undergone in the history of political thought, from classical antiquity to the emergence of liberalism. Through these explorations I aim to understand why sentimental compassion was not embraced in the traditions of classical or Christian thought, and why it became a feature of political theory only during the ascendancy of modern liberalism. That compassion would become a salient category of modern thought was in some sense inevitable, given the stated aims of modern political philosophy as the relief of man’s estate through the mastery of nature, or the progressive elimination of suffering.

At the same time, compassion attained moral and political significance in liberal modernity because it was unleashed from certain constraints and commitments placed on it in premodern systems of thought. On account of its lowly status as a sentiment, the earlier traditions did not valorize compassion but treated it, like all passions generally, as a problem to be overcome. Sentimental compassion was viewed as unfit for achieving the goals that modern man has set for it, most importantly that of binding individuals to one another with strong ties of affection that facilitate voluntary acts of self-sacrificing beneficence. Premodern thought maintained that such lofty aims might be realized only if other-directed sentiments like
compassion were tethered to a higher principle within a broader moral order comprehending a rank order of human goods and aims. The modern revaluation of compassion can be understood in terms of its immediate heritage in a Christian morality that was fundamentally other-directed yet grounded theologically in a transcendent principle that fell victim to modern secularization.

For compassion to assume the status that it currently has in our moral consciousness, it required a serious reconsideration of the status of sentiments and passions within the human soul, and of the purported necessity of a transcendent moral order, on the basis of which the soul itself could be ordered. The emergence of liberalism is prefigured in the teachings of Machiavelli, who began the process of severing compassion from these earlier conceptual constraints, paving the way for it to take on a uniquely modern and political meaning. Liberalism, structured around a new orientation toward the passions and sentiments, and guided by a new philosophical goal of relieving man’s estate on earth, enabled compassion to stand on its own footing as a prosocial virtue, at least in principle. Yet the far-reaching consequences of liberal political theory were not manifested in its beginnings. It was not until liberal societies could be seen in action, and their deleterious effects on human happiness and social relations appreciated, that political thinkers would be compelled to give more serious attention to compassion. The reasons for this are outlined nicely in the political thought of Montesquieu, himself a seminal figure in the emergence of the modern moral outlook, which prepares us to better understand the conscious turn toward compassion by Rousseau and Adam Smith in the following chapters. Given the scope of the current chapter relative to those which follow, a great deal of depth will be sacrificed for breadth here. It should be kept in mind that my primary goal is not to provide an intellectual history of compassion, but to seek out the origins of modern compassion and to demonstrate thereby its inseparability from the fundamental commitments of liberalism.
Compassion has a long and rich lineage in western thought, but it did not always carry the moral significance that it eventually attained in modernity. In the thought of classical antiquity, compassion (ἔλεος or οἶκτος in Greek) was held in relatively low esteem owing to its nature as an emotion and its juxtaposition with the virtues that consisted in the rule or control over one’s emotions.\(^1\) As an emotion, compassion was said to be a species of blind desire belonging to the appetitive part of the human soul, which stood lower in rank to the spirited and rational parts of the soul. We get a general sense of this view from Homer’s epic poems, the great repositories of ancient Greek culture and spirit, where compassion is portrayed as a weak and effeminate passion as contrasted with the strong and manly spiritedness of warlike heroes. Achilles, the mightiest and manliest of the Homeric heroes, is characterized by his “proud spirit” and “pitiess heart” (Iliad IX.509-510; IX.652).\(^2\) As a function of base desire, pity or compassion aims at the attainment of lower-order goods defined by the avoidance of pain or death, whereas spiritedness aims at the attainment of higher-order goods like nobility, honor, glory, and prestige. The noble or heroic type, representing an improvement on the base human being, is properly attuned to the latter and willing to forgo the former.

This juxtaposition is presented most starkly by Homer in an intimate conversation between the Trojan hero Hector and his wife Andromache, when the former has stepped away

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\(^2\) Primary sources are cited parenthetically in text throughout. Abbreviations are listed in the Bibliography.
from the battle outside the walls of Troy to see his family for what may be the last time.

Andromache appeals to her husband’s compassion as she pleads with him to stay with his family and leave the fighting to the others:

But show some pity and stay here by the tower,  
Don’t make your child an orphan, your wife a widow. (*Iliad VI.453-454*)

Hector is not immune to his wife’s pleas, nor is he incapable of compassion: “He pitied her” (*Iliad VI.509*). Yet he is unwilling to yield to and act upon his compassion, subjecting his emotional desires to the demands of noble honor. His virtue consists not in a complete insensitivity to compassion, but in a self-command that enables him to subordinate compassion to a higher principle of action. Compassion tugs at his heartstrings, but he is willing to sacrifice the satisfaction of this passion to the higher desire for honor and praiseworthiness so characteristic of the Greek martial ethos. Hector summarizes his predicament and its resolution as follows:

Yes, Andromache, I worry about all this myself,  
But my shame before the Trojans and their wives,  
With their long black robes trailing, would be too terrible  
If I hung back from battle like a coward.  
And my heart won’t let me. I have learned to be  
One of the best, to fight in Troy’s first ranks,  
Defending my father’s honor and my own. (*Iliad 6.463-469*)

The general attitude toward compassion that is displayed here provides a helpful context for understanding why the political thinkers of ancient Greece attributed little value to it from the perspective of politics. In their view, the capacity to be moved by the pain or suffering of others was innate and natural, but it belonged not to the higher or most fully human part of our nature, but the part that man can be said to share with the beasts. As a result, in Plato’s view even

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3 Virgil presents a very similar exchange between Aeneas and Dido (*Aeneid IV.379-500*). While Dido appeals to his compassion, and Aeneas is indeed moved deeply by compassion for her, he nevertheless holds firm against this sentiment on the basis of duty and piety (*Aeneid IV.550-65*).
compassion’s claims to other-directedness are suspect. In sharp contrast to the tendency in our day to assimilate compassion to a kind of altruism, Plato’s Socrates speaks of compassion as a selfish appetite, a “hunger” for “tears and sufficient laments” that has its ultimate origin in a concern for one’s own prospects for suffering (Rep. 606a-b). According to Socrates, this compassionate appetite tends to be strongest among those with a vicious character—those who do not have proper control over their passions—in part because it is inseparable from fear, particularly the fear of what misfortune might befall oneself or one’s own things. Accordingly, the habitual feeling of compassion toward others tends to encourage the cultivation of excessive self-pity (Rep. 605d). Vicariously sharing in someone else’s suffering is pleasurable not because it brings relief to the other, but because the feeling of grief that it evokes can be redirected inward toward one’s own selfish concerns, catering in a roundabout yet thoroughly egoistic way to the desire for “tears and sufficient laments.” Ultimately for Plato, compassion, like all base appetites, is an expression of unreflective animal selfishness, and a function of the vulgar concern with one’s own things that characterizes a soul ruled by irrational desire as opposed to calculating reason (Rep. 606b).

In a similar fashion, Aristotle locates pity among the passions (pathē) belonging to the non-rational part of the soul, the strict governance of which belongs to virtue (Nic. Ethics 1105b21-24). Moreover, in Aristotle’s ethical writings there is not even a particular virtue pertaining to compassion, as he generally prioritizes “virtue in suffering, rather than compassion with suffering” (see e.g. Nic. Ethics 1100b30-1101a14). Accordingly, his most sustained treatment of compassion is found not in the context of his moral philosophy, but in his Rhetoric,

4 Leo Strauss, Seminar in Political Philosophy: Aristotle’s Rhetoric (1964); Ronna Burger ed. (Estate of Leo Strauss, 2014), 209. The same is true of Plato as well; see Republic 605d.
where it is presented alongside envy, shame, indignation, anger, and fear as emotions to which a skilled orator might appeal in attempting to sway an audience (Rh. 1378b-1389a). For Aristotle, compassion, like all sentiments, is morally neutral at best. While in some cases a certain compassion of the proper sort might be “characteristic of a good character,” compassion as such is by no means productive of or coextensive with good character; on the contrary, it is generally felt most acutely by those who are “weak,” “cowardly,” or “not in a courageous emotional state” (Rh. 1385b20-25, 1386b).

Given their understanding of its lowly origins in the desiring or non-rational part of the soul, Plato and Aristotle did not view compassion as especially valuable in the context of political life. From the perspective of classical philosophy, politics is the activity which at its best aims to cultivate the character of human beings with a view to the good life. Such cultivation requires an education in virtue or moral self-command by which man, through proper exercise of the rational part of his soul, is so disposed toward the raw appetites and desires of his uncultivated nature as to be able to rule over them. Thus, Aristotle specifies the “appropriate student” of “the political art” as one who is neither “disposed to follow the passions” nor accustomed to “living in accord with passion and pursuing each passion in turn;” rather, the

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5 For a more extensive treatment of compassion in the Rhetoric, see Marlene K. Sokolon, Political Emotions: Aristotle and the Symphony of Reason and Emotion (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2006), 141-147, 157-159.

6 Some have interpreted Aristotle to be more charitable in his assessment of compassion than I have indicated here. In addition to Nussbaum (1996; 2001), see David Konstan, “Affect and Emotion in Greek Literature,” in Oxford Handbooks Online (Oct. 5, 2015), who argues that “pity, as Aristotle conceives it, is not the same thing as raw sympathy for pain, for it requires a moral judgment, which is constitutive of the sentiment itself” (cf. Konstan 2001). It seems that for these scholars, the fact that Aristotle attributes a cognitive component to it elevates compassion above the status of a mere emotion or appetite. Even if we grant this, however, we are still confronted with the fact that compassion is noticeably absent in Aristotle’s account of virtue. Thus, in the brief summary provided here I follow Strauss ([1964] 2014) and Orwin (1980) in situating Aristotle’s Rhetoric in the broader context of his corpus.
political art belongs properly to those of “self-restraint” who “fashion their longings in accord with reason” (Nic. Ethics 1095a1-10). In this view compassion is properly constrained within a moral order as predicated on the existence of a hierarchical human soul and a rank-order of human goods that transcend bodily pleasures and pains. As such it is subordinate to and must be guided by the higher, rational part of the soul which is attuned to the priority of higher-order goods.

Ancient suspicion towards compassion was thus predicated on the understanding that compassion is merely a feeling, as opposed to a quality of character or a type of activity. To reverse the usual ordering of things, we might say that the ancients held a “realistic” conception of compassion that tempered their hopes for what it might accomplish politically, and that stands in sharp contrast with a more “idealistic” understanding of compassion in currency today. But does the latter not have something to recommend itself from the perspective of classical philosophy? After all, many modern proponents of compassion would grant that it is problematically prone to passivity, and likely to be an ally of egoism, so long as it remains a mere emotion. They would quickly draw our attention to the idea of a compassionate action as one in which the raw feeling of pity prompts us to act on behalf of another and for their good. Were the ancients simply unconcerned with this kind of beneficent action? And can it truly be

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7 Similarly, Aristotle’s great-souled man, who represents the pinnacle of moral virtue, is described as one who does not appeal to or indulge feelings of compassion: “When it comes to necessities or small concerns, he is least of all given to lamentation or requests for help, since it is the mark of a serious person to be thus disposed toward these” (Nic. Ethics 1125a9-10).

8 A major theme in Aristotle’s account of moral virtue is that the good cannot be reduced to pleasure, nor the bad to pain and suffering (Nic. Ethics 1095b20-22), although he indicates that the many (hoi polloi) are inclined to make this error.
said that there is no connection between this kind of action and the underlying feeling of compassion?

Classical political philosophy certainly pays homage to a kind of benevolence or “friendly affection” (*philia*) by which one acts for the good of another, but actions of this sort bear no intrinsic relationship to compassion.\(^9\) For Aristotle, noble acts of beneficence are motivated not by sentimental compassion, but by higher, immaterial concerns, by a love of “the noblest things and the greatest goods” (*Nic. Ethics* 1168b30). Put differently, beneficent acts that are truly praiseworthy are motivated not by a concern for the desires or needs of the recipient, but by a concern for their good that is derived from a deeper longing for the good and beautiful in itself.\(^10\) While we might be inclined to confuse compassion with goodwill, Aristotle indicates that being moved by the pain of another is not the same thing as desiring their good. In order to be effectual, our concern with alleviating the suffering of others must be grounded not in compassion, which tends to be a fleeting and shallow emotion, but in a nobler kind of affection oriented toward a vision of the good that transcends material passions and desires. Thus, the man of noble beneficence “acts on account of what is noble; and the better a person he is, the more he acts on account of what is noble and for the sake of a friend, while disregarding himself” (*Nic. Ethics* 1168a34-35). Beautiful and noble actions of this sort frequently involve a degree of self-sacrifice, or abstraction from considerations of narrow self-interest (*Rh. 1366b1-1367a3*). But

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\(^9\) Aristotle’s account of political friendship in the *Nicomachean Ethics* bears little relationship to that of compassion as outlined in his *Rhetoric*. Although he does indicate that compassion bears some kinship to friendly fellow-feeling (*sun-gnomê*), or the rather mysterious manner in which one experiences the reflection of oneself in the person of a friend, the resemblance is faint (*Nic. Ethics* 1166a30-33; 1170a25-b19; cf. 1111a1-2). The culmination of Aristotelian friendship involves the ability to perceive one’s own nature reflected within the other person and to share in an intimate communion of thoughts, feelings, and perceptions, a process which reaffirms the pleasure of existence itself—a pleasure that is different in kind from that associated with compassion (*Nic. Ethics* 1170b10-19).

compassion, as the suspicion of Socrates indicates, fails to meet this lofty standard of nobility because it is not animated by an apprehension of and longing for the good and the beautiful, but rather by base desires that are naturally intertwined with a fear of one’s own pain. Truly noble acts of altruism correspond to higher moral considerations to which the person of virtuous character is sensitive; by contrast, mere sentiments like compassion produce only a “superficial affection” that is “without intensity or longing,” and thus without power to motivate noble beneficence (Nic. Ethics 1166b30-1167a3). Moreover, given that Aristotle describes friendly affection in terms of intimacy, or intense longing steered in the direction of particular individuals, it would seem that the effective reach of our concern for the wellbeing of others is quite limited to only a few persons. On the basis of Aristotle’s account we might wonder, as many modern thinkers would, whether the shallowness of compassion is in some way connected with its universalizing tendencies.

It is on the basis of considerations such as those outlined above that Plato and Aristotle both speak of pity or compassion as an emotion that perpetually threatens to cloud wise judgment and undermine good political rule (Rep. 415c; 516c; 518b; Rh. 1356a14-21; 1377a). Both viewed compassion as a passive emotion that can be felt in the absence of interpersonal intimacy or political friendship and that is of little use in the pursuit of those higher goods that can only be attained through the action of the higher parts of the soul. Yet precisely because it issues from the desiring part of the soul, compassion is experienced with a certain base pleasure

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11 This view was shared by the ancient Romans as well. Thus, Polybius presents as evidence of “the perfection and strength of principle” of the Roman regime the occasion on which the Romans did not give in to their compassion for the captive countrymen held for ransom by Hannibal after Cannae (Histories VI.58). Consider also the lesson to be gleaned from the Fall of Troy as told in Virgil’s Aeneid, the epic founding myth of imperial Rome: the Trojans’ compassion for an enemy imposter who appealed to their pity led directly to the destruction of the city (Aeneid II.179-93, 252-55).
that renders it attractive. Guarding against the excessive indulgence of compassion thus becomes a politically important task. Socrates’ expulsion of the poets from his city-in-speech is necessitated in part by a recognition of this task: tragic poetry trains individuals in the exercise of compassion and encourages its further indulgence to the detriment of virtue (Rep. 605d-606c). It is with a view to the same task that Aristotle departs from Plato’s teaching and endorses tragic poetry as a means with which to cathartically purge compassion from the soul and thus proactively guard against its pernicious excesses (Poet. 1449b25-30; 1453b12-13). A dispute over the nature of compassion thus constitutes an important aspect of the ancient conflict between poetry and philosophy, which lies beyond the scope of this study.\textsuperscript{12} For our purposes, the relevant point is that the ancients, in contrast to the entire trajectory of modern political thought, were more likely to conceive of compassion as a political vice rather than a political virtue, owing to compassion’s relative position within a transcendent moral order that defined that a hierarchy of human goods.

\textbf{Christian Constraints}

Moving forward from classical antiquity to the rise of Christianity, we observe a major reconceptualization of compassion, which can be understood as a movement away from the classical understanding and toward the modern understanding.\textsuperscript{13} Oriented by a vision of God as

\textsuperscript{12} A helpful introduction to this conflict and the dispute over pity which was a part of it can be found in Allan Bloom’s interpretive essay in \textit{The Republic of Plato} 2\textsuperscript{nd} Ed., translated by Allan Bloom (Basic Books: 1991), 351-361, 426-434.

the creator and sustainer of the universe whose omnipotent power is manifested in his love, the scriptures of the New Testament place a premium on neighbor-love that is second only to the love of God: “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets” (Matthew 22:37-40; see also Romans 13:8-10; Galatians 5:14; I John 3:10-11; II John 1:5).14 Through the contemplation of Christ’s suffering and the emulation of his compassionate way of life, Christians are called upon to exercise compassion toward their fellows: “Finally, be ye all of one mind, having compassion one of another, love as brethren, be pitiful, be courteous” (I Peter 3:8).15 In the context of this teaching, compassion took on a more important role than the pagan poets and philosophers had attributed to it, but its usefulness and efficacy in human life were always dependent on one’s orientation toward God and the divine moral order as ordained and revealed by him.

Christianity, like ancient Greek philosophy, holds that no sentiment or passion can be virtuous in itself, but for different reasons: because of original sin, all natural emotions must belong to fallen human nature.16 Thus, Saint Augustine describes compassion (misericordia) in

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14 As contrasted with the New, the Old Testament is commonly seen as conveying a harsher and crueler teaching. Similar to the teaching of Plato and Aristotle as indicated above, the Old Testament places a premium on bearing up under suffering or maintaining one’s righteousness in the midst of it—as exemplified in the Book of Job—as opposed to alleviating, eliminating, or commiserating with it. Nevertheless, the Old Testament does present compassion as a divine command: “He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the Lord require of thee? to do justly, and to love mercy [misericordia], and to walk humbly with thy God?” Micah 6:8-9.

15 The seminal teaching on compassion in the New Testament is conveyed by Jesus through the parable of the Good Samaritan, with its concluding command “Go, and do thou likewise” (Luke 10:25-37; see also Galatians 5:13; James 2:13; cf. Augustine, City of God XXI.22).

16 In the words of Augustine: “We must, however, confess, that the emotions which we have, even when they are righteous and according to God, belong to this life, and not to the life to come for which we hope” (City of God, XIV.9).
Socratic terms as an “impulse” that emanates from our corrupt natures and aims at self-satisfaction. In describing the years of his youth, prior to his conversion, Augustine illustrates the baseness of sentimental compassion in the absence of God’s grace. The compassion that he felt as a young man was an appetite for the cathartic pleasure of commiseration which led him to frequent the local theater in order to weep over tragic performances and thus satiate this emotional hunger. “Hence came my love for sufferings, but not of a kind that pierced me very deeply; for my longing was not to experience myself miseries such as I saw on stage. I wanted only to hear stories and imaginary legends of sufferings which, as it were, scratched me on the surface” (Conf. II.ii.4). This weak and shallow compassion, standing on its own and not harnessed to any belief in the divine moral order, did not issue forth in beneficent action, but stagnated in a kind of passive voyeurism.

As Augustine’s anecdote illustrates, mere compassion, according to the Christian teaching, is insufficient to bring about the kind of neighbor-love that God’s law commands; for this to occur, sentimental compassion must be transformed into charity (caritas), the highest Christian virtue.\(^{17}\) Thus, it does not follow from compassion’s natural baseness that it ought to be suppressed or purged from the human soul (see e.g. City of God IX.5).\(^{18}\) Rather, compassion is to be enlisted in the pursuit of God’s righteousness, but this can only be accomplished with divine assistance. The proper exercise of compassion, as Aquinas and the schoolmen would explain, depends on its being subordinated to charity, or the kind of elevated love that draws its strength

\(^{17}\) “And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity” (I Corinthians 13:13); “And above all things put on charity, which is the bond of perfectness” (Colossians 3:14); see also I Timothy 1:5.

not from the human heart but directly from God (*Summa Theol.* II-II, Q.23-26). Christian charity is not a natural emotion, but a supernatural virtue that unites man with God. Through charity, a part of the love which is God’s divine essence is added to human nature, not as a result of man’s efforts alone but “by the infusion of the Holy Ghost” (*Summa Theol.* II-II, Q. 24 A.2). The divine love infused in man through his faith in and communion with God can be harnessed in turn and extended to one’s neighbors through a more powerful kind of compassion than that which is merely natural.\(^\text{19}\) Augustine provides an elegant description of the manner in which compassion is transformed into charity:

> But souls which ‘thirst after you and appear before you,’ souls separated out from the society of the ‘sea,’ you water with your hidden and sweet spring, ‘so that the earth also may produce her fruit.’ As the earth produces her fruit, so at your command, the command of its Lord God, our soul yields works of mercy ‘according to its kind,’ loving our neighbour in the relief of physical necessities, ‘having in itself seed according to its likeness.’ Aware of our infirmity we are moved to compassion to help the indigent, assisting them in the same way as we would wish to be helped if we were in the same distress—and not only in easy ways, like ‘the grass bearing seed,’ but with the protection and aid given with a resolute determination like ‘the tree bearing fruit.’ This means such kindness as rescuing a person suffering injustice from the hand of the powerful and providing the shelter of protection by the mighty force of just judgement. (*Conf.* XIII.xvii.21)

These selfless acts which issue from charity are a function of the longing “thirst” or love that one has for God, whose divine love in turn is infused in the human soul where it transforms weak compassion into lofty beneficence. Whereas sentimental compassion is an impulse that can be indulged passively, and is therefore a weak motive to self-sacrificing, other-directed action, *caritas* adds a level of “purpose” or “intention” to the mere sentiment, linking it with a “good will” that issues forth in effective action (*City of God* XIV.7). In this way, compassion’s strength in the world is dependent on the condition of the human soul and its orientation toward the divine moral order.

Abstracted from God’s intervention and the individual’s proper orientation toward him, man’s natural compassion is insufficient to manifest the kind of neighbor-love modeled by Christ. The assumption that human wholeness and happiness can be realized through natural sentimental affections toward one’s fellows, even toward one’s friends, without an orientation of the soul toward the divine, is in Augustine’s assessment “a vast myth and a long lie” (*Conf. IV.viii.13*). Likewise, Aquinas insists that compassion cannot be considered a virtue so long as it is merely natural, or the impulsive and unreflective movement of a sensitive appetite (*Summa Theol. II-II*, Q. 30 A. 3). In other words, horizontal relations among men will always leave us disappointed unless they are supplemented by a vertical dimension that enables man to draw inspiration from something higher than mere sentiment.

In all, the Christian understanding of compassion marks a significant departure from Platonic and Aristotelian understandings, insofar as the former makes room for a positive ethical role for compassion that recommends its cultivation and qualified indulgence. Yet the compassion called for by Christianity is equally far removed from that which would be theorized by the moderns, and which remains with us currently. A new way of thinking about compassion would emerge in modernity, and it would require fundamental moves against both classical philosophy and Christian theology. Modern compassion would be freed from the disapprobation arising from its being a “merely natural” faculty, because it would be severed from the higher moral principles to which it had been tethered—the idea of the good and the beautiful in classical philosophy, and the virtue of charity of Christianity. The elevation of compassion in modernity, in other words, required a seismic transformation in man’s understanding of both nature and God.
Machiavelli and the Invention of Political Compassion

The modern “unleashing” of compassion occurred over the course of a few centuries during which the concept was unmoored from the metaphysical foundations of classical antiquity and the religious foundations of Christianity as outlined above. Notwithstanding the fundamental differences between them, both traditions expressed reservations regarding compassion’s efficacy as a bulwark of human morality. From the perspective of classical philosophy, compassion was not particularly useful to the pursuit of philosophic wisdom or political justice; from the perspective of Christianity, the value of compassion as an impetus to neighbor-love was contingent upon the grace of God and one’s orientation within the moral order prescribed by him. Moreover, both traditions posited a hierarchical human soul in which compassion and other sentiments were ranked lower and held subordinate to a higher principle that constituted the teleological aim of human life. The question of the good life was a question of man’s ability to live in cooperation with the natural or divine moral order by orienting his life toward its ends. A proper orientation demanded a degree of command over one’s passions, such that they were indulged in the right way as determined by authoritative standards of reason or revelation. Human morality was a matter of human character, or virtue, and good character could not simply be reduced to the base components of the human soul. Instead, the question of good character was a question of the form impressed upon those components. Impressing the proper form on one’s natural sentiments, including compassion, depended ultimately on one’s orientation within the moral order of the cosmos, a moral order transcending than the material realm of political life.
Modern political thought began with a conscious rejection of these ideas and the implications that flow from them. As a result, compassion was reconceptualized in modernity from a mere emotion into a self-justifying principle now understood to be philosophically defensible, morally sanctioned, and politically significant. The transformation was made possible by a radical break from the pre-modern traditions of thought, and especially the pre-modern understanding of human nature as aiming at an ideal or teleological end determined by the transcendent moral order. In effect, compassion was freed from the constraints that had precluded its inclusion among the virtues.

The point of radical departure from the older traditions is characteristically attributed to Machiavelli, who advanced a novel understanding of compassion that was unconstrained and highly politicized. In Machiavelli’s thought we can observe with great clarity the relationship between our modern understanding of compassion and the theoretical reorientation toward political life that marks the modern break with classical and Christian thought. Such a break is announced explicitly in Machiavelli’s famous statement of intent in Chapter 15 of *The Prince*, where he castigates as useless and ineffectual the teachings of those who “have imagined republics and principalities that have never been seen or known to exist in truth.” For Machiavelli the great error of the older traditions lay precisely in their insistence upon an authoritative moral order external to political life, and on the basis of which political life must be

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20 In this regard, my interpretation of the history of political thought aligns with the political theory of Leo Strauss in insisting on a “hard break” between the ancients and moderns that precipitates the emergence of liberalism; see e.g. Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), and “The Three Waves of Modernity,” in *Political Philosophy: Six Essays*, ed. Hilail Gildin (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989), 81-98. A recent and influential exposition of this position can be found in Deneen (2018). Against this interpretive approach, the Cambridge historical school of political theory argues that there was no radical break in the history of political thought and generally eschews serious consideration of “grand narratives” or “perennial questions;” see e.g. Quentin Skinner, “Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas,” *History and Theory* 8, No. 1 (1969): 3-53.
evaluated. Classical philosophy and Christianity alike failed to grasp that “it is so far from how one lives to how one should live that he who lets go of what is done for what should be done learns his ruin rather than his preservation.” Machiavelli’s bold innovation was to deny the existence of a gap between the demands of morality and those of politics, “for if one considers everything well, one will find something appears to be virtue, which if pursued would be one’s ruin, and something else appears to be vice, which if pursued results in one’s security and well-being” (Prince XV). Good politics, or politics of the “effectual” as opposed to the “imaginary” kind, requires that our concern with virtue be subordinated to and redefined in light of considerations of political success or expediency.

Machiavelli’s teaching effectively overturned received notions of virtue as the cultivation of good character as defined by authoritative moral standards. The political perspective—the only perspective that matters for Machiavelli—must approach man as he is and not as he ought to be. In other words, the method that Machiavelli introduced into the study of politics takes its bearings from the empirical origins rather than the speculative ends of political life. And man’s political origins, when examined carefully, appear far from dignified. Machiavelli’s political analysis shows that the establishment or founding of political society is accomplished through the violent exercise of power, as archetypically manifested in the fratricide of Romulus. The human soul is not hierarchical in a way that reflects a rank-order of human goods; rather, human nature is a reflection of primordial chaos as manifested in the base impulses, desires, passions, and appetites that predominate. Accordingly, political science and political practice must accept
that man is fundamentally a creature of desire and passion, not a moral agent rationally striving to govern desire and passion (*Prince III*).\(^{21}\)

It is in his pursuit of this radical break with the older traditions that Machiavelli reconceptualizes compassion, undermining the foundations it once rested upon while bringing it into the realm of politics. The significance of this reconceptualization has been articulated in a seminal article by Clifford Orwin, who explains how Machiavelli is “the philosophic founder of pity liberated from piety, the first great ‘secularizer’ of Christian compassion.”\(^{22}\) Appropriating this traditionally Christian category to a worldly philosophy that established the supremacy of political over moral or religious ends, Machiavelli bequeathed to us an understanding of compassion as untethered from all non-political constraints.\(^{23}\) He introduced, in other words, the idea of political compassion as a central concept of modern politics.

Machiavelli’s novel treatment of compassion is couched in his recommendation of “humanity” (*umanità*) as a new moral category.\(^{24}\) Humanity is a thoroughly modern concept, familiar to us in various forms such as “humanitarianism” or the “humane” treatment of others, that was creatively deployed by Machiavelli as the basis for a new kind of morality that is in keeping with his bold denial of any gap between morality and politics. Humanity, for

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\(^{21}\) See also *The Prince* XVII; *Discourses on Livy* I.1, I.16, I.39, II.pr, III.30.


Machiavelli, provides a moral framework that can be located within and held subservient to an overarching political framework, such that morality can retain some semblance of structure and intelligibility while remaining flexible enough to be adapted to any conceivable political need. Yet the moral order that the notion of humanity aims to establish is fundamentally ambiguous, for it implies that human life can guide itself without a guiding light. As implied by the word, to be humane is to be characteristically human. Humanity is free-standing. It needs no knowledge of the divine, and it leaves no room for the consideration of what might be said to transcend what is merely human.25 Throughout Machiavelli’s political thought, humanity emerges subtly as a replacement for Christian humility and charitable compassion, which count among those qualities that appear virtuous but in effect lead to political ruin (Discourses I.41, II.2, II.14, III.9).26 In usurping the reigning Christian virtues, humanity thus establishes itself as the ground of Machiavelli’s new political morality, and clears a path for the emergence of compassion as a morally fruitful sentiment.27

As a vehicle through which moral considerations are subordinated to political ones, humanity attempts to reconcile what is psychologically necessary with what is politically necessary. Compassion appears in Machiavelli’s account of the origins of political society in Discourses I.2 as one such necessary element of human psychology. In the first human societies, “knowledge of justice” came from the experience of “seeing that if one individual hurt his benefactor, hatred and compassion among men came from it.” Reflecting on such experiences,

men “thought too that those like injuries could be done to them,” and thus, “to escape like evil,” they created rules of justice to be enforced by a political authority for their protection. It may seem surprising that Machiavelli speaks of compassion in this context, given his descriptions elsewhere of the violent origins of political society. The surprise fades, however, once we realize that the meaning of compassion has been twisted in a typically Machiavellian fashion. In these brief remarks, compassion is conceived not as a freestanding, other-directed sentiment, but as a function of resentment toward perceived injustice, particularly the injustice of not receiving those benefits to which one feels entitled. Upon observing that someone else has been slighted in this way, the observer is pained not by the fact of the misdeed or the suffering of the offended party, but by the gnawing awareness that one day he too might be offended in a similar way. What passes for compassion here is merely desire mixed with insecurity. And what is most essential about compassion here is not that men feel it themselves, but that they demand it from others. But a demand for compassion is actually a demand not to be offended which is actually a demand to be given the benefits one desires. The passage is a fine illustration of how Machiavelli assimilates compassion to his own understanding of human nature as fundamentally acquisitive, while severing it from the moral constraints of classical philosophy and Christian theology. His is a conception of compassion that fits more neatly within the bounds of mere humanity, where it can be enlisted in the pursuit of this-worldly political ends by prudent leaders.

Yet when compassion is reconceptualized as an aspect of humanity in this way, when it is transformed into political compassion, it clearly becomes something different from a benign sentiment felt for a suffering other. Machiavelli’s most focused treatment of political compassion is found in Chapter 17 of The Prince, where he juxtaposes compassion and cruelty as qualities
for which a ruler might be praised or blamed.\textsuperscript{28} Here we are taught that the prince must strive to be both loved and feared by his subjects, to appear generally compassionate while periodically engaging in calculated acts of cruelty (cf. \textit{Prince VIII}). The shocking claim advanced here is not only that cruelty can be disguised as compassion, but that political compassion itself is inseparable from cruelty, or as one scholar puts it, “prudent cruelty is more merciful [i.e. compassionate] than imprudent mercy.”\textsuperscript{29}

On the one hand, cruelty is indispensable for Machiavelli because the preservation of political order depends ultimately on fear. Acts of kindness do not go far in establishing reliable bonds of love because the generality of men “are ungrateful, fickle, pretenders and dissemblers, evaders of danger, eager for gain.” Obedience to one’s ruler and devotion to one’s fellows do not arise organically from some prosocial sentiment; they must be imposed: “love is held by a chain of obligation, which, because men are wicked, is broken at every opportunity for their utility, but fear is held by a dread of punishment that never forsakes.”\textsuperscript{30} In a move that would later inspire

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\textsuperscript{28} Here Machiavelli uses \textit{pietas} in the Latin and \textit{pietà} in the Italian, which might be translated as either “mercifulness” or “compassion;” I have followed Orwin (1978) in treating it as compassion as opposed to Mansfield’s translation of mercy. There is certainly a difference between the two, as mercy implies an act of leniency on the part of one who is in a position of power or authority, particularly the granting of a reprieve where a harsher punishment would be warranted. The distinction is elaborated further in Seneca’s discussion of the differences between \textit{clementia} and \textit{misericordia} (\textit{De Clementia} II.5-6). Moreover, \textit{pietà} bears connotations of piety in addition to pity, and thus stands closer to Christian charity than to sentimental compassion as I have defined it. On the one hand, Machiavelli does seem to have “mercy” in mind in this chapter, insofar as he is addressing princes (although it is difficult to say, as his only real example of \textit{pietà} in action is an example of Cesare Borgia’s prudent cruelty). On the other hand, Machiavelli is clearly speaking to the tradition of Christian charity, and more precisely undermining this tradition by divorcing the other-directed aspect of \textit{pietà} from the transcendent orientation of piety. Thus, while he may not have in mind precisely what I mean by sentimental compassion, his (re-)conception is still useful for illustrating how modern compassion was unleashed from premodern constraints. Cf. Malcolm Bull, \textit{On Mercy} (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), esp. 22-25.

\textsuperscript{29} Tarcov (2015).

\textsuperscript{30} Consider also \textit{Discourses on Livy} I.3: “it is necessary to whoever disposes a republic and orders laws in it to presuppose that all men are bad, and that they always have to use the malignity of their spirit whenever they have an opportunity for it;” cf. III.1: “Unless something arises by which punishment is brought back to their memory and
Hobbes, Machiavelli identifies fear as the supreme passion that undergirds political order. Politics cannot dispense with fear and fear can only be sustained through prudent acts of “inhuman cruelty.”

On the other hand, however, it is possible for astute political leaders to exercise cruelty without acquiring a reputation for it that might generate hatred and unrest. It is possible, in other words, for the prudent prince to be cruel while appearing to be compassionate, provided that he understands the desires of his people and how to manipulate them. Above all, the many desire not to be dominated and to be secure in their possessions (*Prince* XVII; *Discourses* I.4-5, I.16, I.29). When threatened with perceived domination or deprivation these basic passions grow more intense, transforming into enthusiastic desires for vengeance against perceived oppressors and the acquisition of more goods to better secure those already possessed (*Discourses* I.5, I.29, I.37, I.46). Any ruler who can cater to these desires by visibly protecting his people from pain and conferring material benefits on them will acquire a reputation for compassion. As it happens, this can be accomplished most effectively through acts of cruelty: the spectacular punishment of criminals who have preyed upon others, or the redistribution of goods plundered or swindled from other societies, go a long way toward garnering a reputation for compassion while also generating a healthy amount of fear. Thus, Machiavelli’s exemplars of political compassion and cruelty well-used are one and the same, figures like Cesare Borgia or Camillus (*Prince* XVII; *Discourses* III.21).

Two dimensions of political compassion thus emerge from Machiavelli’s teaching: the demand for compassion on the part of the people and the provision of compassion on the part of
the prince. It is true of course that compassion in this sense does not reflect our common understanding of what compassion is. This fact serves as a useful reminder not only of the radical nature of Machiavelli’s project, but the implications of conceptualizing compassion as a free-standing principle for the advancement of political ends, unconstrained by concerns for moral or religious virtue. In the absence of any reference point beyond the horizon of politics, it is only the appearance of compassion that matters, because “men in general judge more by their eyes than by their hands… Everyone sees how you appear, few touch what you are; and these few dare not oppose the opinion of many” (Prince XVIII). When compassion ceases to be a function of the moral order, and becomes instead a function of the political order, then what passes for compassion is frequently a mask for acquisitive and demanding passions, reflective of selfish desires and not other-directed concerns. The surest way for a political ruler to appear compassionate is to cater to the desires of constituents or subjects, providing them with benefits while exempting them from associated costs, which are cruelly imposed elsewhere. As Clifford Orwin puts it, “compassion manifests itself in politics, therefore, as the apparently unselfish satisfaction of the selfish wants of others. Professions of compassion on the part of political leaders have thus always proved inseparable from promises, express or implied, to indulge to the limits of their abilities the wishes of those for whom they profess to feel. Political compassion is at the same time flattery and attempted bribery.”31

Of course, cruelty as such is not compassion, but it can easily take on the appearance of compassion when exercised prudently. Moreover, political compassion cannot dispense with cruelty because compassion is esteemed not for what it is but for what one gets from it. Selfish

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31 Orwin (1978), 1224.
desires are expressed in demands for compassion from others, not in the sense of sharing one’s pain but protecting one from pain, often through the provision of benefits that go beyond mere protection. But appeals to compassion, no matter how ubiquitous, do not necessarily correspond to the underlying sentiment of compassion in any meaningful sense. Furthermore, acts of beneficence or good offices will not suffice to establish stable, reciprocal relationships because men are ungrateful and fickle by nature; thus, fear and cruelty can never be removed from the picture. The intimate relationship between compassion and cruelty, emphatically announced by Machiavelli, will remain an important theme in the chapters to come. For now, it is worth noting that while we might be tempted to look to compassion as a source of cohesion, a vehicle for justice, and a mechanism for dispensing with fear and cruelty in our social condition, Machiavelli gives plenty of indication that we are liable to be disappointed.

Liberalism and the New Science of Passion and Politics

Machiavelli’s elevation of “humanity” and its coeval rejection of transcendent or teleological considerations allowed for the reconceptualization of compassion as a politically salient sentiment. While Machiavelli’s direct contributions to this reconceptualization can be observed with clarity today, the generations of political thinkers that immediately followed in his steps expressed little interest in compassion or other-directed sentiments in general. Yet they would seize upon the notion of humanity and use it to articulate a new science of politics, grounded in a new set of philosophical commitments and a new understanding of the human passions and their relationship to political life. These developments in political philosophy would
pave the way for compassion to assume a lofty status in the moral consciousness of modern liberal democracy.

Machiavellian humanity, as we have seen, seeks to reconcile political science with the fundamental passions and desires that most reliably characterize human nature, raising the stature, in a sense, of the animality which the ancients had castigated as base nature, and the Christians as fallen nature. It was Machiavelli’s intellectual successor, Thomas Hobbes, who would take up the standard of humanity, merging the new science of human passions and desires with a more systematic political theory that would eventually, once realized, give modern compassion its definitive form. Like Machiavelli, Hobbes sought to answer the question of the best social order with a view to how men actually live as opposed to how they should live; the crucial difference between the thinkers was that Hobbes aimed more explicitly to salvage the notion of a moral order, but without recourse to transcendence. And like his predecessor, Hobbes too concluded that a careful study of man as he really is reveals the primacy of passion or sentiment in human nature.

On the basis of his materialistic philosophy, the human mind, for Hobbes, consists solely of sense impressions and their residue, which cause the internal movements that are passions, desires, or sentiments (Lev. I, VI). Base passions and desires, or the internal motions that are manifested as “appetite” and “aversion,” are the only true essence of human nature: “Felicity is a continual progress of the desire from one object to another… So that in the first place I put for a general inclination of all mankind a perpetual and restless desire of power after power that

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ceaseth only in death” *(Lev. XI.1-2)*. Reason and imagination are subordinate to passion, because they are merely the faculties of sorting through and comparing sense impressions and the passions that arise from them *(Lev. II; V)*. This conception of the human being as nothing more than matter in motion necessarily resulted in the bleak image of Hobbes’s “state of nature,” where man is determined by blind passion as the light of reason and the good that it might illuminate are nonexistent.

From this famous point of departure, Hobbes proceeded systematically to lay the groundwork for the liberal political theory that would come to full bloom in the century after he lived and wrote.\(^3\) Remaining wholly within the moral framework of humanity, the question of the correct social order must be approached with a view to the most fundamental facts of human nature, which happen to be the passions. The strongest of those passions, that which might be said to overpower all others in the final analysis, will reveal the purpose of politics and provide an ultimate political aim in service to that supreme passion. The fear of death and its concomitant desire for self-preservation best fit this role, according to Hobbes, and thus provided the basis for all natural and political right. The thinkers who followed in the liberal tradition that Hobbes initiated, while modifying his political theory in various ways, held to this fundamental

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framework in which the ultimate end of political life is securing and protecting the rights of individuals as derived from their natural passions.\textsuperscript{34}

The principles beneath Hobbes’s political theory were in accord with a modern reorientation of the stated aims of philosophy or science, away from the contemplation of universal truths and toward the practical intervention upon the human condition in the name of peace and comfort. In the famous words of Francis Bacon, “the last and furthest end” of modern philosophy was “to conquer nature in action” in order to facilitate “the relief of Man’s estate” on earth.\textsuperscript{35} Or as Descartes put it, the aim of modern science was to “render ourselves, as it were, maters and possessors of nature,” such that we might “enjoy trouble-free the fruits of the earth.”\textsuperscript{36} The whole trajectory of modern political philosophy, insofar as it internalized these general aims, was to locate all human goods on the plane of the material body and to conceive of pain and death as the supreme human evils. All subsequent philosophical efforts within this conceptual horizon were necessarily oriented toward eliminating the sources of human suffering. At the broadest level we might say that this intellectual movement is most responsible for placing compassion at the center of modern man’s moral horizon, insofar as the ultimate aim of modern philosophy and science can be considered a compassionate aim.\textsuperscript{37} Moreover, notwithstanding the radical break with premodern philosophy that this represented, the

\textsuperscript{34} “If we may call liberalism that political doctrine which regards as the fundamental political fact the rights, as distinguished from the duties, of man and which identifies the function of the state with the protection or the safeguarding of those rights, we must say that the founder of liberalism was Hobbes” (Strauss 1965), 181-182.

\textsuperscript{35} Francis Bacon, \textit{Advancement of Learning} I.53; \textit{The Great Instauration} 21.

\textsuperscript{36} René Descartes, \textit{Discourse on Method} VI.62.

\textsuperscript{37} Considered in this sense, we are dealing with “social compassion” as described in the previous chapter; that is, an abstract and unsentimental version of it that nevertheless permeates much of the contemporary discourse surrounding the possibility for a politics of compassion.
The compassionate aim of the modern project could claim a certain tenuous affinity with the tradition of Christian charity, while at the same time usurping it. Accordingly, political life and political science alike were to be recalibrated along Machiavellian lines, staying within the parameters of mere humanity, while aiming toward the relief of human suffering and the attainment of peace and comfort. Hobbes disparaged premodern political philosophy for its misguided obsession with “virtue,” when instead the proper object of political philosophy consists in “the means of peaceable, sociable, comfortable living,” means which are to be found in the passions themselves, especially the “desire of ease and sensual delight” combined with “fear of death and wounds” (Lev. XV.40, XI.4). The true political science which Hobbes claimed to have first discovered presupposes that “the final cause, end, or design” of political life is “preservation” and “a more contented life” than is possible by nature alone (Lev. XVII.1). The state of nature, with its attendant pain, suffering, and death is the enemy to be fought, conquered, and replaced with a civil state wherein pleasure, comfort, and preservation are secured. In this way, it is tempting to say that compassion, albeit in an abstract of meta-level sense, becomes the raison d’être of political life and the animating spirit of political philosophy. At the very least, the new political philosophy exerts a kind of priming effect, conditioning the mind to think in terms of compassion when it comes to the more practical matters of virtue and action in political society.

The various strands of liberalism that emerged from these origins in early modern political philosophy were united in the pursuit of this aim—increasing man’s power over nature for the relief of man’s earthly estate—but also in positing as the fundamental unit of analysis the

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individual and his self-centered desires. Hobbes revealed how a systematic theory of political
rights, obligations, and institutions might be derived from the postulate of lone individuals,
assumed at least in the abstract to be asocial and selfish. Given that the essence of human nature
was said to lie in the passions, the strongest of which are fundamentally selfish, the political
problem became one of restraining the more destructive passions that perpetually threaten to
undermine any human interaction, to say nothing of extensive cooperation in a social order. To
solve this problem on its own terms, without recourse to a hierarchical conception of the soul,
political science would need to stoop to the level of the passions, singling out certain ones to be
prioritized by the individual in order to temper and restrain others. The most powerful version of
this solution to the political problem came in the form of “self-interest,” or the encouraging of
acquisitive passions like greed or avarice which could be allowed full expression through free
commercial enterprise within a liberal political framework, such that those passions might
oppose or offset the more destructive and antisocial passions like aggression, sexual desire, or
the lust for power and domination. It was believed that self-interest, understood properly,
would induce individuals who are naturally dissociated and selfish towards peaceful cooperation,
and ensure a degree of social cohesion sufficient for the sustenance of political society.

It may seem somewhat surprising, given the nature of this understanding of the political
problem, that early liberal thinkers did not turn to sentimental compassion, or other sympathetic
emotions. Yet although they embraced a new orientation toward feeling as such, they gave little

39 My description of self-interest here and throughout is informed primarily by Albert O. Hirschman, The Passions and the Interests (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), esp. 31-48. In this seminal essay, Hirschman explains the genesis of the concept of “interest” as a deliberate invention by liberal theorists who were seeking a middling alternative to the age-old reason vs. passion dichotomy. Self-interest was an idea that injected the passions with a dose of rationality that rendered them less unruly yet did not require reason to serve a utopian or idealistic function in the human psyche. Thus, the concept of “rational self-interest” resembles something like functional rationality but emphasizes that the fundamental motives of human action remain sub-rational.
attention to fellow-feeling. Notwithstanding the centrality of a certain kind of abstract “compassion” as a guiding principle or idea behind the modern project, the actual sentiment of compassion was not given any special consideration. Other-directed sentiments were glossed over or explained away in order to be made consistent with the assumption of man’s natural selfishness. Accordingly, and consistent with Machiavelli’s earlier teaching, appearances and experiences of compassion were reduced to mere aspects or mutations of self-love.40 Hobbes annihilated any distinction between “fellow-feeling,” “pity,” or “compassion,” reducing all of them to a feeling of “grief for the calamity of another,” which is more precisely “an expectation of pain” that “ariseth from the imagination that the like calamity may befall oneself” (Leviathan VI.48).41 Any manifestation of fellow-feeling, that is, was simply the expression of an emotional and epistemological selfishness that constituted the essence of human nature. Yet this assumption was absolutely crucial for the whole project; admitting that man was not exclusively a selfish being, or that his egoistic drives had to compete with potentially altruistic ones would necessarily weaken the case for his leaving the state of nature and binding himself with the constraints of political society.

For the early progenitors of liberalism, then, compassion and similar emotions, while perhaps unburdened of the opprobrium of prior ages, were not granted special significance, nor expected to play a major role within the liberal regime. Nor was sentimental compassion deemed

40 “If man naturally loved his fellow man, loved him, I mean, as his fellow man, there is no reason why everyone would not love everyone equally as equally men… By nature, then, we are not looking for friends but for honour or advantage from them… One must therefore lay it down that the origin of large and lasting societies lay not in mutual benevolence but in men’s mutual fear.” Hobbes, De Cive I.2.

41 For a more extreme version of this egoistic reductionism, see Bernard Mandeville, Fable of the Bees I.254-260. For similar reductions of compassion to self-love in the French context at this time, see La Rochefoucauld, Maximes 263-264; and Pierre Nicole, Essais de Morale III.123.
necessary in any significant way; to bring about social cohesion and stability, it would suffice to enlighten individuals as to their true material interests and encourage them to pursue those interests rationally within the boundaries of a stipulated legal framework. From the perspective of the new political science, sentimental compassion would be superfluous. Yet it was precisely the social consequences of the new political science, built upon the teachings of Machiavelli and Hobbes, that would necessitate a return to sentimental compassion in the near future.

Liberalism and the Problem of Human Relations

The emergence of liberalism in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries coincided with a general neglect of compassion in political thought, for reasons outlined above. Yet actual manifestations of liberalism in eighteenth-century societies like England or the Netherlands raised new concerns that would compel later modern thinkers to turn to compassion. In particular, societies committed to facilitating acquisitive passions, and structured around a conception of government as limited to the protection of individual rights, would be forced to grapple with novel issues stemming from egocentrism, atomism, and, in later years, the question of equality. It was within a constellation of thoroughly modern political problems that compassion would burst onto the political scene, and the moment in which those problems began to be perceived is captured nicely in the political thought of Montesquieu. For Montesquieu’s thought marks a critical juncture in the modern evolution of compassion, providing a link between the early liberal theory rooted in the teachings of Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Locke, and the later modern thinkers who would turn to compassion out of dissatisfaction with those teachings. More precisely, Montesquieu grasps, at least in outline form, what would later come
to light as the fundamental problem of modern compassion. Liberalism appears to secure some of the necessary preconditions for the flourishing of strong other-directed sentiments—the preconditions for a kinder, gentler, more harmonious, and more compassionate society—and yet the bourgeois citizens of the liberal society fail to manifest such sentiments. In exploring briefly these concerns as they arise Montesquieu’s thought, we will better understand the ground on which later thinkers struggled to invigorate compassion in liberal democracy.

The resilience of liberalism owes a great deal to its apparently gentle nature, which has contributed much to its lasting attractiveness. From the beginning, the promise of liberalism was to lift man out of the state of nature, such that he might leave behind that condition of insecurity and unpredictability that necessitated a harsh posture toward oneself and the world. And as indicated above, the liberal doctrine of self-interest was devised as a means to achieve this softer and gentler mode of existence by channeling selfish passions in a direction conducive to peaceful cooperation. Montesquieu’s contribution to this broader project is contained in his magnum opus, *The Spirit of the Laws*, which, if the American Revolution may be taken as an indicator, stands as perhaps the most influential articulation of liberal political principles.42

Montesquieu’s liberal pedigree is made clear in the opening passages of *The Spirit of the Laws*, where he follows Machiavelli in drawing a sharp distinction between the ethical and the

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political (SL Foreword; I.1; cf. IV.5), and Hobbes and Locke in taking man’s origins in the state of nature as a point of departure for political science (SL I.2). He follows his liberal predecessors further still by insisting upon the predominance of the passions in human nature and grounding both politics and morality in man’s desires and sentiments. And perhaps most significantly, Montesquieu immediately rules out transcendence as a valid normative category, reducing God to “a primitive reason” that has generated the various “laws” by which both the natural and human world operate; in principle, there is nothing in the orderly rules through which “God” governs that is inaccessible to human reason, including the moral relations among men (SL I.1).

Yet at first glance Montesquieu also departs from liberal orthodoxy by positing a weak but nonetheless innate sociability on the part of natural man. In the state of nature, “fear would lead men to flee one another, but the marks of mutual fear would soon persuade them to approach one another. They would also be so inclined by the pleasure one animal feels at the approach of an animal of its own kind” (SL I.2). Asserting the existence of weak social desires that might temper selfish ones marks a crucial break with Hobbesian egoism and seems to point in the direction of a different kind of liberalism in which compassion might play a more


45 On this general point see Thomas L. Pangle, The Theological Basis of Liberal Modernity in Montesquieu’s Spirit of the Laws (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).
foundational role. This does not turn out to be the case, however, as the weak sociability that Montesquieu speaks of is born of natural fear and timidity, as opposed to innate benevolence. Despite the lip service paid to natural sociability, Montesquieu concedes that even if it is not his original condition, nature quickly pushes man into an inevitable state of war (SL I.3). On this front there seems to be little distance between Montesquieu, on the one hand, and Hobbes and Locke on the other. Nonetheless, there is some distance, and we might wonder whether his slightly more sociable construction of human nature may point toward a natural justification for compassion or other prosocial emotions that is lacking in pre-Montesquieuian liberalism.46

Montesquieu’s ultimate defense of liberalism is presented in his interpretation of the liberal commercial society that was emerging in mid eighteenth-century England, which provided the first real manifestation of liberal theory and its doctrine of self-interest. The end or aim of the English regime, Montesquieu observed, was political liberty, and the lifestyle of its people, being left free to indulge their self-interested passions, tended toward acquisitive commercial activity (SL XIX.27). For Montesquieu, the actualization of liberty establishes a more peaceful and tranquil mode of daily existence: “Political liberty in a citizen is that tranquility of spirit which comes from the opinion each one has of his security, and in order for him to have this liberty the government must be such that one citizen cannot fear another citizen”

46 Scholars are divided over the question of natural sociability in Montesquieu. Some, like Lowenthal (1959) and Pangle (1973), characterize him as leaning more heavily towards the Hobbesian or Rousseauean position of man as naturally asocial (but see the reference at note 47 below, where Pangle does acknowledge natural sociability as an important element of Montesquieu’s thought). For an alternative reading that emphasizes the distance between Montesquieu and his predecessors on this question, see Rasmussen (2014), 252-258. I am sympathetic to both positions and would argue that they are not necessarily incompatible. Montesquieu claims that man is naturally transgressive of those laws of nature by which he is a social animal. Natural sociability need not imply the total absence of certain asocial proclivities which predominate in particular circumstances. But it does provide some natural grounding, on the basis of sentiment, for the pursuit of a more humane society. The real question is whether any sort of general, universal conclusions can be drawn from a premise that is so qualified. Montesquieu’s thought raises some doubts about this.
We might recall here that man’s natural condition, according to Montesquieu, is a state of weak sociability and very powerful fear, the latter of which is inimical to any sense of security or tranquility. The great appeal of the liberal regime lies in the fact that it dispenses with this natural condition of fear but leaves intact that weak element of sociability. More precisely, liberal political institutions carefully divide and disperse power such that citizens need not fear oppression, either from political authorities or fellow citizens, yet also find themselves unable to impose their will on others, a condition that necessarily renders their interpersonal relations softer and gentler.\textsuperscript{47} Thus, as Thomas Pangle puts it, for Montesquieu the model of English liberalism seems justified in part because it “promotes the only naturally social or unselfish human impulses.”\textsuperscript{48}

But does the liberal regime actively promote sociability, or does it only appear to insofar as it alleviates man’s primordial fear? What exactly is the nature of the gentleness that Montesquieu perceives? Is a gentle society necessarily one in which citizens are committed to one another and the community through their affections? Is a tranquil society necessarily a happy and flourishing one? The inherent gentleness of liberalism, for Montesquieu, derives not only from an institutional structure which disperses and softens applications of power, but from the emphasis that it places on the private pursuit of material wellbeing through commercial activity. “The natural effect of commerce is to lead to peace,” because “commerce cures destructive prejudices, and it is an almost general rule that everywhere there are gentle mores, there is commerce and that everywhere there is commerce, there are gentle mores” (SL XI.5). In part,

\textsuperscript{47} Manent (1995), 61.

\textsuperscript{48} Pangle (1973), 155.
commercial activity softens men by enlightening them: “Commerce has spread knowledge of the mores of all nations everywhere; they have been compared to each other, and good things have resulted from this” (SL XX.1). Montesquieu portrays commerce here as the driving force behind progress and civilization. The limited range of human interaction in pre-commercial societies enabled the entrenchment of parochial social customs that reflected ignorance, superstition, and prejudice, or as Montesquieu puts it, mores that are “pure,” “destructive,” and “barbarous” (SL XX.1). Furthermore, when combined with the security and tranquility afforded by liberal political institutions, commercial activity enlightens men as to their mutual neediness (or perhaps more precisely their mutual acquisitiveness) and the potential for mutual utility, and thus facilitates the kind of interdependence manifested in market exchange (SL XIX.27; XX.2). As a result, liberal political arrangements and commercial activity combine to produce softer and gentler conditions at both the international and domestic level. Not only is the liberal commercial republic unlikely to compromise its economic interests by engaging in conventional warfare, but citizens within such a republic are conditioned to recognize the mutual humanity of their fellows. As a result, traditional barriers that separate men from one another and harden their hearts against those on the other side of the barrier are eroded while sentiments become unified and homogenized.

To fully understand the nature of liberal gentleness, we must look at how Montesquieu evaluates the English commercial society comparatively vis-à-vis the republics of Greek and Roman antiquity. Classical republican regimes had depended entirely on the presence of virtue, and virtue itself consisted in the inculcation of certain passions: “Virtue, in a republic, is a very simple thing: it is love of the republic; it is a feeling and not a result of knowledge” (SL V.2). Political virtue, the patriotic passion for one’s homeland and the disciplined devotion to its laws,
was the principle that sustained the old republics. But political virtue of this sort entailed a degree of sacrifice and self-inflicted frugality that generally hardens men: “political virtue is a renunciation of oneself, which is always a very painful thing” (SL IV.5; cf. V.3-6). The republics of old required “the full power of education” to instill a public spiritedness that does not come to man naturally (SL IV. 4-5). Under these circumstances commerce and the pursuit of acquisitive passions that might undermine one’s attachment to the community had to be strictly regulated, if not forbidden altogether.\(^49\) The greatest degree of artifice—one might say the greatest degree of inhumanity—was required to twist human nature into a form that might sustain widespread patriotic devotion. To drive this point home, Montesquieu goes so far as to compare the political virtue of republican citizens to the fanaticism of ascetic Christian monks (SL V.2). Passionate political virtue is incompatible with the pursuit of self-interest and can only be indulged through public-spirited activities that redound to the glory and honor of the fatherland. As a result, war becomes one of the few available avenues for the expression of one’s passions (SL IV.8; VIII.5; X.6).\(^50\) Of course, this definition of virtue is fictional, bearing little resemblance to the manner in which classical political philosophy had conceived of it.\(^51\) By redefining virtue in the way that he does here, Montesquieu undermines the claims of the older tradition and its vision of the moral order in which human passions are to be located, in order to advance the claims of liberal modernity and its all-encompassing moral framework of humanity.

\(^{49}\) See esp. SL IV.6. In addition, Montesquieu cites several other harsh restrictions that were necessary to the inculcation of political virtue, including a rigorous system of censorship (SL V.19) and sumptuary laws (SL VII.2).

\(^{50}\) The political virtue of classical republics presupposed a closed society, in which the patriotic passions of citizens could only be vented against outsiders. Montesquieu’s first actual example of the classical republic in action is the Athenian custom of executing foreigners who mingled in politics (SL II.2).

For Montesquieu, a principal advantage of the liberal commercial republic as typified in modern England is that in relying on self-interested as opposed to self-sacrificing behavior, this regime inculcates a different set of passions that don’t engender such harshness of character, and thus don’t necessitate outbursts of violence and destruction. In the liberal commercial republic, that is, “humanity […] is allowed to come to the surface in human intercourse.”52 In his study of the ancient Romans, Montesquieu emphasizes the contrast between their “fierce humor” and our “gentler manners” that more reliably respond to the weak inclinations of “natural gentleness and justice” (Considerations XV). The difference between the two historical ages is attributed to a difference in the direction given to mores through habituation: “Since the Romans were accustomed to making sport of human nature… they could scarcely know the virtue we call humanity” (ibid.).53 Montesquieu expresses his preference for modern humanity over ancient political virtue, declaring that “homage must be paid to our modern times, to contemporary reasoning, to the religion of the present day, to our philosophy, and to our mores” (SL X.3; cf. XXIV.3; XXIX.14).

Based on all of this, we might expect liberal commercial societies to stand as bastions of compassion and humanitarian fellow-feeling. The gentleness that Montesquieu ascribes to the spread of commerce is certainly a prerequisite for any real flourishing of other-directed sentiments. Men are never more unfeeling toward their fellows than when they have hardened their hearts against them, and such are the prejudices that Montesquieu claims will be cured by

52 Pangle (1973, 204).

53 For the deeper implications of Montesquieu’s elevation of l’humanité, see Pangle (1973, 322-323 n.8); for the Machiavellian origins of this virtue, in addition to the discussion above in this chapter, see Andrea Radasanu, “Montesquieu on Ancient Greek Foreign Relations: Toward National Self-Interest and International Peace,” Political Research Quarterly 20, no. 10 (2012): 1-15, esp. 6, 14n.19.
enlightened modernity. Yet Montesquieu himself indicates at times that such hopes may in fact be futile, and his endorsement of liberal modernity is not without qualification or the intimation of what must be foregone in choosing humanity over virtue. The qualifications, moreover, point to concerns regarding the limited efficacy of sentimental compassion. In the first place, we might note that the passage quoted above as paying homage to enlightened modernity is immediately followed by a reflection on the cruelty with which modern men wage wars of colonial conquest, thus calling into question the initial claim.

More importantly, Montesquieu’s detailed description of modern English society suggests that the new condition of gentleness is compatible with, perhaps even inseparable from, a profound coldness or distance in human relations. The liberal commercial republic in England is populated with bourgeois “confederates” whose relations are softened yet rendered shallower. Even as this society fosters peace and the enlightened qualities of humanity, it is sustained by the countervailing forces of self-interest and materialistic acquisitiveness that tend to separate individuals from one another and produce a kind of social atomism that is all too characteristic of liberal commercial society as such. Montesquieu sees in modern England a mass of individuals who are inclined to forget “the laws of friendship,” and, “living mostly alone with themselves […] often find themselves among unfamiliar people” (SL XIX.27). Far from appearing happy and content, they are restless and anxious, “a people to whom everything can be intolerable” and among whom “hatred, envy, jealousy, and the ardor for enriching and distinguishing oneself […] appear to their full extent” (SL XIV.13, XIX.27). This outcome is unavoidable where individuals are at liberty to pursue their material interests through commercial activity: “if the spirit of commerce unites nations, it does not unite individuals in the same way. We see that in countries where one is affected only by the spirit of commerce, there is traffic in all human activities and
all moral virtues; the smallest things, those required by humanity, are done or given for money” (SL XX.2). Thus, the true nature of the new moral outlook grounded in “humanity” comes to light as something much less benign than what we might be led to hope for at first glance. Whatever moral dictates might be derived from humanity tend to become commodified, enlisted in service to the calculating pursuit of material interest. The gentleness that it brings, while desirable in itself, threatens to blind us to the fundamentally impoverished nature of the underlying human relations.

That human relations in the modern commercial republic are at once softer and more superficial only sharpens the contrast between these societies and their premodern counterparts. In barbarous societies where harshness is engendered by “destructive prejudices” and “pure mores,” there is also a deeper intimacy in relations, and selfless acts of devotion on behalf of others are more frequent. Montesquieu observes that “hospitality, so rare among commercial countries, is notable among bandit peoples” (SL XX.2). Similarly, the harsh political virtue of the premodern republics had sustained a “family-like cohesion” among citizens, who willingly subordinated their own wellbeing to that of their fellows and fatherland.54 This contrast, between harshness that is conducive to action and intimacy, and gentleness that is conducive to passivity and atomism, is sustained throughout Montesquieu’s work, and indicates his deeper reservations regarding the strength of modern “humanity” as a reliable motive to other-directed action.

It would be wrong to conclude from this that Montesquieu harbors any sort of nostalgia for the premodern alternatives to liberal commercial society. As indicated above, he quite explicitly sides with the moderns against the ancients, and he chastises the seventeenth-century

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English for misguidedly attempting to revitalize republican political virtue (SL III.3).

Nonetheless, Montesquieu’s study of the new English commercial republic paints a picture that is full of contradictions. On the one hand, commerce is supposed to cure destructive prejudices and break down conventional barriers that put men at odds with one another; on the other hand, the unbridled pursuit of material self-interest that commerce encourages raises barriers of its own that isolate men from one another. Insofar as liberal commercial society tends toward the unification of sentiments and the homogenization of mores, it produces a condition where men are alike yet distant from one another; they readily recognize the common humanity of their fellows, but the familiarity does not extend much further than this.\(^55\) Thus, underlying Montesquieu’s apparent belief in liberal progress and enlightenment is a hard-nosed realism which acknowledges that the sociable or humane virtues will always concede when confronted with the acquisitive passions of self-interest.\(^56\)

In all, the conditions that Montesquieu describes seem to call for a reinvigoration of compassion and other prosocial emotions that might better attach individuals to their fellows. Liberalism does produce a certain gentleness and the recognition of equality, conditions that may

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\(^{55}\) The issue of homogenization creates a further tension in Montesquieu’s thought, insofar as he is taken to be a great proponent of particularism and an enemy of universalism in politics (see e.g. SL I.3). As people become more alike with the spread of commerce and liberal mores, the efficacy of particular, local, traditional norms and customs will necessarily be compromised. It is not clear how Montesquieu himself would propose to handle this problem, or if he even yet recognizes it as a problem. For a recent exposition of particularism in Montesquieu that grapples with this issue, see Joshua Bandoch, The Politics of Place: Montesquieu, Particularism, and the Pursuit of Liberty (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2017).

\(^{56}\) This conclusion is at odds with those scholars who interpret Montesquieu’s thought in a more idealistic light. For example, Robert Howse, “Montesquieu on Commerce, Conquest, War, and Peace,” Brooklyn Journal of International Law, Vol. 31, No. 3 (2006): 1-16, argues that Montesquieu believed compassionate humanity, the by-product of commercial exchange and cross-cultural interaction, was capable of bridging social cleavages which we might be tempted to consider intractable – religious convictions, for example – and producing a new epoch of peace and cooperation. For a convincing analysis that upholds Montesquieu’s Machiavellian realism against such interpretations, see Radasanu (2012).
be necessary for the fruitful exercise of compassion. Yet this gentleness appears to be, in the final analysis, little more than a negative condition characterized by the absence of that primal fear that makes the state of nature so unbearable. It implies nothing in the way of compassion as an active principle or motive to beneficent action on behalf of unfortunate others. If the ancients were correct in asserting that a truly noble act of beneficence entails a degree of self-sacrifice, the liberal regime as described by Montesquieu would appear to undermine the possibility for such motives. Moreover, if classical political philosophy and Christianity were correct to insist that sentimental fellow-feeling must be situated within a moral order that acknowledges the existence of higher-order goods of an immaterial sort, the liberal regime appears problematic. If anything, Montesquieu’s thought provides good reason to doubt whether a desirable form of compassion is capable of manifesting itself in the midst of modern atomism and individualism. In this regard, his novel use of *humanité* is remarkable for its simultaneous connotations of universality and indiscriminateness. It brings to mind our familiarity with a certain “humanitarian sensibility” that claims to encompass the whole world yet struggles to fix its aim on any particular objects. As we have seen, Montesquieu, even as he endorsed it, was the first to acknowledge that this modern virtue was more akin to a passive sentiment than an active modification of the soul, and one that was a close ally of egoism. To grasp the deep implications that arise from this realization, we must turn our attention to the work of Rousseau, who perceived these problems with even greater clarity and turned to compassion in his search for an alternative to the liberal morality of self-interest.
CHAPTER 3
ROUSSEAU AND THE CULTIVATION OF COMPASSION

The reason why compassion features so prominently in our moral consciousness is directly related to certain problems that are endemic to modern political philosophy and its moral commitments. The morality of rational self-interest is problematic from the perspective of social life, and so it seemed to many of the political thinkers who first witnessed the manifest effects of liberal commercial society. Even Montesquieu, who described the emerging liberal order with a tone of optimism, harbored serious reservations about the strength of social bonds in that order. His descriptions of the English regime evinced an awareness that peace and prosperity had been purchased at the cost of a hollowing out in human relations and a loss of devotion from one to another and to the community. In this he proved to be correct, for these are precisely the problems which constitute the crisis of liberal democracy, and it is with a view to them that we are inclined to embrace compassion as morally fruitful sentiment and remedy. In doing so, whether we realize it or not, we are following in the footsteps of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, though only remotely as will become clear in this chapter.

As the concerns that were inchoate in Montesquieu’s political thought became more explicit throughout the eighteenth century, a number of thinkers began turning to compassion and other forms of sentimental fellow-feeling in search of some other-directed tendency in human nature that might be harnessed to offset the narrow-minded pursuit of material self-
interest and the social condition that resulted from it.¹ Jean-Jacques Rousseau stands out in this context as the most incisive critic of liberalism and the most outspoken proponent of compassion. Today he is remembered chiefly for his scathing denunciations of liberal commercial society, and for initiating a longstanding tradition of Counter-Enlightenment criticism of modernity. He is also responsible for bringing compassion into the purview of political thought and political life, to the extent that we might plausibly consider him the inventor of modern compassion.² These two strands of his thought are intimately related. In Rousseau’s view, liberalism and its morality of self-interest is predicated on false principles which are problematic both from the perspective of individual happiness and that of social or political cohesion. In his critique of liberalism, compassion comes to light as a sentimental mechanism that might provide a counterpoise to both of these problems. Thus, those who theorize about a politics of compassion in the present day are working in the spirit of Rousseau.

Yet as we have seen in the previous chapter, sentimental compassion was historically viewed with suspicion by the premodern traditions of thought, and Rousseau shares many of these suspicions. In his view compassion, insofar as it remains a freestanding sentiment severed from any guiding principle, is generally powerless to support social life and the morality that it requires. Rousseau’s effort to inspire an ethic of compassion thus does not stop at the cultivation of good sentiments but extends to the establishment of a framework of moral belief, beyond the

¹ For surveys of the eighteenth-century turn toward fellow-feeling, see Ryan Patrick Hanley, “The Eighteenth-Century Context of Sympathy from Spinoza to Kant,” in Schliesser (2015), 171-198; and Frazer (2010).

needs and passions of the body, in which compassion might thrive. Rousseau’s most important moral rhetoric is delivered in his teaching on natural religion, which is intended to shape the moral outlook of those living in the liberal commercial society with a view to empowering their compassion. In other words, Rousseau’s most focused statements on compassion do not provide us with his full account of that sentiment; to understand his teaching on compassion requires that these statements be supplemented by a careful examination of his “Profession of Faith of the Savoyard Vicar.” Far from suggesting that we can alleviate the social and political ills of liberal modernity through a morality of sentimental compassion, Rousseau points to the need for a recovery of a higher moral framework capable of nourishing substantive moral beliefs that might inform and guide sentimental compassion in the pursuit of a more wholesome social life.

Rousseau’s efforts to inspire compassion thus speak to problems that we are familiar with in the present day as we speculate about the need for compassion in our current political condition. But although Rousseau is concerned with finding ways to offset the deleterious effects of liberal commercial society, he believes that those problems originate at a much deeper level, in social life as such rather than this or that particular regime or condition. For this reason, his hopes for what compassion might accomplish in liberal modernity are ultimately quite limited. Rousseau’s compassion, even in its most developed form, is not a solution but a palliative, operating on the margins to alleviate without curing social and political ills. The expectations that one attaches to compassion or any other human sentiment must ultimately reflect a particular vision of human nature, and if we accept Rousseau’s vision, we must also accept the political problem as a permanent feature of our reality. In what follows, I begin by establishing Rousseau’s view of this fundamental problem. I then briefly examine his belief that liberalism
and its morality of rational self-interest exacerbates this problem, before exploring and assessing his teaching on compassion.

The Problem of Man in Society

Rousseau’s treatment of compassion, like the whole of his thought, is oriented toward the fundamental problem of man in society, or the conflict that necessarily occurs, wherever men live together, between the self-regarding inclinations of the individual and the stringent demands of social life. The most straightforward articulation of this problem is found in the Discourse on Inequality, a work in which Rousseau claims to have conveyed the foundational principles of his thought (Conf. II.viii, 379). In that work, Rousseau claims that by nature man is not fit for society (DI 126-128). If we separate what is socially acquired from what is truly natural in man, we can observe that there are no innate social principles or other-regarding inclinations, there is only self-love (amour de soi). Driven by this unitary instinct, human beings naturally seek to preserve their lives and to enjoy the sweet sentiment of existence itself, but their striving goes no further than this (DI 117, 142). Thus, man is naturally inclined toward a life of self-sufficiency and complete independence from others. Such a life may seem impossible today, but in his original primitive state this condition would have been within reach because man’s natural desires were limited to his basic bodily needs. Moreover, the mental capacities of the natural man were rudimentary, limited to perception and feeling without reason or imagination, and this was sufficient to guide him to the satisfaction of his instinctual desires without the risk of conjuring up new ones in his mind. On the basis of this equilibrium between his desires and his capacities to fulfill them, happiness in self-sufficiency was the lot of man as intended by nature.
From his reflections on human nature, Rousseau derives the principle that serves as the foundation for his whole system of thought, namely that man is naturally good. Man is naturally good for himself because he is led by self-love to live a well-ordered and self-sufficient life. And although he is not a social animal, he is naturally good for the others he may happen to encounter thanks to a rudimentary capacity for pity (pitié), which Rousseau describes as a “principle” of human nature that “inspires in us a natural repugnance to see any sensitive being perish or suffer” (DI 95). Natural pity is a “pure movement of nature prior to all reflection,” manifested in a subconscious feeling of “identification” that “puts us in the position of him who suffers” (DI 131-132). This pure movement is remarkably simple; indeed, pity is “so natural that even beasts sometimes give perceptible signs of it” by recoiling at the sight of suffering fellows or avoiding the unnecessary infliction of pain (DI 130). In keeping with the limited mental faculties of the natural man, natural pity is a primitive reflex that operates through the medium of rudimentary emotional identification and requires very little in the way of cognitive effort.

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3 The best study of Rousseau’s system of thought, which has deeply influenced my own reading of Rousseau, is Arthur M. Melzer, The Natural Goodness of Man: On the System of Rousseau’s Thought (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990); on the meaning of Rousseau’s foundational principle of natural goodness, see esp. 15-26.

4 In this chapter I continue to treat “pity” and “compassion” as synonymous. Rousseau very rarely employs la compassion, opting instead for la pitié in most of his writings. As will become clear below, there is a crucial difference between la pitié naturelle, the compassion belonging to natural man in Rousseau’s state of nature, and la pitié simply, which is used in referring to the cultivated or refined compassion of man in society. I maintain this distinction throughout by referring to “natural” pity or compassion, as opposed to “cultivated” or “sociable” pity or compassion. In doing so I follow a number of other scholars who have separated the two species of compassion, while treating compassion and pity as synonymous in Rousseau; see e.g. Marc F. Plattner, Rousseau’s State of Nature: An Interpretation of the Discourse on Inequality (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 1979), 82-87; Strauss (1965), 283-285; Hanley (2017), 66-103; and Michelle A. Schwarze and John T. Scott, “Mutual Sympathy and the Moral Economy: Adam Smith Reviews Rousseau," The Journal of Politics 81, no. 1 (2019): 66-80. Others have treated this same distinction as one between “pity” and “compassion;” see e.g. Michael Schleeter, “Adam Smith and Jean-Jacques Rousseau on the Vices of the Marketplace,” in Adam Smith and Rousseau: Ethics, Politics, and Economics, Maria Pia Paganelli, Dennis C. Rasmussen, and Craig Smith eds. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 127-142.
At a glance it may seem that the foundations of Rousseau’s political thought are equipped to address the problem of social relations in liberal modernity, thanks to his sustained emphasis on the instinctive originality of something like compassion. Yet the natural pity that Rousseau describes cannot be taken for an inchoate social instinct or moral sentiment, for natural man is an asocial and amoral creature. Rather, natural pity is a negative principle of conduct and an aspect of self-love that contributes to the preservation of the species by discouraging the individual from harming others in the pursuit of his desires. The “inner impulse of commiseration,” so long as it is heeded and not resisted, ensures that one man “will never harm another man or even another sensitive being, except in the legitimate case where, his preservation being concerned, he is obliged to give himself preference” (DI 95). Natural pity thus establishes something like an informal, pre-political rule of conduct that is the inverse of the Golden Rule: “Do what is good for you with the least possible harm to others” (DI 133). The ability to identify with other beings who are suffering produces a general aversion toward being a cause of suffering. But natural pity does not entail beneficence or active concern for others; it does not compel a person to go out of his way to assist someone else in need.

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5 Roger D. Masters, The Political Philosophy of Rousseau (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), 46-47, 136-146, argues that natural pity is not even a sentiment as such, but is more akin to an evolutionary principle operating at the level of the species. Others have contended that natural pity plays a more positive role in Rousseau’s system of thought as a psychological function that lies at the root of social experience and is transferred over into social or political life; see e.g. Mira Morgenstern, Rousseau and the Politics of Ambiguity: Self, Culture, and Society (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), 59-60; and David James, “Rousseau on Needs, Language, and Pity: The Limits of ‘Public Reason,’” European Journal of Political Theory 10, no. 3 (2011): 372-393.

6 There is a single statement in the Discourse on Inequality that would seem to indicate otherwise: “pity […] carries us without reflection to the aid of those whom we see suffer” (DI 133). Some might be inclined to take this statement at face value; see e.g. David Lay Williams, Rousseau’s Social Contract: An Introduction (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 17. This statement, however, runs counter to the preponderance of other descriptions of natural pity in terms of passivity and its negative orientation. Moreover, since it is found near the very end of Rousseau’s extended treatment of natural pity, which is explicitly presented as a refutation of Hobbes
desires few enough, that individuals do not typically stand in need of the assistance of others; and even on those rare occasions when they do, pity does not reliably prompt such assistance (*DI* 126-127). Indeed, insofar as Rousseau repeatedly describes it in terms of “agitation” or “repugnance,” pity seems as likely to prompt the avoidance of suffering as the active relief of it (*DI* 95, 131-132). In other words, the very naturalness of pity means that it is suited to a presocial condition in which it is infrequently needed, where there is little misery or suffering, a condition of radical independence. Accordingly, Rousseau’s actual examples of natural pity in action are negative, and moreover are always qualified by the primacy of self-love and the demands of self-preservation (*DI* 133, 144-145).

Thus, although Rousseau is quite interested to speak of human nature in terms of compassion, the practical conclusions that can be drawn from this are quite limited. Natural pity is part of what makes the natural man good, but that goodness does not entail what we would consider as the social virtues of altruistic care and concern. Rather, the part of man’s natural goodness that is upheld by pity is a propensity to behave peaceably and to mind one’s own business, a propensity that distances Rousseau’s state of nature account from that of Hobbes by negating those causes of war that the latter had supposed to render man’s natural condition miserable. In Rousseau’s account the natural man is good, happy, and whole, living a self-sufficient life of “profound indifference” to others, neither willing to harm them nor to go out of his way to help them (*DI* 179).

and Mandeville, I would argue that it is best read as a concluding rhetorical flourish against those thinkers as distinguished from the substantive description that is conveyed in the preceding passages.

7 On this point see Schwarze and Scott (2019), 71, who aptly observe that the function of Rousseau’s natural pity is akin to the *daimon* of Socrates.
In time, due to a series of historical accidents, man abandoned his original condition of asocial simplicity and happiness to join forces with other men in the establishment of large-scale societies. The emergence of society coincided with an equally accidental development of man’s mental capacities, which expanded to include reason and imagination, thus generating a host of new desires and passions that he was unable to satisfy through his own efforts alone. For Rousseau, the crucial moment in human development occurred when man first became conscious of himself in relation to or comparison with other men. Once the individual is capable of looking at other human beings and comparing himself with them, gentle self-love (*amour de soi*) is transformed into unruly *amour-propre*, or vanity, a restless desire for superiority and recognition (*DI* 148-149, 222). When social life begins, *amour-propre* becomes the supreme animating principle in the human soul, and the simple desires of nature give way to more complex and abstract desires for status, distinction, esteem, and honor. To the individual driven by *amour-propre*, it is not enough simply to be good and happy if one is not also superior to and happier than one’s neighbor. This amounts to a profound mutilation of the human being that is problematic from the perspective of individual happiness and wholeness. The creature that was made for self-sufficiency and independence now finds himself completely dependent on conditions that are beyond his direct control or capacity to achieve. He is concerned with his position vis-à-vis others, and with the opinion that others hold of him; he is internally divided between his absolute existence as a natural being living for himself and his relative existence as a social being living for others (*DI* 179-180).

The emergence of *amour-propre* as the ruling principle of the human soul is equally problematic from the perspective of society. Individuals who are striving for relative superiority necessarily run up against others who are striving for the same. As private desires multiply to
become ever more diverse and idiosyncratic, conflicts of interest arise that turn men into enemies. *Amour-propre* exercises such power over the human psyche that it incapacitates natural pity and “inspires in men all the harm they do to one another” (*DI* 222; cf. 132). The man living in society knows that he often stands to gain at the expense of others, and his desire for gain outweighs any natural reluctance to impose the expense. Natural pity, not particularly strong to begin with, cannot withstand the force of the passions that are generated and rationalized in the context of social life. Of course, no society can function if its members frequently harm one another in the pursuit of selfish aims; if social cooperation does not arise naturally, it must be imposed forcefully, and for this reason society as such is inseparable from a coercive authority. Social order requires that individuals must be made to submit to certain duties or constraints that frustrate their private inclinations. Shackled with unnatural social restraints, *amour-propre* lashes out violently in the human soul, manifesting in anger, resentment, anxiety, and discontent.

Insofar as man finds himself living in society, then, his natural goodness, happiness, and wholeness are compromised. Having lost touch with his original nature, he is a disintegrated person, internally torn between his inclinations and his duties, yearning for the independence to pursue his ends yet dependent on others as means to those ends, alienated alike from himself and from those around him. For Rousseau, all human maladies can be traced to the contradiction that lies at the heart of social life as such. His teaching on compassion, therefore, can only be assessed properly with a view to this fundamental problem. Staying within the purview of Rousseau’s thought, the question we must keep in mind is whether or not compassion can do

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*8* Strauss (1965), 270, 283, identifies the weakening of natural pity as “the decisive change” that took place when man left the state of nature.

*9* For more on the theme of alienation in Rousseau, see Melzer (1990), 70-77; and Morgenstern (1996), 132-157.
anything to solve or at least alleviate this problem. But before turning to Rousseau’s positive teaching on compassion, we must briefly examine his critical engagement with the political theorists who preceded him, and particularly those of the liberal tradition. For in Rousseau’s estimation, it is liberalism’s insufficiency in responding to the problem of man in society that necessitates a serious consideration of compassion.

Beyond Rational Self-Interest

For Rousseau, the problem of man in society is a universal one, persisting wherever there are human communities. The deep tension between man’s inclinations and duties is rooted in society as such and not its particular mode of organization. Nonetheless, Rousseau believes that a few societies in human history discovered a political solution capable of reconciling this tension to the degree that it can be reconciled, by psychologically transforming men into citizens. This was accomplished by ancient societies like Sparta and Rome that most closely approximated the classical conception of the polis (DAS 43-46; DI 80; SC 1.6, IV.4-7; E I.39-40). The ancient polis had responded to the problem of man in society by implementing a rigorous system of public education that de-natured men—stripped them of their natural inclinations—by training them to virtue. For Rousseau, virtue means roughly the same thing it does for Montesquieu: a harsh discipline or self-repression that enables one to will something other than one’s own selfish desires, or to sacrifice one’s own private interests for the good of the community (GM I.4, 167-68; II.4, 191). Or, in a language more familiar to readers of the Social Contract, virtue is

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10 For the psychological transformation of men into citizens, and the rhetorical purpose that Sparta and Rome play in Rousseau’s thought, see Judith N. Shklar, Men and Citizens: A Study of Rousseau’s Social Theory (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 1-32.
manifested when individuals conform their private wills to the general will by subjecting their selfish interests and desires to a test of generalizability: “virtue is only this conformity of the private will to the general” (PE 217; SC II.4). In other words, virtue is a kind of internal force or strength wielded by the individual against his natural inclinations.

As Montesquieu had indicated, such virtue does not come naturally or easily to man, and if it existed in the classical polis it was on account of a rigorous indoctrination facilitated by harsh political institutions. Instilling virtue was “the great art of the governments of antiquity,” but the public education that is needed to instill virtue can only be practiced under very limited conditions (PE 217). In contrast to the sprawling open society of the liberal regime, the polis is necessarily a small closed society that is ethnically homogenous and economically egalitarian. In contrast to the permissiveness of liberal institutions, the polis trains individuals to virtue through the strict enforcement of repressive sumptuary laws, censorship, martial training, civil religion, and other measures that forcefully transform men into virtuous citizens who think of themselves only in relation to the community. These institutions operate upon each individual not by removing amour-propre, but by redirecting it away from the self and toward the achievement of collective goals.\footnote{On virtuous citizenship as a redirection of amour-propre, see Orwin (2000a), 68 and Shklar (1969), 15-16.} Private interests are whittled down and replaced as citizens internalize public ends. Private passions are transformed into a patriotic love of the fatherland, its laws, and its collective freedom that culminates in an indifference to oneself or one’s own things.

In this way, the classical polis responds to the problem of man in society not by seeking a tenuous balance between man’s inclinations and duties, but by replacing the former with the latter to the greatest possible extent. If the fundamental problem is not entirely resolved, it is at
least rendered less pernicious. Whereas the man living in society is alienated from himself and his fellows on account of his internal dividedness, the virtuous citizen is completely integrated into the political society, existing not as a private person but as part of a political whole. Unity of soul forcefully imposed through virtue approximates the natural wholeness that is lost when man enters society. Moreover, this wholeness is harmoniously reflected at the social level, where cohesion is maintained through shared interests and affections. Passionate devotion to the community facilitates acts of self-sacrifice or altruism in the name of the common good. Thus, a virtuous citizen, as contrasted with a private individual living in society, is better for himself and for others, insofar as he represses his natural inclinations by channeling his amour-propre toward the expression of his public duties.

Although Rousseau paints an attractive picture of political virtue throughout his works, he also underscores the extreme difficulty of instilling it. A polis devoted to virtue must perpetually swim against the current of human nature, which requires an almost godlike prudence in order to avoid countless fatal errors (SC II.7). Inherent difficulties aside, Rousseau ultimately concludes that this political solution to the problem of man in society is no longer a viable option in the context of modernity. “Public instruction no longer exists and can no longer exist, because where there is no longer fatherland, there can no longer be citizens. These two words, fatherland and citizen, should be effaced from the modern languages” (E I.40, 337n.; SC I.6n.; DAS 59). Among other reasons that make citizenship impossible for modern man, Rousseau points to the effects of liberalism and the commercial life it promotes: “let us not flatter ourselves that we shall see Sparta reborn in the lap of commerce and the love of gain”
Like Montesquieu, he thus counsels against misguided attempts to reinvigorate classical political virtue; unlike Montesquieu, he does not judge the liberal commercial society to be a desirable alternative (SC IV.4, 119; PE 221-224).

Liberalism, as indicated in the previous chapter, attempts to offer another possible solution to what Rousseau recognizes as the problem of man in society. The liberal project explicitly rejects the political solution represented by the classical polis, along with its public morality oriented toward categories of virtue transcending private interest. Instead, liberalism takes the opposite course, attempting to lower duties to the level of natural inclinations by enlightening individuals as to the connection between their private interests and the common good. In the context of a commercial society, man is encouraged to pursue his selfish, acquisitive passions within a framework of general rules that require only the sacrifice of certain other passions. The justification for privileging private inclinations and passions lies in the belief that rational self-interest will suffice to make individuals live peacefully and happily in loose cooperation with others. There need not be any fundamental conflict between inclination and duty, for one’s duties can seamlessly be made a function of his self-interested calculations.

Rousseau would accept none of this. Far from empowering the better angels of human nature, he believes that the liberal morality of rational self-interest exacerbates the problem of man in society. The liberal society, aiming to facilitate the pursuit of private commercial ends

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12 Allan Bloom indicates in his editorial notes to Emile (482n.8) that Rousseau ultimately blames not liberalism but Christianity for rendering virtuous citizenship impossible, as the universalistic spiritual teaching of the Christian religion undermines patriotic attachment to any particular earthly society; see SC IV.8, GM I.2.

13 “Ancient politicians incessantly talked about morals and virtue, those of our time talk only of business and money” (DAS 51).

14 For the liberal commercial or “capitalist” society as the particular target of Rousseau’s criticism, and the pinnacle of civilized badness in his view, see Allan Bloom, “Rousseau’s Critique of Liberal Constitutionalism,” in Orwin and
in the context of a market order, establishes a condition of “universal dependence,” in which each man stands at all times in need of many others (DI 128). This condition is the very antithesis of the radical independence which human nature strives for, and thus frustrates man’s natural longings. Moreover, for Rousseau this universal condition of mutual interdependence does not appear as a finely calibrated economic system that facilitates cooperation, but as a perpetual state of war that “necessarily brings men to hate each other in proportion to the conflict of their interests” (DI 193). By introducing and encouraging among men artificial conflicts of interest that would not exist by nature, the liberal society forces each to take his bearings from the competitive socioeconomic game that consists precisely in those conflicts. Competition in the commercial arena produces inequality which undermines social order by generating contempt toward the poor and resentment toward the rich (DI 150, 157; E IV.224). Compassion and friendly affection have no place in this ongoing war of private interests, for “when our interest is involved, our sentiments are soon corrupted. And it is only then that we prefer the evil which is useful to us to the good that nature makes us love” (D’Alembert 24). Thus, the “moral economy” of the liberal society amounts to a zero-sum game in which “the good of one necessarily constitutes the harm of another” (E II.105n; cf. DI 174-175, 193, 195; E IV.312n).\(^{15}\) Liberalism, instead of removing man from a state of war, places him into one.

Rousseau thus presents a bold challenge to the claim that liberalism has ushered in a new epoch of gentleness and softness in human relations. He squarely confronts the Montesquieuean premise that the spread of commerce has softened mores and rendered men gentler than their

\(^{15}\) Rousseau’s conception of a zero-sum “moral economy” is elaborated by Schwarze and Scott (2019).
barbaric ancestors. In doing so, he relentlessly strips away the mask of progress that conceals an underlying hardness and harshness in the character of modern man. Liberal modernity, fueled by commerce and the progressive advance of the arts and sciences, has certainly allowed for the formulation and proliferation of new rules of common decency, good manners, politeness, and civility, all of which carry pretensions to moral superiority in the modern mind. Yet contrary to what a good Enlightenment liberal might expect, this development has not strengthened human relations or produced deep and meaningful bonds of affection among individuals. At best, all of these manifestations of enlightened gentleness are behavioral ornaments that do not reflect the character of men, but merely lend them “the semblance of all the virtues without the possession of any” (DAS 36; DI 180; Julie II.xiv, 196; E IV.338). Modern gentleness is ridden with hypocrisy and insincerity as civilized men strive to appear good more than to be good. On the one hand, this is psychologically harmful for the individual, who is forced to live a double life, divided between the private self that reflects natural inclinations and the persona that must be assumed in the presence of others. On the other hand, the insincerity of

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17 “Everything that facilitates communication between nations transmits not the virtues, but the crimes of each to the others” (PN 96).

18 Rousseau’s assessment of the arts and sciences is complex and somewhat ambivalent, and cannot be treated with the precision it deserves here; for helpful treatments, see Christopher Kelly, “Rousseau and the Case against (and for) the Arts,” in Orwin and Tarcov (1997), 20-44; and Clifford Orwin, “Rousseau’s Socratism,” *The Journal of Politics* 60 (1998): 174-187.

gentle manners is socially harmful, undermining trust and good faith among men and forcing
each to view his fellows with constant suspicion.

The misguided moral commitments of liberalism have ultimately produced a new human
type, a degraded being that Rousseau identifies as the “bourgeois.” “Always in contradiction
with himself, always floating between his inclinations and his duties, he will never be either man
or citizen. He will be good neither for himself nor for others… He will be nothing” (E I.40). For
Rousseau, the failure of liberalism can be traced to the false belief that the bonds produced
incidentally by the individual pursuit of rational self-interest will suffice to make men social. It is
a false belief because it overestimates the power of human reason, which cannot justify social
life or the duties it imposes.

Even the precept of doing unto others as we would have them do unto us has no true foundation
other than conscience and sentiment; for where is the precise reason for me, being myself, to act
as if I were another, especially when I am morally certain of never finding myself in the same
situation? And who will guarantee me that in very faithfully following this maxim I will get others
to follow it similarly with me? (E IV.235n., emphasis added)

Thus, Rousseau not only provides us with an incisive explanation for the various social and
political ills that plague liberal modernity even into the present day; he also points us in the
direction of the sentiments as a promising resource for combatting them. Reason, and thus
rational self-interest, more reliably divides men than it unites them (DI 132-133, PN 99-100). If
naturally asocial men are to be made social, they must be connected to one another through
affection or sentiment. Only bonds “formed by mutual esteem and benevolence” can accomplish
what bonds of “self-interest” are intended to do; by prioritizing the latter, liberalism undermines
the former, for “it is indeed impossible to tighten one of these bonds without the other relaxing as
much” (PN 100n.). Sentimental bonds are the only ones that will suffice to restrain egocentrism
and support social life, and the sentiment Rousseau fixes upon for this purpose is compassion.
Cultivating Compassion

For Rousseau, the *polis* and the liberal commercial society represent two alleged political solutions to the problem of man in society. Rejecting both solutions as insufficient for modern man, Rousseau offers his own alternative to virtuous citizenship and bourgeois morality in his *Emile*. In this book Rousseau turns his gaze forward, accepting the modern liberal regime, the prejudices that sustain it, and the alienating effects it produces as inevitable realities. His teaching presupposes the context of a liberal commercial society, and it consists in a “domestic education” of the individual, in which compassion will serve as the cornerstone for a new morality of sentiment (*E* I.40–41). The novel, which recounts the fictional education of an ordinary boy named Emile, conveys Rousseau’s vision of a new human type, one that might thrive in liberal society without being corrupted and transformed into a bourgeois.\(^{20}\) The story of Emile’s education amounts to a grand thought experiment to determine whether an individual can be raised to live as a natural man in the midst of civilization, thus retaining his natural wholeness and goodness in the context of a corrupt society. Notwithstanding the contradiction of social life as such, Emile will not be raised for a solitary existence; he must eventually live among other men, and therefore he must be made good for himself and for others in a way that doesn’t leave him torn between his inclinations and his duties. His attachment to others will be predicated not on the tenuous bonds of mutual interest, but on a sociable compassion that draws him toward his fellows and makes him a true asset to the community in which he resides.

\(^{20}\) For a seminal analysis that has influenced my own reading of *Emile*, see Allan Bloom, *Love and Friendship* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993), 39-140.
As opposed to the public education of the classical polis, which is no longer an option in modernity, domestic education is private education, and the morality that it leads to is a private morality rather than a civic one. The explicit goal of Rousseau’s educational project is not social or political, but individual and personal. Yet although Rousseau embraces compassion with a view to this inward-facing goal, he is not indifferent to the outward-facing social effects that derive from a compassionate individual. Nevertheless, we must keep in mind that the compassionate alternative to liberal morality that Rousseau envisions is not a political solution, nor will it culminate in widespread social reform or a radical restructuring of the human condition. It is no solution at all, properly speaking, but a palliative, a means for mitigating the worst effects of social life. In all, the broader project of Emile indicates that the task of cultivating compassion is ultimately a non-political or individualistic task.

The education that is imparted to Emile over the course of the novel is described as “the education of nature,” in contradistinction to the conventional education that typically prevails in modern society (E I.41). Conventional education corrupts man by alienating him further from his nature and exacerbating the tendency of social life to make him unhappy in himself and unhelpful to his fellows. “From our earliest years a foolish education adorns our mind and corrupts our judgment. I see everywhere immense institutions where young people are brought up at great expense, learning everything except their duties” (DAS 56). In contrast to ordinary educational methods, the aim of Emile’s natural education is a negative one; it is to “teach” the

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21 Others have rightly emphasized that “at every stage of the education, Emile’s compassion proves to be even better for him than it is for his neighbors” (Orwin 1997a, 307); see also Richard Boyd, “Pity’s Pathologies Portrayed: Rousseau and the Limits of Democratic Compassion,” Political Theory 32, no. 4 (2004): 519-546. In this chapter I slightly shift the emphasis toward the goodness for others that is an equally remarkable outcome of Emile’s education, even if a tangential one in the broader context of the novel.
child as little as possible, and instead to preserve his natural goodness against the influence of “prejudices, authority, necessity, example, [and] all the social institutions” that “stifle nature in him and put nothing in its place” (E I.37). Retaining natural goodness in society is no simple task. Rousseau likens it to cultivating a shrub in the middle of a busy walking path. In the context of human civilization, myriad forces conspire to stifle nature, and nature requires a helping hand in order not to be smothered. Thus, the natural education that Rousseau describes involves a great deal of intervention and artifice on the part of Emile’s tutor, particularly when it comes to Emile’s social (and thus unnatural) relations with others.  

This last observation bears directly on how we should understand the role of compassion in Emile’s education. For Rousseau, nature does not simply render man compassionate. There are no innate prosocial inclinations or other-directed sentiments waiting to emerge spontaneously in the heart of the young pupil. As we have seen, the hypothetical natural man, living a self-sufficient life in the state of nature, would have originally possessed a rudimentary capacity for pity, but an asocial and amoral pity, of the kind manifested in the behavior of horses and cows that avoid stepping on a live creature. Natural pity falls far short of the more robust kind of compassion that would be capable of tempering the excesses of amour-propre and upholding sentimental bonds of attachment among individuals in society. This latter can come into being only if it is constructed through the active effort of a serious training. Rousseau thus suggests

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22 “One must use a great deal of art to prevent social man from being totally artificial” (E IV.317).

23 See note 4 in this chapter above. For helpful explanations of the consistency between the two seemingly disparate accounts of pitié in Rousseau, see Masters (1968), 46-47, 136-146; and Morgenstern (1996), 56-63. For more recent discussions that touch on the differences between “natural pity” and “developed pity,” see Hanley (2017), 66-103; and Schwarze and Scott (2019).
that it is a mistake to treat compassion as an innate potentiality lying dormant in human nature, insofar as it requires the full force of a prudent and robust education to come into being.

Rousseau’s proposed method for such an education is rather counterintuitive. The key to cultivating compassion is to seize upon and manipulate *amour-propre*.24 We have already seen Rousseau’s claim, in the *Discourse on Inequality*, that at a certain point in man’s historical development benign self-love (*amour de soi*) was transformed into ravenous *amour-propre*, a more pernicious species of self-love that is constantly eyeing one’s position in relation to others and striving for preeminence over them. In *Emile*, Rousseau collapses the distinction between the two species of self-love, highlighting the centrality of *amour-propre* in all aspects of human life (*E* II.92, IV.213). *Amour-propre* comes fully into play at the age of adolescence, when Emile first becomes self-consciously aware of himself as a relative being. He begins to notice others and to notice that they notice him; he compares himself with them and begins to consider his status in relation to theirs. The catalyst for this development is puberty and the first stirring of sexual desire, which turns the boy’s attention away from himself and toward others. Sexual desire is inseparable from a desire to make oneself noticed, or to become the preferred object of another person, and “this is the source of the first glances at one’s fellows” and “the source of the first comparisons with them” (*E* IV.214). The emergence of *amour-propre* thus constitutes a psychological awakening, manifested in a new feeling of restless expansiveness as the boy’s

24 Many scholars have noted that compassion is intimately related to *amour-propre*; see Masters (1968), 42-46; Melzer (1990), 93; Bloom (1993), 68-70; Orwin (1997a), 305-306; Boyd (2004), 523-524; and Hanley (2017), 86-90. For an account that is at odds with the one I provide here, see Laurence D. Cooper, *Rousseau, Nature, and the Problem of the Good Life* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999), 96-102, 125-126. Cooper argues that Rousseau maintains a sharp distinction between *amour de soi* and *amour-propre*, and that compassion is a species of the former. My own account is much closer to those of Bloom, Orwin, and Hanley, insofar as they indicate that compassion is a species of *amour-propre*.
imagination begins to extend across the social world, seeking out others against whom to measure himself.

For Rousseau, this moment is a particularly dangerous one in the boy’s psychological development, and how it is handled will carry far-reaching consequences in regard to his character as an adult (E IV.211). Fortunately, “the inclination of instinct is indeterminate,” amenable to guidance and direction (E IV.214). Amour-propre is the great complicating factor in the human condition, but not hopelessly so from the perspective of the individual. The spirited yearning and restlessness in which it is manifested is the source of man’s greatest crimes and miseries, but so too of all that is highest and most distinctively human, including man’s moral relations with his fellows (E IV.252). On its own, amour-propre is morally “neutral,” and “it becomes good or bad only by the application made of it and the relations given to it” (E II.92).

This selfishly striving element of the human soul can be given a variety of expressions. On the one hand, it can become a domineering vanity, fueled by “envy and covetousness” that leads to cruel and malevolent actions. On the other hand, it can become a noble pride, fueled by “beneficence and commiseration” that leads to “humane and gentle” actions (E IV.235). If amour-propre takes the former course, it is due to our own failures in education; the latter course is fully within our reach if we are committed to realizing it through the proper training (E IV.215). Thus, the tutor aims to stifle the emergence of vanity and all the destructive passions and actions associated with it—envy, resentment, avarice, deceit, and so forth—and he does this by directing Emile’s amour-propre toward a more benevolent species of pride by awakening and

exercising his compassion. Compassion comes to light as an outlet for his selfish striving that is particularly benign, good for himself insofar as it prevents his self-love from compromising his happiness, and good for others insofar as it renders him less outwardly egocentric and better disposed toward his fellows, especially those who are suffering or in need.\footnote{On this point, see Jonathan Marks, “Rousseau’s Discriminating Defense of Compassion,” \textit{American Political Science Review} 101, no. 4 (2007): 727-739: “Compassionate feeling and action are among the least harmful manifestations of the dangerous natural human desire to extend the self and to show signs of power and activity” (727).}

It is worth noting that prior to the awakening of \textit{amour-propre} in adolescence, the tutor has already taken a number of anticipatory steps earlier in the child’s life in preparation for this moment. First, Emile’s nascent \textit{amour-propre} was kept in check even before its full emergence; in early childhood, he was not allowed to develop a taste for “command” or “dominion” over others, which would have had a fatal effect on the future direction taken by his \textit{amour-propre} (\textit{E} I.66-67; II.87-88). In other words, Emile was conditioned from his earliest years never to conceive of others as means to his ends, which rendered him more susceptible to compassion later on. Second, far from being coddled, Emile was exposed to a fair share of physical pain and privation early in his life; thus, by the time he becomes capable of feeling compassion, he knows what it is to hurt, and he does not take suffering lightly (\textit{E} I.48, II.78, 87). Third, although Emile was exposed to suffering of his own, he was always treated kindly by other people; when he suffered, it was on account of things in the world, not the malevolent will of other persons (\textit{E} I.66-67, IV.213). On the contrary, he only encountered benevolent wills among those who populated his childhood environment, and his experience of their beneficence helped pave the way for the future emergence of his own\footnote{For the crucial role that benevolence plays in the development of Emile’s gratitude and compassion, see Jonathan Marks, “The Divine Instinct? Rousseau and Conscience,” \textit{The Review of Politics}, 68.4 (2009): 564-585.} Finally, the tutor took great care never to preach
directly to the child about duties or responsibilities that are owed to those less fortunate; as a result, Emile never received onerous sermons or nagging lessons that might have stifled the future emergence of his compassion by making it appear to be a burdensome chore that is best avoided (E II.89-91, 102-103). Instead, he was made to watch as his tutor engaged in compassionate acts of beneficence, and the example set by these actions established an object of healthy emulation for Emile to aspire to at a later time.28 The success of Emile’s actual education to compassion thus owes a great deal to the foresight previously exercised by his tutor with a view to the eventual goal of directing *amour-propre* toward compassion and beneficence.

When the crucial moment arrives, the question of whether or not Emile’s *amour-propre* can be channeled in the direction of compassionate feeling and action depends ultimately on the comparisons that he makes between himself and others, or upon “what position he will feel he has among men” (E IV.235). The strength of Emile’s compassion, in other words, reflects his own assessment of himself in relation to others. This self-assessment in turn is determined by the objects toward which his restless imagination is directed. His compassion could easily be stifled if he were to fixate his attention on others who are better off than him in the world—the great, the powerful, the wealthy—for the comparisons he would make between his position and theirs would be unfavorable to himself. As a result, his sentiments would tend in the direction of misanthropy as opposed to fellow-feeling. To “nourish in the heart of a young man the first movements of nascent sensibility and turn his character toward beneficence and goodness,”

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28 “Masters, leave off pretenses. Be virtuous and good. Let your examples be graven in your pupils’ memories until they can enter their hearts. Instead of hastening to exact acts of charity from my pupil, I prefer to do them in his presence and to deprive him of even the means of imitating me in this, as an honor which is not for his age; for it is important that he not get accustomed to regarding the duties of men as only the duties of children.” But if Emile proceeds to engage in covert acts of charity out of a desire to imitate his tutor, he will not be scolded: “This is a fraud appropriate to his age, and the only one I would pardon him” (E II.104).
Rousseau advises, “do not put the seeds of pride, vanity, and envy in him by the deceptive image of the happiness of men. Do not expose his eyes at the outset to the pomp of courts, the splendor of palaces, or the appeal of the theater” (E IV.221-222). This would be to tempt his *amour-propre* in the direction of envy, bitterness, and resentment which would close off his heart to his fellows. Instead, Emile is made to witness the least well-off in society, those who are far less fortunate than he is and who will therefore elicit his pity rather than his envy. So long as his *amour-propre* has remained neutral and uncorrupted by jealousy, observing those who are suffering will naturally arouse his commiseration and he will learn the sentiment of compassion, which grows stronger with practice.

The sentiment of compassion that is cultivated in Emile is quite different from the simple sensation of natural pity. Whereas the latter goes no further than an impulsive “gut reaction” to the sights and sounds of suffering, Emile’s cultivated compassion is a compound sentiment that involves observing others, imaginatively identifying with them, returning to oneself, comparing oneself to them, and finally being moved by the situation of the other in light of one’s position relative to theirs. It is not a pure emotion but an intellectual sentiment that relies on the assistance of such cognitive faculties as reason, imagination, comparison, reflection, and judgment.29 Accordingly, the tutor takes great pains to arrange Emile’s experiences and observations with a view to his cognitive abilities, and in such a way that his compassion grows more robust and complex with time.

Emile’s compassion is first aroused by exposure to those whose suffering is the most easily apprehended: the poor, oppressed, injured, and ill who are subject to physical pains and

29 For a helpful discussion of how Emile’s compassion requires the assistance of his more complex cognitive faculties, see Hanley (2017), 83-91.
privations (E IV.222-223). Upon commiserating with these, Emile is able to conduct a favorable self-assessment, judging that he is better off than they are and feeling relieved about this. His experience of compassion satiates his amour-propre. The next step, lest Emile become too prideful in his self-assessment, is to extend his compassion to those who have suffered tragic reversals of fortune or fallen from positions of high rank or status (E IV.224). This helps to bolster Emile’s compassion by preventing him from developing a sense of cold superiority or contempt toward those he observes suffering. From these observations he learns that tragic occurrences can place anyone, himself included, in such unenviable positions. He now understands that others suffer, and that their suffering could easily be his own were it not for a degree of “luck.” The final and most difficult step is to extend Emile’s compassion to those who do not suffer physically and have not been the victims of tragic misfortune—the rich, powerful, and prestigious who are generally the least likely to elicit our compassion. Through a carefully guided study of historical figures, he will learn that there are internal sufferings of a moral, spiritual, or psychological kind that afflict even the great (E IV.236-237, 243). This final step prevents the emergence of envy and hatred toward the privileged and prepares the way for Emile to generalize his feelings of compassion to apply to all men. Advancing progressively through these stages, Emile’s compassion is cultivated gradually, culminating in a robust and refined intellectual sentiment that is capable of being extended to men of any stripe.

On the basis of these educative efforts, Emile develops an inclination to engage positively in compassionate feelings and beneficent actions, and this inclination grows stronger in time thanks to the pleasure that he derives from his compassion:

If the first sight that strikes him is an object of sadness, the first return to himself is a sentiment of pleasure. In seeing how many ills he is exempt from, he feels himself to be happier than he had thought he was. He shares the sufferings of his fellows; but this sharing is voluntary and sweet. At
the same time, he enjoys both the pity he has for their ills and the happiness that exempts him from those ills. He feels himself to be in that condition of strength which extends us beyond ourselves and leads us to take elsewhere activity superfluous to our wellbeing. (E IV.229)

We see in this passage just how hard-nosed Rousseau is in his conception of compassion, and how far it contributes toward the goal of making Emile good for himself. Insofar as it assures him of his relative standing in the social world, compassion placates his *amour-propre* which yearns for distinction and superiority. It enables him to be “satisfied with himself without believing himself to be wiser than others” (*E* IV.249). Moreover, insofar as compassion enables him to extend his being into the lives of others, it enables him to live more fully. Being transported outside of himself through imagination and feeling, the sentiment of his own existence is deepened and this in itself is a source of profound pleasure.\(^3\) Compassion is unique in that other, more pernicious forms of *amour-propre* don’t enliven the sentiment of existence in this way.

Yet even if compassion is merely a species of self-love, it is the one that is least harmful from the perspective of social life. During the crucial period of adolescence, Emile’s *amour-propre* is occupied in the exercise of seeking out those who are suffering and dispensing beneficence wherever he can. He makes “the interest of indigents” his own; he assists them “not only with his purse but with his care;” in considering himself “their representative,” he is driven to “serve them, protect them, consecrate his person and his time to them” (*E* IV.250). Thus Rousseau illustrates how a cultivated compassion can be put to work as a substitute for

\(^3\) While it cannot be treated fully here, Rousseau’s notion of the sentiment of existence is crucial to his understanding of happiness. The sentiment of existence lies at the heart of two different visions of human life that Rousseau considers throughout his writings: the life of the solitary walker, and the life of active virtue, the latter of which corresponds more closely to his teaching in *Emile*; see Eve Grace, “The Restlessness of ‘Being:’ Rousseau’s Protean Sentiment of Existence,” *History of European Ideas* 27.2 (2001): 133-151; Cooper (1999), esp. 20-26; and Melzer (1990), 33-34, 40-46.
calculating self-interest in the context of liberal society, and in a way that alleviates some of its attendant miseries. It contributes to the negative aim of mitigating egocentrism by harnessing self-love and preventing it from running amok; it also contributes to the positive aim of alleviating suffering and rendering aid to those in need. Yet for all of its apparent promise up to this point, broader difficulties related to the fundamental problem of man in society still remain, and these difficulties compel Rousseau to go beyond compassion in his moral teaching.

Although it represents a significant improvement over other potential expressions of amour-propre, Rousseau indicates that compassion alone is insufficient to support the morality that social life requires. Even in its highly cultivated form, compassion remains a relatively weak sentiment that is prone to deteriorate with overstimulation. “Long struck by the same sights, we no longer feel their impressions… It is thus by dint of seeing death and suffering that priests and doctors become pitiless” (E IV.231). For this reason, Rousseau warns against overexposing the young pupil to objects that arouse compassion. There is a perpetual danger that one’s compassion might deteriorate into “a fleeting and vain emotion which lasts no longer than the illusion which produced it,” or a “sterile and cruel pity” which is “satisfied with pitying ills it can cure” (D’Alembert 24; E IV. 251). Aside from its relative weakness, Rousseau also indicates that sentimental compassion is parochial and narrow, tending to reflect one’s “blind preference” or “unjust bias” for those toward whom one is partial, and thus threatening to compromise rather than to support devotion to the common good (E IV.252-253). Unless compassion can be generalized and made equitable, it may frequently function as an obstacle to justice.

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31 On this point, see Boyd (2004), 524-528.
These insufficiencies may not be immediately obvious in the case of Emile, but they can be detected if we reflect on the limited uses to which compassion is put during this stage of his education. As we have seen, the most important function that compassion plays in the context of Emile’s adolescent life is to keep his self-love in check by channeling it in a safe direction. But even as he develops a more refined and robust version of this sentiment, he still does not have a particularly strong motive to act on his compassion for the good of others. He does so incidentally, as it were, because it pleases him in an immediate sense. His compassion is sufficient so long as his inclinations align with the interests of others, but he has not yet been asked to sacrifice anything dear to himself, or to forgo a private interest for the good of another or of his community. His compassion, like that of most men living in society, is “developed but weak” (*DI* 132). What seems to be lacking in sentimental compassion is the motivational force of obligation or duty. Yet this is precisely what is most needed if there is to be any prospect for realizing a “politics of compassion” that is guided by a sentimental morality of compassion: the sentiment itself must bring with it the force of moral obligation or duty. Is there a way to arrive at a form of compassion that is “developed and strong,” to combine the refined and cultivated sentiment with a sense of duty that reliably supports social life? Rousseau indicates that there is, but not through the apparatus of sentimental compassion alone. Compassion must be transformed from a sentiment simply into a *moral* sentiment. It is at this point that virtue necessarily enters back into the picture.
Virtuous Compassion

We might recall at this point that Rousseau is seeking in compassion a sentimental alternative to the liberal morality of rational self-interest, which in turn was an alternative to the political virtue of the classical *polis*. Social life requires morality, or a certain willingness to sacrifice one’s inclinations or interests for the common good. But due to the fundamental problem that man is not fit for social life, morality poses a supreme difficulty. For Rousseau, the failures of liberalism show that reason alone fails to support morality; at the same time, sentimental compassion of the kind that is cultivated in Emile only gets us part way there. Ultimately, Rousseau is forced to concede that virtue of some kind remains necessary. Yet if the political institutions that instilled virtue in the *polis* are no longer available, liberal modernity needs recourse to a new method, and Rousseau attempts to provide such a method through his teaching on natural religion.

From the model of the ancient *polis* Rousseau had learned that virtue is ultimately dependent upon a framework of fixed opinions and beliefs about the world and one’s place in it (*DAS* 33, 50). The *polis* established a belief structure such that each citizen could, in the words of Judith Shklar, “justify and explain his every action in terms of values that are external, shared by those around him and more general in scope than any that his purely private self could offer.”

More precisely, this belief structure provided a powerful rationale for engaging in acts of self-sacrificing virtue. Through his novel religious teaching, Rousseau attempts to provide modern man with an analogous support for morality that does not rely on the mediation of political

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institutions. Compassion must be wedded to a sense of duty, and in the absence of an all-
compassing political solution, the sense of duty requires religious belief (E IV.263).

The very next stage in Emile’s education, following the cultivation of his compassion, is
his religious education, which paves the way for his eventual exercise of virtue. Up until this
point, Emile has not needed virtue; he has not experienced any imbalance between inclination
and duty, and therefore has retained his natural goodness. Yet due to the fact that he lives in
society, there ultimately comes a point when the passions born of social life assert themselves
and threaten to compromise his internal equilibrium. That equilibrium will henceforth need to be
imposed through virtue, and it would seem that some form of belief provides a necessary
bulwark for virtue. Thanks to amour-propre, “the progress of the passions is accelerated” and
Emile’s tutor turns to religion as a source of “enlightenment which serves to regulate these
passions” (E IV.259). The religious teaching is conveyed not in Rousseau’s own words, but
through The Profession of Faith of the Savoyard Vicar, which is not taught to Emile directly
although we are told that he receives a similar teaching (E IV.313-314). Instead, it recounts the
Vicar’s speech as delivered to a young Rousseau whose psychology resembles that of an
ordinary man raised in society without the advantage of a natural education; society has
corrupted him, his amour-propre is out of control, and early destitution has turned him into a
bitter and resentful misanthrope. This, along with certain intimations that Rousseau provides
elsewhere, indicate that the Profession is intended as a teaching for Rousseau’s readers,
necessary for them to establish a viable link between sentimental compassion and a sense of
duty. While the substantive content contradicts Rousseau’s stated principles, he nevertheless
presents it as a teaching that will be “useful” for “the public” (E IV.260, 295). Taken as a whole, the Profession indicates that a minimal degree of religious belief is necessary for compassion to be empowered as a moral sentiment supportive of social life.

The first fact that we learn about the Vicar is that he is a man of refined and cultivated compassion, but his good sentiments have been “strengthened” by “the lessons of wisdom and an enlightened virtue” derived from his religious beliefs (E IV.262). As a result, his “private life” is characterized by “virtue without hypocrisy, humanity without weakness” (E IV.264). What enables him to link his compassion to the practice of virtue is his belief that there exists a divine moral order in the universe to which he is beholden. It is this belief alone that establishes a solid “principle” for his duties (E IV.268). Compassion, the “inner sentiment” which speaks through the voice of conscience, remains the cornerstone of his morality, but it draws strength and inspiration from the principle to which it is linked (E IV.286-287, 291).

In his Profession the Vicar teaches the wayward young Rousseau the tenets of his religious belief, which have enabled him to forcefully impose unity upon his divided soul and thus to embrace willingly his duties toward other men. His is not a revealed religion, but a natural one, in which the beautiful order of nature, once perceived and contemplated, provides a fixed standard to which one can anchor oneself amidst the ugly disorder and chaos of the social

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33 For the differences between the Vicar’s teaching and Rousseau’s religious beliefs, see esp. Reveries III. The Profession should also be considered in light of Rousseau’s own statements on Christianity, which are more subversive and perhaps less salutary than those of the Vicar; see E IV.255-260; SC IV.8. That the Vicar’s teaching may amount to a salutary untruth is supported by Reveries IV, where Rousseau defends lies “which have a moral purpose,” and admits his own “desire to substitute at least a moral truth for the truth of the facts” in order “always to set forth some useful instruction” (48, 52). Several others have concluded that the teaching of the Profession amounts to a salutary untruth; see e.g. Bloom (1993), Melzer (1996), and Orwin (1998).

34 In this regard, it is interesting to note that the only instance in Emile where Rousseau uses la compassion as opposed to la pitié occurs in the context of describing the Vicar’s elevated compassion (E IV.265).
world (E IV.278). At the core of the Vicar’s teaching is a metaphysical dualism grounded in this contemplation of nature’s beauty. Reflecting on the natural order and the innermost sentiments of one’s heart leads to the external perception of an ordering will (God) as distinct from ordered matter, and the internal perception of an incorporeal mind or soul as distinct from the corporeal body (E IV.280, 286). This dualism is necessary for two derivative beliefs that bolster morality in the social world: the belief in free will and the belief in an afterlife where virtue is rewarded.

The Vicar indicates that individuals cannot take virtue or morality seriously unless they believe themselves to be free agents with a noumenal existence, capable of willing and acting contrary to their natural inclinations. The propagation of materialist philosophy debunks the notion of virtue by undermining belief in free will and thus gives men excuses to avoid sacrificing their interests for the common good (E IV.280-281). Yet even in terms of Rousseau’s own materialist philosophy, the edifying belief that one has free will adds a new dimension to one’s sentimental compassion, providing an additional impetus for *amour-propre* to be expanded outward to others in a way that is pleasurable, and flattering the desires of *amour-propre* with the belief (or perhaps more precisely, illusion) that one has acted freely from a position of strength. Even more necessary for the support of morality in the social world is the belief that virtuous actions will be rewarded in the afterlife by a beneficent God. For the Vicar, there is no other way to overcome the discouraging fact that in most cases “the wicked man prospers, and the just man remains oppressed” (E IV.282, 284). From the perspective of social life, the usefulness of belief in the afterlife lies not so much in frightening the bad man as in comforting the good man and encouraging him to persevere on the path of self-sacrificing virtue. “Here on earth… the humiliation and disgrace attracted by the practice of the virtues prevents all their charms from being felt,” and thus for most people virtue needs recourse to this last refuge of faith in a life to
come (*E IV.283). Even one whose compassion has been highly cultivated may find no other means for reliably acting upon it outside of this hopeful belief.

As a result of these beliefs, the Vicar’s sentimental compassion is linked to virtue and is thus made capable of reliably structuring and guiding his relations with others. Bound to a guiding moral principle, his compassion is strong and energetic as opposed to weak and sterile; it is uncorrupted by narrow self-interest and free from “hypocrisy” (*E IV.262, 264). Through the practice of virtue, he is consistently able to heed the “inner sentiment” of compassion even when doing so is not to his advantage. Thus “he did not hesitate” to give aid to the suffering young Rousseau upon their initial meeting, despite taking on a significant personal risk (*E IV.262). Far from being narrow and parochial, his compassion extends outward from a desire to love all those he encounters “without distinction” and “as brothers,” to do good to all, no matter their relationship to himself (*E IV.309-312). In his character we can observe the effects of the moral teaching that Rousseau means to convey regarding the linking of compassion to virtue through religious belief.35

We might now summarize that teaching as follows. Social life is unthinkable without virtue of some kind, but human reason is too weak and uncertain to provide support for the practice of virtue; at its worst, reason speaks against morality and leads us directly away from the exercise of virtue. Sentiment is a more reliable support, and particularly the sentiment of compassion, which speaks to us as the voice of conscience in favor of morality if we will but heed it. When our selfish passions and inclinations are aroused, we are inclined to ignore those gentle feelings that speak to us through this voice. Opinions or beliefs like those of the Vicar can

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35 Thus, Bloom (1993), 74, describes the Vicar’s teaching as “an absolutization of compassion.”
intervene to lend a helping hand to the inner sentiment against the passions. Moreover, these beliefs can be seen as quite natural: a sincere assessment of our deepest sentiments tells us that there is a beneficent God whose goodness and justice is reflected in the order that he has created; he has given us the freedom to align ourselves with that order and to act contrary to our passions and inclinations through a willful act of strength, and he rewards such virtuous acts in the next life. The Vicar cannot provide solid reasons or arguments for these beliefs, and he acknowledges from the outset that there are “insoluble objections” to them. But he is willing to disregard these, and to heed only the inner sentiment which quietly insists that there is a “moral order” sanctioned by God, and that “the good man orders himself in relation to the whole” (E.IV.292-293). His morality of compassion ultimately rests upon faith, as “without faith no true virtue exists” (E.IV.312).

In the final analysis, Rousseau’s sentimental morality of compassion is inseparable from the framework of moral belief he recommends through his teaching on natural religion. As Arthur Melzer has shown, Rousseau’s moral project, undertaken in response to Enlightenment liberalism and its secular rationalism, aims to re-enchant the modern world by reviving while also transforming Christianity.36 Ironically, the traditional Christian teaching is, in Rousseau’s view, inimical to the virtuous exercise of compassion, especially insofar as its doctrine of original sin undermines belief in free will and causes men to view their neighbors with suspicion, if not outright hostility. His preferred natural religion therefore retains some of the moral teachings of the Gospels which center on love and compassion, while dispensing with the dogmatic doctrines of the Church (E.IV.307-308). Divine revelation is replaced with the guiding

light of the inner sentiment and the voice of conscience through which compassion speaks, although the strength of that light and that voice is always dependent on a foundational belief in the existence of a moral order. As a post-Christian religion for liberal modernity, “it is no longer a religion of redemption, transcendence, or eternal life but a moral religion, supplying the metaphysical needs of the conscience. God is a demand of morality and not the reverse.”

This is a salutary teaching that Rousseau believes is necessary for the common man to transform his sentimental compassion into an active beneficence guided by a sense of duty. Regardless of their plausibility, the doctrines of free will and recompense in the afterlife are edifying to mankind and provide a support for the practice of virtue that simply does not exist by nature or in the present state of society. Unlike Rousseau, the Vicar teaches that “man is by his nature social,” and that his natural sociability finds its highest expression in the noumenal realm where his soul resides and through which he is free to choose the course of virtue and duty as against the base inclinations of his material nature (E IV.290). In Rousseau’s view this is a useful myth for the ordinary man living in society, whose virtue must somehow find nourishment in the barren landscape of human civilization.

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37 Ibid., 355.

38 It should be noted that the doctrine of free will, as presented by the Vicar, is far more edifying than the animalistic portrayal of human nature that Rousseau himself presents in the Discourse on Inequality; and the doctrine of recompense in the afterlife is acknowledged by the Vicar himself as having no philosophical support beyond the strength which his virtue draws from it and the comfort it provides him (see esp. E IV.283-284).

39 Thus, the Vicar concludes his Profession by telling the young Rousseau: “I have told you nothing up to now which I did not believe could be useful to you… in your present condition you will profit from thinking as I do.” In a footnote Rousseau adds: “This is, I believe, what the good vicar could say to the public at present” (E IV.295, 295n.). Elsewhere Rousseau reiterates the social utility of this teaching: “what interests me and all my fellow men is that each person know that an arbiter of the fate of human beings exists and that we are all his Children; that He prescribes that we all be just, love one another, be beneficent and merciful, and keep our promises to everyone – even to our enemies and His; that the apparent happiness of this life is nothing; that there is another life after it in which this Supreme Being will be the rewarder of the good and the judge of the wicked. These and similar dogmas are the ones it is important to teach the youth and to persuade all the citizens to accept” (E V.381).
rise to the status of a truly moral sentiment, one that is felt and acted upon not only with proper sincerity and for the right reasons, but at the expense of one’s own private interests.

We can conclude by returning briefly to the story of Emile. While we are not privy to his exact beliefs, we know that Emile receives some kind of teaching in natural religion, and that it resembles closely if not exactly the one taught by the Vicar. What we do learn explicitly is that Emile’s religious belief plays a crucial role in preparing him to choose virtue and to internalize a sense of duty:

It is only then [after his religious education] that he finds his true interest in being good, in doing good far from the sight of men and without being forced by the laws, in being just between God and himself, in fulfilling his duty, even at the expense of his life, and in carrying virtue in his heart. He does this not only for the love of order, to which each of us always prefers love of self, but for the love of the Author of his being—a love which is confounded with that same love of self—and, finally, for the enjoyment of that durable happiness which the repose of a good conscience and the contemplation of this Supreme Being promise him in the other life after he has spent this one well. Abandon this, and I no longer see anything but injustice, hypocrisy, and lying among men. Private interest, which in case of conflict necessarily prevails over everything, teaches men to adorn vice with the mask of virtue. Let all other men do what is good for me at their expense; let everything be related to me alone; let all mankind, if need be, die in suffering and poverty to spare me a moment of pain or hunger. This is the inner language of every unbeliever who reasons. (E IV.314-315)

The religious teaching provides the crucial link between compassion and virtue that is essential to Rousseau’s new morality. We also see here how religious belief can be explained philosophically in terms of Rousseau’s monistic psychology of self-love, for it is Emile’s *amour-propre* that is extended to encompass God, whose approving gaze can be felt even in the absence of human spectators. The religious edifice that is constructed upon Emile’s *amour-propre* makes possible his belief in a kind of moral freedom which he has not experienced (or needed) up to this point. It is soon after this that Emile willingly subjects himself to the authority of his tutor in what amounts to his first act of moral self-legislation (E IV.325). Later we witness Emile’s virtuous compassion in action when he willingly sacrifices a very serious private interest to assist to an injured man he encounters while travelling (E V.440-441). Emile’s cultivated compassion
is transformed into a vehicle for virtue only when he believes himself to be a moral being existing within a moral order, capable of freely choosing to act from a sense of duty even to the detriment of his selfish inclinations.

At the end of the book we are provided with a more holistic picture of what Emile’s mature sociable compassion looks like. Emile’s place in the world is somewhere between that of the solitary dreamer or philosopher who Rousseau describes elsewhere, and the virtuous citizen. Without being fully denatured, he will still be a boon to those around him on the basis of his compassionate morality. Rousseau indicates that Emile’s elaborate education has bridged the gap between individual and society and provided him with “the most necessary art for a man and a citizen, which is knowing how to live with his fellows” (E IV.327-328). He will not live in a large city, for “a beneficent man can hardly satisfy his inclination in the midst of cities” (E V.474). Yet his will still be a social life among men in the country, where he will be “their benefactor and their model” (ibid.). He will not be a political man or take on the “painful duties” that are incumbent upon “the honorable function of citizen” (ibid.). Nevertheless, he will remain an enlightened critic of politics, capable, on account of his cultivated compassion, of penetrating through the layers of convention to perceive the root causes—social, psychological, and institutional—of turmoil and suffering among his fellows (E IV.251). He will balance a gentle contempt for political life with a sincere desire to improve the lives of those around him.40

40 We might contrast the character of Emile with Rousseau’s description of the misanthrope. Rousseau describes, sometimes in a sympathetic tone, the character of a true misanthrope in his criticism of Moliere (D’Alembert 37-42). The misanthrope is a man whose great compassion finds expression in a hatred of wickedness and vice as opposed to love and beneficence. He focuses his attention far more on public injustices than private ones and reflecting too extensively on the inherent horrors of social life causes his compassion to lose its sweetness and become painful. As a result, he detaches and withdraws from his fellows; in a way, his misguided compassion undermines itself. This is helpful for understanding why Emile’s sociable compassion is limited to the social and doesn’t necessarily extend to the political or the public. In the context of modern society, where politics in the proper sense no longer exists, a deformed version of political compassion may only be capable of producing a fanatic or tortured misanthrope.
Above all, the character of Emile’s settled family life is defined by his active beneficence: “I am moved by contemplating how many benefactions Emile and Sophie can spread around them from their simple retreat, and how much they can vivify the country and reanimate the extinguished zeal of the unfortunate village folk” (E V.474). Thus, while it is true that Emile’s education to compassion may have been undertaken primarily with a view to his own good, it is no less true that it turns out to be quite good for others and for society.

Assessing Rousseau’s Compassionate Rhetoric

Rousseau’s teaching on compassion challenges us to reconsider our own conceptions of that sentiment. Insofar as man is fundamentally self-interested and unfit for social life, and insofar as social and political problems reflect this fact and not merely some error in our mode of social organization, Rousseau suggests that we must not treat compassion as an innate principle of sociability waiting to emerge under the right social conditions. A tendency to conceive of compassion as an entirely disinterested and altruistic instinct may in fact encourage insincerity, dissimulation, and a sterile pity that merely pays lip service to beneficence. To jettison the assumptions which might support a more “idealistic” conception of compassion cannot fail to alter our methods for cultivating it. If morality is not a question of balancing self-centered inclinations with other-directed inclinations, and is instead a question of giving a socially useful

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41 In his other great novel Rousseau paints a similar portrait of Julie’s sociable compassion and the improvements which it brings to the small society at Clarens. The society as a whole is embellished and improved by “Julie’s care for the people in the villages around Clarens, the principles by which she dispenses her charity, the help she gives the villagers in developing their talents, and her attitudes toward the beggars” (Julie V.ii,n.65, 417). Julie’s compassion, like Emile’s, is strengthened by natural religion and informed by principles of “just discipline” applied generally to all; see Julie IV.x, V.v.
form to selfish inclinations, then our efforts must be directed toward instilling in individuals a noble and lofty self-love capable of comprehending a distinguished kind of benevolence.

Rousseau thus indicates that in order to put compassion to work alleviating social ills, we need not necessarily conceive of it as starkly opposed to self-love. In doing so, he addresses a common critique that debunks compassion by assimilating it to the selfish pleasure we take in observing that we are exempt from the suffering of others. This need not be a hindrance or obstacle, Rousseau tells us; a frank admission that compassion is a species of self-love creates new possibilities for the cultivation of the former through the manipulation and prudent direction of the latter. Yet this entails a specific kind of education, a moral education, and thus compassion, even at its best, anticipates the more fundamental question of morality.

The most important suggestion to be drawn from Rousseau’s educative account is the necessity of locating sentimental compassion within a moral framework held together by a fundamental belief in the existence of a moral order that cannot ultimately be reduced to sentiment alone. His critique of liberalism highlights the problem of attempting to ground social life on a morality of enlightened self-interest. His proposed solution to this problem can be thought of as a return to morality that does not entail a return to classical philosophy or doctrinal Christianity. He attempts to articulate the possibility of a new human type defined by a moral life that needs no recourse to reason or revelation, but only to nature. In this regard compassion, because of its naturalness, functions as a kind of engine for animating the pursuit of a moral life; yet this pursuit must still be guided by substantive moral beliefs of the kind preached by the Vicar. On this point Rousseau is explicitly clear: no matter how useful compassion might be from the perspective of social life, it is no substitute for virtue. Compassion has a role to play in liberal society, but as an ally of virtue and not an alternative to it. In modernity the available
avenues to virtue are limited, and the natural religion of Rousseau’s Vicar attempts to approximate on an individual level what is no longer feasible at a political level.

The individualistic nature of Rousseau’s teaching points to its ultimate political limitations. Compassion is always a personal sentiment, and the moral teaching that Rousseau conveys aims at shaping a personal and private morality. The outlook that he means to impart is not expected to be widely shared; it privileges sincerity and conscience over public spiritedness; it is meant to operate within the context of liberal commercial society to alleviate some of its ills and render bourgeois individuals slightly less selfish, slightly more beneficent, and somewhat happier than they might be otherwise. If a few individuals take his teaching to heart, and successfully substitute a developed and strong compassion for self-interested calculation, they will be in a position to work for good on the margins of a social order that remains fundamentally problematic.

The combined effect of two important aspects of Rousseau’s political thought—his critique of liberal modernity in the name of morality and his praise of compassion in the name of natural goodness—has been to inspire future generations to seek out remedies for liberal ills in a “politics of compassion.” Yet the effect does not align with Rousseau’s intention. The very notion of a politics of compassion taking root in the context of liberal commercial society is, for Rousseau, a contradiction. He would likely remind those of us taken with such a notion that the true meaning of politics is “almost entirely lost among modern men” (SC I.6, 54). Compassion cultivated properly in the soul of the individual may help, but it will never reach to the roots of the systemic problems in liberal society; then again, nothing can short of a radical reshaping of the social order that would entail a total abandonment of liberalism. Ultimately, the problem of man in society remains permanent and intractable, and the kind of moral life that is accessible to
the individual is one that keeps politics at arm’s length. This is in part a reflection of compassion’s limits, but those limits in turn reflect Rousseau’s fundamental premise of natural asociality. Yet we might be inclined to doubt this fundamental premise, and with it the subsequent limits of compassion, insofar as the two are bound together in Rousseau’s thought. We might counter that man is naturally social, that he does possess positively other-regarding sentiments that are not a function of *amour-propre*. Such is the approach taken by Rousseau’s contemporary and reader, Adam Smith, who did not accept the fundamental problem of man in society, but nevertheless afforded compassion a prominent role in his own attempt to grapple with the unsavory effects of the liberal commercial society. In the following chapter we will examine whether Smith’s different point of departure leads to a more optimistic conclusion regarding compassion’s possibilities in modern political life.
The problem of liberalism and compassion that emerged in the eighteenth century has its roots in the emergence of modern political philosophy, as discussed in chapter 2. Compassion was disburdened of its lowly premodern status as a mere emotion through a radical redefinition of human nature and the human soul. Whereas compassion had once been subordinated to moral or divine virtue, thinkers like Hobbes and Montesquieu who advanced the liberal project provided a critique of virtue in the name of comfortable self-preservation and freedom. This, combined with the stated aim of modern philosophy as the relief of man’s earthly estate, had the effect of replacing virtue with the more nebulous notion of humanity or humane gentleness, ostensibly lending to compassion the ethical status traditionally held by virtue. Yet as social and political realities came to reflect these fundamental philosophical commitments, the true distance between humane gentleness and happiness or flourishing became manifest, calling into question not only the morality but the social utility of compassion. As we have seen, Rousseau’s response to the modern situation depends crucially on utilizing compassion insofar as classical political philosophy and Christianity are undesirable or unavailable to modern man; yet it depends equally on a recovery of virtue and the subordination of compassion to virtue, and Rousseau attempts to accomplish this through a religion of “naturalness” that enables the man living in society to enlist compassion in the pursuit of an approximation to the natural goodness that defined man’s original condition.
Rousseau was not alone in his efforts to elevate compassion as an alternative to the liberal morality of rational self-interest. A similar project was undertaken in the eighteenth century by thinkers of the Scottish Enlightenment who were gravely concerned about the moral consequences of the self-interest doctrine and its demotion of virtue. The key figures belonging to this tradition, each in his own way, sought to salvage both the notion of man’s natural sociability and that of a goodness beyond interest toward which man is naturally directed. Compassion was especially useful to these ends and became something of a common theme in the moral thought that proliferated in this tradition. At the pinnacle of this tradition stands Adam Smith and his *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (*TMS*), the most robust eighteenth-century attempt to reconceptualize morality in terms of fellow-feeling.

It may seem strange to include Smith in a study of modern compassion, given his reputation as a preeminent theorist of rational self-interest, a founding father of modern capitalism, and an inspiration for twentieth-century neoliberalism. For many he is naturally associated with the cold and calculating outlook of the dismal science of economics, and remembered for such utterances as “it is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker, that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest” (*WN* I.ii.2). A highly influential introduction to the history of economic thought summarizes Smith’s attitude as

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follows: “Don’t try to do good, says Smith. Let good emerge as the by-product of selfishness.”

Over the past few decades scholars have worked hard to dismantle this caricature, recapturing the reputation Smith held in his own time as a preeminent moral philosopher and theorist of sympathy, a disciple of Hutcheson more than of Locke. As a result, it is not unusual to find various references and appeals to Smith—usually unaccompanied by a careful examination of Smith’s thoughts on the matter—in recent works that seek to advance a politics of compassion.

A closer examination of Smith’s treatment of compassion in light of Rousseau’s is useful for a number of reasons. Writing as contemporaries, Smith and Rousseau respond, albeit in very different ways, to the emergence of liberalism; and in spite of their differences, they share a number of common concerns regarding the modern world. The intellectual relationship between Smith and Rousseau has drawn much attention in recent years, and scholars have persuasively demonstrated the degree to which Smith, in his measured defense of liberal society, internalized many of Rousseau’s criticisms. What has not been fully appreciated is the degree to which Smith follows Rousseau in turning to compassion in response to the problems born of liberalism.

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The most fundamental disagreement between the two thinkers lies in their differing conceptions of human nature and human society. Unlike Rousseau, Smith views man as a naturally social animal possessing innate other-directed inclinations that cannot be reduced to *amour-propre*. Yet notwithstanding such fundamentally different starting points, Smith comes to similar conclusions regarding the modern moral situation, and the potential fruitfulness of compassion. Insofar as modernity has closed off other paths to human flourishing, compassion is at once necessary yet inherently limited, and thus stands in need of strengthening. For all of his efforts to separate self-regarding from other-directed inclinations, Smith finally admits that to strengthen the latter requires a noble and lofty form of self-love informed by certain substantive moral beliefs. On this point Smith and Rousseau are in complete agreement: liberalism needs compassion, but that sentiment alone is weak and unreliable unless it can be situated within a moral order transcending interest. This convergence is all the more interesting given that the two thinkers are commonly taken to represent opposite ends of the modern political spectrum. Yet there are significant differences in the nature of the moral order that each thinker views as desirable for this purpose. Whereas Rousseau focuses on a recovery of man’s natural goodness as accessible in principle to all men, Smith focuses on an idea of moral greatness as accessible only to an elevated human type. Keeping this in mind, we must be prepared to evaluate each thinker’s attempt to vitalize compassion in the context of liberal modernity.

This chapter proceeds as follows. The first two sections establish Smith’s basic views on compassion in light of Rousseau’s account. While Smith provides a somewhat different descriptive account of it, he agrees with Rousseau about the inherent limitations of sentimental compassion; nonetheless, he believes that inspiring compassion is of paramount importance in liberal modernity, where commercial society compromises human relations and thus human
happiness. Given compassion’s natural weaknesses, and given our need for it in the modern world, Smith seeks out a way to strengthen it. Accordingly, the next two sections of this chapter move on to Smith’s normative project which aims to empower and ennoble compassion through virtue. In his moral teaching Smith gives a place of primacy to beneficence, the virtue pertaining to sentimental compassion that harnesses it while overcoming its natural weaknesses and limitations. In these sections I aim to show how Smith embodies some of the deeper problems regarding liberalism and its professed commitment to compassion; more precisely, we will see how Smith’s account of compassion as virtuous beneficence presupposes a more fundamental framework of moral beliefs that his own philosophical commitments are unable to account for, let alone support. Thus, while Smith makes a valiant effort to ennoble compassion in the context of liberal modernity, I suggest that he cannot fully escape the tensions that are endemic to such an attempt.

Compassion and the Natural Economy of Sentiments

Like Rousseau, Adam Smith engages in a project of rethinking liberalism with a view to the deleterious effects it has on human happiness and social relations. While scholars have increasingly focused on their shared concerns regarding the corrupting effects of modern life, we must not lose sight of the essential fact that Smith ultimately departs from Rousseau by defending commercial society as a desirable improvement over premodern political alternatives, including the ancient polis which the latter embraces as a model. The origin of their ultimate

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6 Some studies which pursue the similarities between Rousseau and Smith tend to obscure this fundamental disagreement; see Pierre Force, *Self-Interest Before Adam Smith: A Genealogy of Economic Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 20, 46-64, 159, who goes too far in making Smith a “disciple” of Rousseau.
divergence lies in their differing assumptions about human nature and man’s fundamental disposition with regard to social life. Smith does not accept the problem of man in society that Rousseau believes to be the defining feature of the human condition, and insists on the contrary that man is “fitted by nature” for social life (TMS II.i.3.1, 85; II.i.3.6; II.2.5-7). In a published review of the Discourse on Inequality, Smith points out that Rousseau’s system is built upon the principles of Mandeville—the thinker who Smith sets up as his own foil—namely that man is asocial by nature and that vice is coextensive with human society. While showing general admiration for the work of Rousseau, Smith accuses him of engaging in a sleight of hand:

The life of a savage, when we take a distant view of it, seems to be a life either of profound indolence, or of […] the most dangerous and extravagant adventures… Mr. Rousseau, intending to paint the savage life as the happiest of any, presents only the indolent side of it to view, which he exhibits indeed with the most beautiful and agreeable colours, in a style, which, tho’ laboured and studiously elegant, is every where sufficiently nervous, and sometimes even sublime and pathetic. It is by the help of this style, together with a little philosophical chemistry, that the principles and ideas of the profligate Mandeville seem in him to have all the purity and sublimity of the morals of Plato. (EPS 251)

What Smith considers to be Rousseau’s subtle trick of “philosophical chemistry,” as Dennis Rasmussen has shown, is his argument for the principle of natural goodness, a principle comparable in “purity and sublimity” to a Platonic Idea, but nevertheless derived from a false representation of primitive life and the false principle that man is naturally unfit for social life. By rejecting both the idea of a pre-social state of nature and that of the natural goodness of man, Smith is led to interpret human history not as tragic or decadent but as generally progressive, and his ultimate endorsement of liberalism is informed by a sense of wonder at the seemingly providential order or form that emerges from the relatively chaotic matter of human nature. For

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7 Rasmussen (2006a); (2008), 65-66. See also Melzer (1990), 51, 291, who points out that the premise of an asocial human nature is in fact the most questionable aspect, and thus the weakest link, in Rousseau’s system of thought.

8 On Smith’s reasons for defending commercial society despite acknowledging its inherent problems, see Rasmussen (2006a); Rasmussen (2008), 101-108, 142-150; and Hanley (2009), 15-24; for Smith’s views on progress, see James
Smith, man does not bear the scars of a natural existence that has been torn from him. Rather, the phenomenon of internal dividedness that so captivated Rousseau is itself an original part of human nature. The human soul is not naturally whole and unified but is perpetually divided between self-regarding and other-directed passions and concerns. Thus, the deepest human problems originate not in society, but in human nature and the ongoing tug-of-war between selfish and sympathetic inclinations. While these inclinations appear to be inimical principles, they interact in subtle and complex ways to produce relatively stable social orders. Anticipating Kant’s idea of “unsocial sociability,” Smith maintains that man is naturally fit for society, but only in a partial or incomplete way. The task of correcting or completing what nature has begun requires the proper direction of the sympathetic sentiments, among which compassion is especially important in the modern context.

Insofar as other-directed inclinations are a central feature of human nature, Smith agrees with Rousseau in a roundabout way that rational self-interest cannot support human morality, which requires a sentimental foundation. For Smith, such a foundation exists in the human capacity for sympathy, by which individuals imaginatively partake in the experiences of others. Human beings according to Smith are social not merely for reasons of utility, but because they

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9 Recall that for Rousseau, this problem is manifested in the emergence of *amour-propre*. Smith has much to say about the dangers of *amour-propre*, but he ultimately believes that it is inseparable from our natural sociality, and more importantly from our sense of morality. For the dangers of *amour-propre*, in Smith’s view, see Hanley (2009), 36-42, 100-109; for its natural status as the source of morality, see Rasmussen (2008), 76-82, 114-119; for its natural status as the essence of sociality, see Charles L. Griswold, *Adam Smith and the Virtues of Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 104-112; and Griswold (2018), chapter 3.

10 Immanuel Kant, “Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Intent” (20-21).
naturally desire to sympathize with others, to observe that their feelings, tastes, and judgments are reflected in another person and to experience a kind of “harmony” or “concord” of sentiments. The desire for this pleasure of “mutual sympathy” is what originally drives man to seek the company of others, and the fulfilment of this desire is a necessary condition for human happiness.

Although Smith’s theory of sympathy has long been a topic of scholarly interest, relatively little attention has been paid to his treatment of compassion as a particular species of sympathy. To a certain extent Smith invites us to overlook pity or compassion by pointedly drawing our attention to the way in which sympathy is a broad phenomenon, encompassing a wider range of sentimental experiences than is readily acknowledged. While Smith understands sympathy to be a diffuse category signifying “our fellow-feeling with any passion whatever,” he distinguishes compassion as a narrower manifestation of “our fellow-feeling with the sorrow of others” (TMS I.i.1.5, 10). On closer examination, however, compassion would seem to be the most important sympathetic sentiment for Smith, and the primary one that his ethical theory aims to harness and empower. The naturalness of compassion is major theme of Smith’s thought, as evidenced in the opening paragraph of TMS where compassion is the first concept that he explicitly introduces:

How selfish soever man may be supposed, there are evidently some principles of his nature which interest him in the fortune of others, and render their happiness necessary to him, though he derives nothing from it except the pleasure of seeing it. Of this kind is pity or compassion, the emotion which we feel for the misery of others, when we either see it, or are made to conceive it in a very lively manner. That we often derive sorrow from the sorrow of others, is a matter of fact too

11 The only focused treatments of Smith’s views on pity or compassion of which I am aware are Hanley (2009), 175-186; and Adam Potkay, “Pity, Gratitude, and the Poor in Rousseau and Adam Smith,” Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture 46 (2017): 163-182. Among the numerous studies of Smith’s broader treatment of sympathy, I have found especially helpful Griswold (1999), 76-112; James Otteson, Adam Smith’s Marketplace of Life (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 13-64; and Fonna Forman-Barzilai, Adam Smith and the Circles of Sympathy: Cosmopolitanism and Moral Theory (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).
obvious to require any instances to prove it; for this sentiment, like all the other original passions of human nature, is by no means confined to the virtuous and humane, though they perhaps may feel it with the most exquisite sensibility. The greatest ruffian, the most hardened violator of the laws of society, is not altogether without it. (*TMS* I.i.1, 9)

Compassion serves here as the point of entry into Smith’s project, which, as the opening sentence indicates, is intended to refute Hobbesian egoism and to provide a sentimental alternative to the morality of self-interest derived from it. Contrary to Rousseau’s description of natural (i.e. uncultivated) compassion as a passive principle, Smith describes it as belonging to a set of “original passions” which render us not merely sensitive to the suffering of others, but actively interested in their fortune or wellbeing.12 Yet he quickly acknowledges at the outset that compassion in its purely sentimental form is no virtue, for it comes naturally even to persons of bad character. Furthermore, he does not deny the naturalness of self-love, but positively affirms it throughout his work (e.g. *TMS* II.ii.2.1, 82). Whereas Rousseau assimilates compassion to self-love, Smith insists on maintaining a sharp distinction between the two, and thus intimates the overarching aim of his moral theory, namely to strike a middle path between the claims for natural selfishness as articulated by Hobbes and Mandeville, and the claims for natural benevolence as articulated by his Scottish predecessors, most notably Hutcheson (*TMS* VII.ii.3-4). Attempting to synthesize these opposing claims necessarily complicates our understanding of human nature and renders the task of constructing a coherent political theory far more difficult. Yet this is the task Smith sets for himself, and it leads him to accept the partial truth and utility of both the selfish and the benevolent principles. His intention throughout is to provide a more accurate account of human morality, one that acknowledges the contradictory impulses to which

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12 While it is not clear whether Smith is thinking of Rousseau here, others have noted that the opening paragraph of *TMS* immediately calls the latter to mind; see e.g. Force (2003), 14-16; Griswold (2018), 130. For the relationship between Smith’s broader theory of sympathy and Rousseau’s pity from a philosophical perspective, see Griswold (2018), 93-149; from a political theory perspective, see Schwarze and Scott (2019).
man is subject and preserves those elements of truth to be found in the disparate systems which seize upon only one of those elements.

In Smith’s view compassion thus represents an aspect of natural benevolence that is crucial to man’s sociability and even his happiness. Belonging to the family of “social and benevolent affections,” compassion is generally esteemed as a benign and agreeable sentiment, such that an impartial spectator would approve of its being expressed in most cases. Smith maintains that unlike many other passions which are clearly odious in their excess, “there is something agreeable even in the weakness” of an overly compassionate heart (*TMS* I.ii.4.3, 40; VII.ii.3.4, 301). While the ostensible effect of compassion is to prompt individuals to give aid to those whom they observe suffering, especially those who suffer unjustly at the hands of others (*TMS* II.i.2.5, 70), its true value is derived from the more profound function that it serves as an aspect of our social nature. As social animals, Smith believes that we naturally long for and relish the sympathy of others: “nothing pleases us more than to observe in other men a fellow-feeling with all the emotions of our own breast” (*TMS* I.i.2.1, 13). The desire for sympathetic connection is especially pronounced in those who are suffering, and for whom the felt compassion of another is itself a true comfort:

How are the unfortunate relieved when they have found out a person to whom they can communicate the cause of their sorrow? Upon his sympathy they seem to disburthen themselves of a part of their distress: he is not improperly said to share it with them. He not only feels a sorrow of the same kind with that which they feel, but as if he had derived a part of it to himself, what he feels seems to alleviate the weight of what they feel. (*TMS* I.i.2.4, 15)

When Smith speaks of compassion as a kind of “healing consolation” that “alleviates grief by insinuating into the heart almost the only agreeable sensation which it is at that time capable of receiving,” he looks beyond the tangible or material succor that compassion might prompt (*TMS* I.i.2.2-5, 14). The deepest human needs according to Smith are not material but
psychological and social, the needs expressed in the desire for sympathetic connectedness with
others. Suffering individuals naturally seek out the compassion of others in search of
psychological relief as much as physical relief, for “the chief part of human happiness arises
from the consciousness of being beloved,” such that “there is a satisfaction in the consciousness
of being beloved, which, to a person of delicacy and sensibility, is of more importance to
happiness, than all the advantage which he can expect to derive from it” (TMS I.i.5.1, 41;
I.ii.4.1, 39). The mere awareness that one is the genuine object of another’s compassion provides
a satisfaction of this kind. On the contrary, “compared with the contempt of mankind, all other
external evils are easily supported,” and thus “the cruelest insult […] which can be offered to the
unfortunate, is to appear to make light of their calamities” (TMS I.i.2.5, 15; I.iii.2.12, 61). Thus,
what is at stake in the phenomenon of compassion is not merely a question of utility, or of
tangible benefits conferred, but something more akin to dignity or respect.\textsuperscript{13} Compassion
contributes positively to human happiness, insofar as it establishes a meaningful sympathetic
connection between the sufferer and spectator and affirms the sufferer’s sense of self-worth.

Although Smith believes that compassion serves a natural and important function in the
economy of sentiments, his descriptive account of it more frequently emphasizes compassion’s
problems than its promise. Smith’s normative account of virtuous beneficence, as we will see,
aims to overcome the various limitations of natural, amoral, sentimental compassion. The
critique that emerges in TMS focuses in particular on three problematic facts about sentimental

\textsuperscript{13} Consider Smith’s statement: “What chiefly enrages us against the man who injures or insults us, is the little
account which he seems to make of us” (TMS II.iii.1.5, 96; see also TMS II.iii.3.4, VI.i.3; WN I.x.c.12); for the idea
of dignity, or the sanctity of the individual, in Smith’s thought, see Stephen Darwall, “Sympathetic Liberalism:
Recent Work on Adam Smith,” Philosophy and Public Affairs, 28, no. 2 (1999): 139-164; and Griswold (1999),
237-238.
compassion: it is psychologically weak, sociologically limited, and morally unreliable. To begin with the first, Smith indicates that compassion, like all manifestations of sympathy, is a phenomenon that exists in and through the imagination, which itself can be more or less dull or lively in different persons (TMS I.i.4.7, 21). In other words, compassion does not necessarily arise spontaneously as if the painful feelings of others were a contagion transmitted to us. It requires a degree of sustained attentiveness, manifested in the active exercise of the imagination whereby we formulate some idea of the other’s experience. But not all individuals conceive of the experiences of others with the same degree of precision and profundity. As we will see in the following section, Smith seems to believe that the human imagination, like a muscle, requires disciplined exercise in order to be acute and agile. Strong compassion thus presupposes a robust imagination, which is not necessarily a given.

Aside from its dependence upon the imagination, Smith maintains that the motivational influence of compassion is relatively weak in comparison with other sentiments.\(^{14}\) Compassion represents merely one side of the human capacity for sympathy, the other side of which crucially includes fellow-feeling for the joy, elation, or happiness of others, which Smith refers to as the sentiment or principle of “congratulation” (TMS I.i.1.5, 10; I.iii.1.1, 43).\(^{15}\) In comparing these two sympathetic sentiments, Smith posits that “our sympathy with sorrow, though not more real, has been more taken notice of than our sympathy with joy,” and not without reason, because “our sympathy with sorrow is, in some sense, more universal than that with joy” (TMS I.iii.1.1-2, 43-44). Compassion is “more universal” than congratulation in the sense that it requires a less

\(^{14}\) Consider Smith’s claim that “compassion even when strongest is but a short-lived passion” (LRBL ii.241).

\(^{15}\) As indicated in the previous chapter, Rousseau downplays this side of sympathy, which speaks against his premise that man is asocial by nature.
complete identification with the other person. In Smith’s vision of the human condition suffering is a more universal feature than joy, and nature has equipped us such that our painful impressions are more “pungent” than pleasurable ones. While sympathizing with the latter requires a greater deal of imaginative effort, merely the vague hint of pain or suffering suffices to give us a relatively clear conception of what the sufferer feels. Nonetheless, Smith maintains that in the final analysis, “when there is no envy in the case, our propensity to sympathize with joy is much stronger than our propensity to sympathize with sorrow” (TMS I.iii.1.5, 45). For as Rousseau had claimed, although compassion is felt with a kind of sweetness, it also contains a competing element of discomfort insofar as it involves the vicarious sharing of another’s pain. In other words, there is always a natural psychological incentive to avoid compassion altogether, and every exercise of it requires the compassionate spectator first to overcome a degree of hesitation, as the mind “naturally resists and recoils” from suffering (TMS I.ii.5.3, 42). Compassion thus requires a robust imagination strengthened by a certain will or resolve in the face of discomfort.

If compassion is psychologically weak in this way, it is also prone to a number of sociological or relational limitations that Smith finds even more problematic. Like all forms of sympathy, compassion is a parochial sentiment, operating within narrow limits defined by familiarity and intimacy (TMS I.i.4.9, 23; II.i.3.4, 86). Thus, when Smith praises the healing consolation that compassion provides, he focuses almost exclusively on compassion among family, friends, and acquaintances as opposed to strangers. He conceives of human relations in spatial terms, as a set of concentric spheres emanating outward from the self, in which fellow-feeling is “more precise and determinate” at the core, “among those who have lived long and

16 For Smith’s views on the sweetness of compassion, see TMS I.i.2.6, 16; III.2.6, 116; VI.i.1.19, 225; on the discomfort that accompanies compassion, see TMS I.i.2.6, 15; I.ii.5.3, 42.
familiarly with one another,” but progressively weakens as it is extended outward to encompass more distant and unfamiliar relations (TMS VI.i.1.8, 221). When it comes to distant strangers, the influence of compassion in our hearts is almost negligible, as Smith famously illustrates with a fictional scenario imagining how little “a man of humanity in Europe” would be moved by news of a cataclysmic earthquake in China:

He would, I imagine, first of all, express very strongly his sorrow for the misfortune of that unhappy people, he would make many melancholy reflections upon the precariousness of human life, and the vanity of all the labours of man… And when all this fine philosophy was over, when all these humane sentiments had been once fairly expressed, he would pursue his business or his pleasure, take his repose or his diversion, with the same ease and tranquility, as if no such accident had happened… provided he never saw them, he will snore with the most profound security over the ruin of a hundred millions of his brethren. (TMS III.3.4, 136)

The reach of our social affections is always limited to those in the immediate vicinity of our lived experience, and this limitation was intended by nature since these are the others toward whom we stand in the best position to offer effectual aid. For this reason, Smith repeatedly disparages compassion without intimacy as something frivolous, extending no further than the display of “sympathetic tears” that are “perfectly useless” (TMS II.i.2.5; II.iii.3.3; III.3.9). In his terms, the example of the earthquake in China illustrates how our benevolence always outreaches our beneficence, for “our good-will is circumscribed by no boundary, but may embrace the immensity of the universe,” whereas “our effectual good-offices can very seldom be extended to any wider society than that of our own country” (TMS VI.i.3.1, 235 emphases added). Even in regard to the latter, our sentimental attachment to fellow members of our community or nation is not the expression of a disinterested humanitarian fellow-feeling, but a parochial attachment to our own: “We do not love our country merely as a part of the great society of mankind: we love

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it for its own sake, and independently of any such consideration” (*TMS* VI.i.2.4, 229). For Smith, compassion’s most serious limitation lies in its inability to transcend the boundaries of distance, or to move beyond the personal to encompass the social or political.

Moreover, Smith maintains that compassion is limited not only to a narrow sphere of physical proximity, but one of social and cultural proximity as well. In this regard, he posits that “those persons most excite our compassion and are most apt to affect our sympathy who most resemble ourselves, and the greater the difference the less we are affected by them” (*LJ*(A) iii.109, 184). This turns out to be especially true when it comes to socioeconomic differences among members of the same community. Compassion arises most naturally and spontaneously when it is for “the unfortunate and the injured,” those who have dramatically suffered some sudden and unexpected tragedy or some sort of bodily illness or harm (*TMS* I.i.5.2, 24). It is not as easily aroused toward the economic plight of the poor: “The mere want of fortune, mere poverty, excites little compassion. Its complaints are too apt to be the objects rather of contempt than of fellow-feeling. We despise a beggar; and, though his importunities may extort an alms from us, he is scarce ever the object of any serious commiseration” (*TMS* III.3.18, 144). As a result, the misery of the poor is doubled by the fact that they are frequently deprived of sympathetic connectedness and find themselves at great pains to arouse the compassion or even consideration of others. “The poor man goes out and comes in unheeded, and when in the midst of a crowd is in the same obscurity as if shut up in his own hovel,” while his better-off fellows

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18 On the variety of “spaces” that condition sympathy, see Fonna Forman-Barzilai, “Sympathy in Space(s): Adam Smith on Proximity,” *Political Theory* 33, no. 2 (2005): 189-217; and Forman-Barzilai (2010), esp. 139-175.

“turn away their eyes from him, or if the extremity of his distress forces them to look at him, it is only to spurn so disagreeable an object from among them. The fortunate and the proud wonder at the insolence of human wretchedness, that it should dare to present itself before them, and with the loathsome aspect of its misery presume to disturb the serenity of their happiness” (TMS I.iii.2.1, 51). Insofar as the poor are cut off from the sympathy of others, they are incapable of attaining happiness. Economic inequality is thus morally and psychologically problematic, and for reasons directly related to the weakness of our compassion.

Interestingly enough, Smith sees contempt for the poor as the reverse side of a natural disposition to admire and sympathize with the great, such that we more readily give ourselves over to “pity” and “compassion” for those of a higher rank or status than ourselves (TMS I.iii.2.2-3, 52-53). The publicized trials and tribulations of those who enjoy celebrity status elicit more feeling from us than the mundane struggles of the many which provoke only contempt. The efficacy of compassion is compromised from the start by the fact that man is a contradictory creature, simultaneously given to inclinations that are slavish and domineering: “There is in human nature a servility which inclines us to adore our superiors and an inhumanity which disposes us to contempt and trample under foot our inferiors… we are rather apt to make sport of the misfortunes of our inferiors than sympathize with them” (LRBL ii.90-91). While our propensity to admire and sympathize with the great is useful in maintaining social order and facilitating economic growth by giving a spur to ambition and industriousness through emulation, Smith nevertheless identifies this propensity as “the great and most universal cause of the corruption of our moral sentiments” (TMS I.iii.3.1, 61). In his view, the perverse effect of social hierarchy is that a fawning adulation flows from the bottom up while indifference and
cruelty flow from the top down. As a result, wherever there is a rank order, compassion toward those who most need it is always on precarious ground.

Finally, aside from its being conditioned by psychological and sociological influences that are problematic, Smith occasionally criticizes sentimental compassion on moral grounds. Without the guiding light of reason and judgement, compassion is capable of taking on a life of its own that leads to the misguided direction of our attention, concern, and ultimately our moral indignation. Heeding only the irrational voice of compassion, we are often led to feel an “illusive” or unreciprocated sympathy for those who have no great interest in or use for our fellow-feeling, including even the deceased (TMS III.i.2.5, 71; II.i.5.11, 78). Moreover, mere compassion is indiscriminate and thus fails to distinguish merited from unmerited kinds of suffering. As a result, it may frequently pose an obstacle to justice, and Smith is particularly disturbed by how easily we are overcome with compassion for the guilty criminal who is suffering his just retribution (TMS II.i.3.7, 88-89). Justice, in other words, often depends upon our ability to silence or at least disregard the voice of compassion.

In sum, Smith sees compassion as serving a natural function in our repertoire of sentiments, yet one that is subject to a number of serious limitations. On the one hand, it is the manifestation of a natural proclivity to enter into the experiences of others and fulfill our desires for mutual sympathy. It contributes to happiness by alleviating misery and affirming a sense of dignity on the part of the recipient. On the other hand, it partakes of our psychological frailties and ultimately runs up against a number of antisocial tendencies and aversions that seem to render its natural function questionable. All of this reaffirms what Smith declares in the opening paragraph of TMS quoted above, namely that compassion itself is natural yet morally neutral, belonging to “the greatest ruffian” and “the most hardened violator of the laws” as often as “the
“virtuous and humane.” Given all of this, what is most remarkable for our purposes is that Smith never abandons compassion, but instead places it squarely within his normative virtue ethics. His constructive project in *TMS* is driven by the conviction that modern society stands in need of a stronger, more elevated form of compassion than nature has given us, and the suspicion that the invisible hand of liberalism may need a helping hand to achieve this.

Compassion and Commercial Society

Adam Smith was once remembered as the Enlightenment’s preeminent defender of commercial society and the thinker most responsible for placing economics at the core of liberalism. Today, thanks to the outpouring of Smith scholarship in recent years, it is something of a truism that he was no doctrinaire apologist for commercial society but was in fact a harsh critic of the regime he famously described in *The Wealth of Nations.* Across his works Smith displays a keen awareness that the benefits of liberalism come at serious costs: the political cost of eroded citizenship and civic virtue, the psychological cost of inauthenticity, anxiety, and restlessness, and the moral cost of a loss of nobility and greatness. Beyond these effects, Smith

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21 Focusing narrowly on one part of Smith’s critique of commercial society influenced many earlier interpretations of his thought. Those who focused on the political side tended to interpret him as a classical republican or civic humanist: see e.g. Donald Winch, *Adam Smith’s Politics: An Essay in Historiographic Revision* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 86-87, 103-120; and Hirschman (1977), 100-113; while those who focused on the psychological side often interpreted him as a forerunner to Marxist criticism: see e.g. E.G. West, “Adam Smith and Alienation: Wealth Increases, Men Decay?” in *Essays on Adam Smith*, ed. Andrew S. Skinner and Thomas Wilson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 540-552. More recently, scholars like Rasmussen (2008) and Hanley (2009) have incorporated the various aspects of Smith’s critique while affirming his place in the liberal tradition, contra the “Cambridge school” and Marxist interpretations.
also sees commercial society as posing certain problems for sympathetic relations in general, and for compassion in particular. More precisely, each of the natural weaknesses of compassion described above are exacerbated in some way by the psychological, sociological, and moral conditions of liberal modernity.

In the first place, commercial society has the effect of deadening the human imagination which, as we have seen, is the medium through which compassion operates. Smith defines a “commercial society” as one in which the division of labor has been thoroughly extended, and where the ordinary occupations of most people are narrowly specialized as a result. According to Smith, the effect of modern specialization and routinization is to stultify the human mind. “The man whose whole life is spent in performing a few simple operations” loses the habit of intellectual and imaginative exertion, and “generally becomes as stupid and ignorant as it is possible for a human creature to become […] the torpor of his mind renders him, not only incapable of relishing or bearing a part in any rational conversation, but of conceiving any generous, noble, or tender sentiment” (WN V.i.f, 782). We might quickly point out that this frequently cited passage occurs not in the context of Smith’s evaluation of commercial society, but rather his argument for the importance of public education in a commercial society. Nevertheless, I would maintain that we are justified in drawing an inference regarding what these remarks mean for the exercise of compassion, given the mental and imaginative prerequisites described above. In a society where “the minds of men are contracted and rendered incapable

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22 The manner in which commercial society inhibits sympathy is understudied in the Smith literature; the only sustained treatments of which I am aware are Hanley (2009), 47-51; and Rasmussen (2016).

23 Rasmussen (2008), 108-111 draws attention to the importance of the context for interpreting this passage. He argues that the general aim of Smith’s rhetoric here is for educational reform, not against commercial society as such: “Smith does not in fact regard the deleterious effects of the division of labor as an inescapable feature of commercial society… he maintains that the state can ameliorate these problems by promoting education and perhaps
of elevation,” compassion is likely to whither along with the other social affections that presuppose a robust imagination capable of receiving lively sympathetic impressions (LJ(B) 333).

The sociological effects that Smith attributes to modern commercial society are also problematic from the perspective of compassion. In particular, commercial society exacerbates the proximity problem described above by breaking apart natural groupings like extended families and dissociating individuals from one another. As a result, a greater proportion of the individual’s contacts and relations occupy those distant spheres where fellow-feeling is weaker. “In commercial countries,” Smith explains, the rule of law renders the protection afforded by close-knit familial units less necessary; therefore, individuals “naturally separate and disperse, as interest or inclination may direct,” and distant family members or friends “soon cease to be of importance to one another” (TMS VI.ii.i.13, 223; cf. LJ(A) i.95). Thus, it is a general rule that “regard for remote relations becomes, in every country, less and less, according as this state of civilization has been longer and more completely established” (ibid.). The effect of liberal commercial society is to fracture the narrow and intimate relational spheres which nourish and educate our sympathetic sentiments, substituting in their place a plethora of distant, shallow, and unsentimental relations mediated by interest and the mercenary exchange of favors.

some kind of martial training” (109). This may be true, yet whether these deleterious effects are truly escapable depends on whether or not Smith’s institutional proposals are up to the task of performing this “crucial, character-forming role” (ibid. 109n.34). Smith scholars are divided on this point; while many beside Rasmussen have given a generally positive assessment, others have argued that “education… is too slight a bandage for the gaping wound Smith himself describes” (Hanley 2009, 60; cf. those cited at 60-61n.12). Without entering into this debate, the point I am making here is that the mental stultification Smith describes, regardless of his intention in doing so, poses a serious problem for sympathy and compassion, a problem which Smith addresses elsewhere in his moral philosophy, as I will argue below, rather than his account of public education here.
Against this last point many readers would likely argue that Smith’s vision of the liberal commercial society leaves plenty of room for the kind of strong interpersonal relationships that cultivate our sympathetic sentiments. This view is supported by the fact that Smith’s defense of commercial society is based in large part on the interdependence of the market, and the social bonds which it sustains and is sustained by. Indeed, Smith declares that among the various effects of “commerce and manufactures,” promoting “the liberty and security of individuals” and removing them from the “continual state of war” and “servile dependency” that characterized pre-commercial life are “by far the most important” (*WN* III.iv, 412; cf. *LJ*(A) vi.6; *LJ*(B) 204-205). We might say that the interdependence of liberal modernity, which replaced coercive systems of direct personal dependence in previous eras, ensures that human relations will never be rendered too distant or shallow. Markets exist in and through regular interactions and relationships, and the individual who participates in them, left free to forge sentimental bonds with others on the basis of a voluntary choice, is perfectly capable of manifesting love and care in his relations with family, friends, colleagues, and even strangers. This argument is not implausible, and we might add to it that Smith is certainly concerned to provide a brighter alternative to Rousseau’s dark vision of the bourgeois. Thus, for instance, he insists that “the prudent man” truly possessed of the bourgeois virtues is not duplicitous, is “always sincere,”

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25 Rasmussen (2006), 639 argues that this passage (*WN* III.iv) is “in many ways the key to Smith’s defense of commercial society.”

26 For a generalized version of this argument that is inspired by a similar reading of Smith, see Deirdre McCloskey, *The Bourgeois Virtues: Ethics for an Age of Commerce* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 126-148. Consider also Rasmussen’s claim that Smith’s model of “the prudent man” is “far from being a Homo economicus who is concerned only with his material well-being; he adheres strictly to his society’s norms of justice, and he genuinely cares for others, especially his family and friends” (2008), 120.
“perfectly genuine,” and “always very capable of friendship” (TMS VI.i.7-9, 213-14). Yet when it comes to caring for others on the basis of compassion, I would argue that Smith’s prudent man leaves much to be desired. He is “not always distinguished by the most exquisite sensibility,” and “his friendship is not that ardent and passionate, but too often transitory affection;” moreover, “he is not always disposed to general sociality,” but instead prioritizes “the regularity of his temperance,” “the steadiness of his industry,” and “the strictness of his frugality” over and above friendly social interaction (ibid., 214). Thus, the bourgeois type that Smith sees as most likely to predominate in commercial society would not appear to be a man of great compassion, at least not without the assistance of some additional virtues.27

In addition to these social effects, commercial society, even as it improves the material standards of living for those who are worst off, exacerbates the problem of contempt for the poor by generating inequality. Smith entertains no illusions about the possibility of eradicating inequality in commercial society: “wherever there is great property, there is great inequality. For one very rich man, there must be at least five hundred poor, and the affluence of the few supposes the indigence of the many” (WN V.i.b.2, 709-710). He explicitly agrees with Rousseau that the liberal vision of politics, which limits the purpose of civil government to the protection of property, defends the interests of the rich against the desires of the poor and thus perpetuates inequality (WN V.i.b.12, 715; LJ(A) iv.23). Inequality, in Smith’s view, is simply the price that must be paid in order to reduce poverty and privation. Thus, while liberalism raises the floor for those who are worst-off, it does not remove the hierarchy of status and rank that designates them

27 It is partly for this reason, as I will argue below, that Smith does not stop at the bourgeois virtues belonging to “the prudent man,” although he believes that they can easily suffice for a stable social order; instead, he seeks to augment his virtue of prudence with the virtue of beneficence.
as inferior, for they remain poor in a relative sense. The precarious position of the poor as residing outside the effective reach of compassion is thus further entrenched with the advance of commercial society.

Aside from bringing about new psychological and sociological conditions, Smith sees the transition from premodern to commercial society as accompanied by a transformation in morals. His descriptions of modern morality are reminiscent of Montesquieu’s statements regarding the spread of commerce and the softening of mores, whereby a harsh ethic of self-denial is replaced with an easygoing ethic of “humanity” that encourages self-indulgence. The modern age is one of “civility and politeness,” where “the virtues which are founded upon humanity are more cultivated than those which are founded upon self-denial and the command of the passions;” by contrast, “among rude and barbarous nations, it is quite otherwise, the virtues of self-denial are more cultivated than those of humanity” (TMS V.2.8, 204-205). Whereas the mores of premodern societies favored the “awful virtues” of self-command, which consisted in the active “control of our passive feelings” or the “restraint of our present appetites,” modern mores favor the indulgence of the passions; in “civilized nations,” therefore, “the mind is more at liberty to unbend itself, and to indulge its natural inclinations” (TMS III.3.21, 145; IV.2.8, 189).

Although the amiable modern morals might appear hospitable to warm bonds of sympathetic and compassionate fellow-feeling, they are in truth far more flattering to self-interest. At a glance, the modern condition seems to secure the necessary circumstances that would enable individuals to exercise compassion more frequently, insofar as modern man enjoys a degree of security and prosperity that allows for a softer and more open posture toward others: “Before we can feel much for others, we must in some measure be at ease ourselves. If our own misery pinches us very severely, we have no leisure to attend to that of our neighbor” (TMS
Compassion has little room to operate in conditions of scarcity or existential threat, yet it does not necessarily thrive when such conditions are removed. According to Smith, the human character that has internalized modern mores too often manifests a selfish disposition that renders one insensitive to his fellows. Smith thus touches on the fundamental problem that surrounds the unleashing of compassion in modernity, the problem that was hinted at by Montesquieu. Commercial modernity unleashes compassion while simultaneously building a fence around it, and while simultaneously producing deleterious psychological and social conditions that seem to call out for the invigoration of compassion.

The pernicious effects that commercial society has wrought on man’s capacity for sympathy inform Smith’s ultimate critique of that society. In a much-debated passage, he embraces the classical distinction between the best regime and the best possible regime, and in his version of it the distinction hinges on the presence or absence of beneficence as a principle of social order:

All the members of human society stand in need of each other's assistance, and are likewise exposed to mutual injuries. Where the necessary assistance is reciprocally afforded from love, from gratitude, from friendship, and esteem, the society flourishes and is happy. All the different members of it are bound together by the agreeable bands of love and affection, and are, as it were, drawn to one common centre of mutual good offices. But though the necessary assistance should not be afforded from such generous and disinterested motives, though among the different

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28 Thus, “in modern times” which are “more refined and cultivated,” even the man of considerable means “gives nothing away gratuitously, for men are so selfish that when they have an opportunity of laying out on their own persons what they possess, tho on things of no value, they will never think of giving it to be bestowed on the best purposes by those who stand in need of it” (LJ(A) i.116-118, 50). This lack of apparent compassion in commercial society is offset to some degree by the benevolent effects of the market, as articulated in Smith’s “invisible hand” metaphor (TMS IV.i.10; LJ(A) iii.134), but even these effects to do not fully compensate for intangible value of strong sympathetic relations, as described above.

29 The distinction recurs, more explicitly, in Smith’s account of the ideal legislator: “When he cannot establish the right, he will not disdain to ameliorate the wrong; but like Solon, when he cannot establish the best system of laws, he will endeavour to establish the best that the people can bear” (TMS VI.ii.2.16, 233). Ryan Patrick Hanley, “Enlightened Nation Building: The Science of the Legislator in Adam Smith and Rousseau,” American Journal of Political Science 52, no. 2 (2008b): 219-234, identifies the acceptance of the classical distinction as a crucial similarity between Smith and Rousseau, and one that informs the particular species of political moderation that they share.
members of the society there should be no mutual love and affection, the society, though less happy and agreeable, will not necessarily be dissolved. Society may subsist among different men, as among different merchants, from a sense of its utility, without any mutual love or affection… it may still be upheld by a mercenary exchange of good offices according to an agreed valuation. (TMS II.ii.3.1-2, 85-86)

In this passage Smith not only entertains the idea of a best regime as one that attains flourishing and happiness beyond mere peace and preservation, but he links flourishing and happiness with beneficence, which, as we shall see below, manifests itself as an elevated form of compassion. Moreover, Smith makes it clear that the liberal commercial society falls short of this regime, insofar as it dispenses with beneficence as a principle and replaces it instead with exact rules of justice. In a liberal regime, stability and cohesion can still be maintained because justice, understood minimally as the enforcement of negative rights, is more essential to polity: justice is “the main pillar that upholds the whole edifice,” while beneficence is “the ornament which embellishes, not the foundation which supports the building” (TMS II.ii.3.4, 86). This observation raises the question of just how committed Smith is to “embellishing” modern society through beneficence.

A common strand of scholarly interpretation maintains that Smith was not all that concerned about approximating the best regime, or that he was quite willing to accept minimal “social order” or “social cohesion” purchased “at the price of social compassion.” This position is exemplified in a seminal study by Joseph Cropsey, who situates Smith as “the disciple of Hobbes” and “the translator of Hobbianism into an order of society.” Cropsey believes that Smith, in defending commercial society, ultimately dispenses with beneficence, charity, and

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sacrifice, opting instead for a negative law of justice (or “justice” lowered in stature to Hobbes’s level), which functions as “the substitute and ouster for benevolence.” According to this view, Smith, regardless of his serious misgivings, was ultimately more concerned about social order than about flourishing or excellence in any meaningful sense.

Against this view, Ryan Hanley argues that “the horizon of Smith’s vision” goes “well beyond the virtues conventionally associated with the good bourgeois” and “speaks to the aspirations of those seeking a less qualified excellence.” Hanley points out that Smith’s effort to remedy the deleterious effects of liberal commercial society occupied his last days, which were spent writing a final edition of *TMS* with an entirely new Part VI devoted to virtue. Hanley believes that Smith’s treatment of virtue in *TMS* Part VI is a kind of exhortation intended to reawaken and engage “longings for transcendence and nobility and greatness” in the context of modernity, that for Smith, “happiness conceived as individual and social flourishing remains a possibility for modern men, even in our modern world,” and that this does not require abandoning the principle of beneficence but pursuing it.

I generally agree with Hanley that Smith is concerned to establish a notion of goodness that aims higher than the middling bourgeois virtues, that transcends rational self-interest to recognize categories of beauty and nobility; and I believe that he conceives of this goodness as

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33 Hanley (2009), 5-6. For similar a similar interpretation, see James E. Alvey, *Adam Smith: Optimist or Pessimist? A New Problem Concerning the Teleological Basis of Commercial Society* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2003), esp. 31-117.

34 Hanley (2009), 6, 14.
consisting largely in beneficence, or an elevated form of compassion. In the previous chapter we saw that for Rousseau, rational self-interest cannot support social morality; for Smith it can, but only in the most limited and prosaic sense. Liberal society is capable of securing to man a bare existence through the enforcement of exact rules of justice that protect negative rights and otherwise encourage the indulgence of selfish passions. But it is not capable of fostering a strong moral commitment or devotion rooted in deep and meaningful bonds of sympathetic affection. The question for Smith is between a bare existence where the provision of material goods is the sole criterion, and a happy existence where immaterial goods of a psychological or spiritual kind are provided for. As indicated above, Smith’s conception of happiness entails more than material security or even prosperity, and encompasses the pleasures derived from strong sympathetic relations with one’s fellows. The constructive side of Smith’s moral theory seeks a means for securing such immaterial goods in the context of a regime that denigrates them. In this regard, *TMS* is rightly interpreted not as merely “a technical treatise” on moral psychology, but rather as a “practical intervention” on Smith’s part to administer “a sustained and developed remedy for the ills he diagnosed,” chief among them being the inhibition of sympathy and compassion. It is quite significant that Smith was preoccupied with teaching virtue at a point in his life when he had ceased writing about political economy and jurisprudence. And it is doubly significant, for our immediate purposes here, that he presents the pinnacle of virtue as active beneficence, and the best man as one whose compassion is empowered and ennobled. He is clearly concerned to turn the minds and hearts of his readers toward a lofty form compassion. However, as will

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35 Cropsey (1957), i.

36 Hanley (2009), 4, 55; a similar point is made by Griswold (1999), 1-26.
become clear what follows, I am less confident than Hanley that Smith’s attempt to ennoble bourgeois selfishness and mediocrity is ultimately successful, or that Smith himself was overly optimistic about his prospects for success. And to the extent that compassion lies at the heart of Smith’s normative project, the shortcomings of that project further call into question the prospects for compassion in liberal modernity.

Beneficence as Virtuous Compassion

Throughout Smith’s work, the “flourishing and happy” society remains the ideal standard against which he judges the actual commercial regime that he ultimately defends (*WN* I.viii.36, 96). He defends it not because he judges its aims to be superior, but because he acknowledges no alternative regime that goes significantly further in approaching the standard. Whereas Rousseau finds a legitimate alternative to the modern condition in the classical *polis*, Smith judges Sparta and Rome as inferior from the perspective of human happiness. Far from approximating any sort of freedom through the general will, the classical republics in his estimation were predicated upon conditions of abject dependence on the private will of others, slavery, insecurity, and a harshness of mores that gave sanction to destructive and inhuman customs (*TMS* V.2.15; *WN* III.ii.8, IV.ix.47; *LJ*(A) i.111, iii.78-87, iii.106; *LJ*(B) 106).37 While the modern commercial society is fundamentally defective in its own ways, it represents an overall improvement upon these conditions. In the absence of any real-world model that might be aspired to, Smith sees no political formula for securing a flourishing social condition of widespread beneficence. Because

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37 On Smith’s assessment of the classical republics, and other premodern alternatives, see Rasmussen (2006), esp. 637-638.
nature has given us “very limited powers of beneficence,” the embellished ideal of a society built upon “bands of love and affection” may very well be chimerical (*TMS* VI.ii.intro.2, 218). Yet Smith maintains that even if there is no political order that will necessarily move us in the direction of this ideal, the ideal can still be approximated if individuals are habituated to virtue. Beneficence thus ceases to be a political aim, strictly speaking, and becomes a matter of human character, which means for Smith a private and internal matter. Smith’s attempt to inspire compassion, like Rousseau’s, ultimately operates at the level of individuals.

To empower and ennoble compassion, in Smith’s view, requires a different approach than the commonplace, moralistic fixation on compassion that he associates with modern moral thinking. Smith delivers a withering critique of “those whining and melancholy moralists, who are perpetually reproaching us with our happiness, while so many of our brethren are in misery” (*TMS* III.3.9, 139). In attempting to make compassionate sensitivity the whole of our duty, such preachers have “carried their doctrines a good deal beyond the just standard of nature and propriety” and exacerbated compassion’s problematic tendency toward passivity (*TMS* III.3.8, 139). Attempting to extort from us “commiseration for those miseries which we never saw,” and “extreme sympathy with misfortunes which we know nothing about,” the sermonizers cultivate insincerity and encourage “artificial commiseration” that serves little purpose beyond gratifying one’s own vanity. Smith speaks elsewhere of a kind of “artificial sympathy” as contrasted with true or “natural sympathy” that reaches that heart and motivates action (*TMS* I.iii.1.12, 47; VI.ii.1.18). In a modern age prone to excessively valuing outward decency over inward self-

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38 “Those who affect this character have commonly nothing but a certain affected and sentimental sadness, which, without reaching the heart, serves only to render the countenance and conversation impertinently dismal and disagreeable” (*TMS* III.3.8, 140).
control, the valorization of compassionate sensitivity can be carried to the point of neglecting active duties, leaving us with a moral principle that is “perfectly useless” (*TMS* III.3.9, 139).

The moralistic preachers of compassion, then, fail to facilitate it. Yet in unmasking the affectations of sympathy that they help to proliferate, Smith gestures in the direction of his own alternative when he declares that the noblest form of sympathy “can exist only among men of virtue” (*TMS* VI.ii.1.18, 225). His own teaching on virtue attempts to shift the focus away from sentimental compassion and its weaknesses, and toward a virtuous beneficence that harnesses and guides compassion. In appealing to virtue, Smith has in mind something different from Rousseau; whereas the latter had taken up Montesquieu’s redefinition of virtue\(^\text{39}\) and used it to delegitimize modernity, Smith sticks closely to a conception of virtue that is more faithful to what the ancient moral philosophers—particularly Aristotle and the Stoics—had meant by it, and uses it to try to shore up modernity. His is not a civic or political virtue, nor an intellectual or philosophic virtue, but a moral virtue pertaining to actions and habits (*TMS* II.ii.3.3). As indicated above, Smith ascribes to human nature an internal tension between selfish and other-directed passions and desires, and virtue intervenes to assist the latter against the former. Virtue aims for “the perfection of human nature,” which consists in a habitual disposition “to feel much for others and little for ourselves” and “to restrain our selfish, and to indulge our benevolent affections” (*TMS* I.i.5.5, 25). In Smith’s telling, complete virtue combines the most attractive features of premodern harshness with those of modern gentleness.\(^\text{40}\) “The man of the most perfect virtue… is he who joins, to the most perfect command of his own original and selfish

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\(^{39}\) See Manent (1998), 21-49.

\(^{40}\) Many have noted that Smith’s treatment of virtue attempts to synthesize liberal principles with classical virtue ethics; see e.g. Griswold (1999), 7, 181; Fleischacker (2004), 102; and Hanley (2009), 53-81.
feelings, the most exquisite sensibility both to the original and sympathetic feelings of others. The man who, to all the soft, the amiable, and the gentle virtues, joins all the great, the awful, and the respectable, must surely be the natural and proper object of our highest love and admiration” (TMS III.3.35, 152). The humane does not suffice for virtue, which needs recourse to the awful; the modern stands in need of the ancient.

Smith devotes a great deal of attention to describing vividly the specific traits of the virtuous character. To combine the utmost command over one’s selfish passions with the utmost sensibility in one’s social passions requires a synthesis of “perfect prudence,” “just magnanimity,” and “proper beneficence,” the three cardinal virtues for Smith.41 What beneficence shares in common with prudence and magnanimity is that each is manifested in a specific kind of self-command, or control over a specific subset of passions. For Smith, self-command—willful mastery over passions and desires—is more essential to virtue than wisdom or knowledge (TMS VI.iii.1). Whereas prudence consists in self-command over appetitive desires and passions, and magnanimity in self-command over spirited desires and passions, beneficence consists in self-command over one’s sentimental pity and compassion.

Hanley has argued convincingly that Smith’s account of virtue is dialectical, ascending from the lowest virtue of prudence, through magnanimity, to the highest virtue of beneficence.42 This ascension from the lower to the higher aims to make man good for himself and for others by manipulating and directing vanity. Human sociability is inseparable from an original natural

41 In this outline of Smith’s virtue ethics, I follow Hanley (2009), esp. 159n.36. For a critique of Hanley’s reading, see Lisa Hill, “‘The Poor Man’s Son’ and the Corruption of Our Moral Sentiments: Commerce, Virtue, and Happiness in Adam Smith,” Journal of Scottish Philosophy 15, no. 1 (2017): 9-25.

42(Hanley 2009), 6, 56-57; he points out that in combining these three virtues—prudence, magnanimity, beneficence—Smith is attempting to synthesize bourgeois, classical, and Christian virtue under a single conception.
vanity that renders each desirous of the praise and esteem of others. Smith sees vice as coextensive with misguided vanity, but posits that through habituation to virtue, vanity can be sublimated into a higher form: “The great secret of education is to direct vanity to proper objects” (TMS VI.iii.46, 259). Through prudence, vain selfishness is transformed into enlightened self-interest; through magnanimity, enlightened self-interest is transformed into noble self-sufficiency; and through beneficence, noble self-sufficiency is transformed into pure and disinterested concern for others. All individuals are born with an ardent and vain desire for the recognition, praise, and esteem of others, some of which is communicated and received through sympathy. But with the accumulation of social experiences over time, we become capable of conceiving with increasing clarity a general idea of what is praiseworthy and good in itself, even in the absence of actual praise (TMS III.2.25-27). Arriving at a clear conception of this distinction between what is praised and what is praiseworthy is essential to exercise of virtue. The developmental path of virtue thus leads from the “love of praise” to the “love of 

43 Contrast this with Rousseau’s claim that “the great secret of education” is to achieve a balance between bodily and intellectual exercise, such that vanity is prevented from emerging at a young age (Emile III.202).

44 To the extent that he provides one, Smith’s account of moral education shows clear traces of Locke: “Esteem and disgrace are, of all others, the most powerful incentives to the mind, when once it is brought to relish them. If you can once get into children a love of credit and apprehension of shame and disgrace, you have put into them the true principle, which will constantly work and incline them to the right… children (earlier perhaps than we think) are very sensible of praise and commendation. They find a pleasure in being esteemed and valued, especially by their parents and those whom they depend on. If therefore the father caress and commend them when they do well, show a cold and neglectful countenance to them upon doing ill… it will in time make them sensible of this difference;” Locke, Some Thoughts Concerning Education 56-62.

45 To preview my criticism in the following section, this is a problematic aspect of Smith’s moral theory. At some point we move from praise (comparable to the realm of mere opinion) to what is praiseworthy (comparable to the realm of knowledge), from conventional and socialized morality to universal and transcendent morality, but the process is vague. It’s not clear by what mechanism this movement takes place; nor is it clear at what point exactly our subjective moral sentiments start to become objective moral principles. As a result of these difficulties, some have concluded that Smith never really gets beyond a conventionalist account of morality (e.g. Forman-Barzilai 2010; Rasmussen 2014, 49-51); others have posited that whatever “objectivity” or universality is to be found in Smith’s morality depends ultimately on its theological foundations, some of which will be discussed below (e.g. Otteson 2002, 255-256).
virtue,” and in the process sentimental compassion is transformed into “noble beneficence,” which is the pinnacle of Smithian virtue (TMS VII.ii.4).

What is crucial in Smith’s account is the framework of moral belief that is necessary for virtue. In the same way that he evaluates the liberal commercial regime against the standard of an ideal type, so he contrasts the bourgeois denizen of the former with an image of the best man, who is referred to throughout as “the wise and virtuous man” (TMS VI.iii.25). What facilitates the best man’s pursuit of virtue is his apprehension of an archetype of moral perfection, a glimpse of “the idea of exact propriety and perfection:” “There exists in the mind of every man, an idea of this kind, gradually formed from his observations upon the character and conduct both of himself and of other people” (ibid., 247). This idea, formed through observation and experience is itself a reflection, an imitation, “a mortal copy” of “the immortal original” that is “the work of a divine artist,” and the wise and virtuous man is aware of this. Although an intimation of this idea is accessible to all men, “the wise and virtuous man… has studied this idea more than other people, he comprehends it more distinctly, he has formed a much more correct image of it, and is much more deeply enamoured of its exquisite and divine beauty;” as a result, he longs “to assimilate his own character to this archetype of perfection” (ibid.). From these passages we can begin to see that “noble beneficence” is inseparable from the belief in a universal moral order that is divinely ordained. This becomes clearer in a separate passage where Smith indicates that “the wise and virtuous man” holds to a “habitual and thorough conviction” that there is a God who is “benevolent, and all-wise;” that he has ordered and continues to direct the universe; that he “is determined… to maintain in it, at all times, the greatest possible quantity of happiness;” and that “all the inhabitants of the universe” are under his “immediate care and protection” (TMS VI.ii.3.1-2, 235). If we examine the nature of beneficence in light of these
passages, we can see that it is only insofar as beneficence is informed by these fundamental beliefs that it can transcend the natural limitations of compassion.

In the first place, noble beneficence corrects for the psychological weaknesses, and especially the passivity, of sentimental compassion. The wise and virtuous man “must not be satisfied with indolent benevolence, nor fancy himself the friend of mankind, because in his heart he wishes well to the prosperity of the world;” on the contrary, he must have the capacity to “call forth the whole vigour of his soul, and strain every nerve” in order to promote actual “changes in the external circumstances both of himself and others, as may seem most favourable to the happiness of all” (TMS II.iii.3.3, 106). Beneficence is not a matter of feeling more compassion more intensely, but of acting to assist the persons toward whom our compassion is aroused. To act upon it, in turn, requires that we be able and willing to deny some desire or interest of our own. In Smith’s terms virtuous beneficence manifests itself as “generosity,” which he contrasts sharply with the modern mores encapsulated in the notion of “humanity:”

Humanity consists merely in the exquisite fellow-feeling which the spectator entertains with the sentiments of the persons principally concerned, so as to grieve for their sufferings, to resent their injuries, and to rejoice at their good fortune. The most humane actions require no self-denial, no self-command, no great exertion of the sense of propriety. They consist only in doing what this exquisite sympathy would of its own accord prompt us to do. But it is otherwise with generosity. We are never generous except when in some respect we prefer some other person to ourselves, and sacrifice some great and important interest of our own… (TMS IV.2.10, 190-191)

Beneficence understood in terms of generosity is characterized by a habitual willingness to act outside our interests for the benefit of others in what amounts to something like a freely given gift. It is a principle of action that goes beyond strict justice and involves giving more than what is demanded by the negative rights of others, or giving something that is not owed strictly speaking (TMS II.i.1.3). It goes beyond even reciprocity, or the “mercenary exchange of good offices:” “To barter one thing for another is mean,” whereas “to perform anything, or to give
anything, without a reward is always generous and noble” (LJ(B) 301). For Smith, a habitual disposition to use one’s compassion as a springboard for such generous action is directly tied to the moral beliefs identified above. “The wise and virtuous man is at all times willing that his own private interest should be sacrificed” for the good of others or the good of the whole, and this because he believes in the existence of a universal moral order “of which God himself is the immediate administrator and director” (TMS VI.ii.3.3, 235). The goodness and beauty of this order, and the archetype of perfection toward which it points, is a source of profound “joy” that renders self-denial less painful than it might otherwise be. In the absence of such beliefs, the motives to generosity are simply not strong enough to overcome the “base and selfish disposition” that is predominant in liberal commercial society.

In the second place, noble beneficence corrects for the sociological limitations of compassion insofar as it is informed by belief in a moral order that is fundamentally egalitarian. The wise and virtuous man manifests a heartfelt conviction that “he is but one of the multitude in no respect better than any other in it” (TMS II.ii.2.1, 83; III.3.4). His partial and parochial attachments are held in check by his belief that God protects and cares for “all the inhabitants of the universe, the meanest as well as the greatest” (TMS VI.ii.3.2, 235). On account of these beliefs, his own moral horizon transcends the relational spheres that normally constrain our compassion. His proper orientation toward the idea of divine moral perfection “will frequently produce something which, though by no means the same, yet may very much resemble those natural affections” that are conditioned by resemblance, familiarity, and intimacy (TMS VI.ii.1.8, 221). Moreover, noble beneficence overpowers the natural inclination toward contempt for one’s

46 “[O]n the contrary, the very suspicion of a fatherless world, must be the most melancholy of all reflections” (TMS VI.ii.3.2, 235).
inferiors, including the poor. The wise and virtuous man is “humbled” by an awareness of “the imperfect success of all his best endeavours” to approximate a standard of moral perfection that is “the work of a divine artist, which can never be equaled” (TMS VI.iii.25, 247). As a result, “he is never so elated as to look down with insolence even upon those who are really below him… far from insulting over their inferiority, he views it with the most indulgent commiseration,” and “is at all times willing to promote their further advancement” (ibid., 248). The social and relational barriers that separate individuals thus fade away in light of an elevated moral horizon.

Finally, noble beneficence as portrayed by Smith is equipped to confront the moral dilemmas which natural compassion is liable to lead us into. As indicated above, sentimental compassion does not discriminate between merited and unmerited suffering and can lead us to side with a wrongdoer if it means lessening his pain. For the wise and virtuous man, partial sentimentality is subordinated to considerations of justice formulated with a view to the divine moral order. He is fully aware that “mercy to the guilty is cruelty to the innocent,” that a “partial evil” might be just in light of “the universal good” or “the good of the whole” (TMS II.ii.3.7, 88; VI.ii.3.3-4). Grounded within a framework of moral beliefs that is “more generous and comprehensive,” persons possessed of noble beneficence have the capacity to “oppose to the emotions of compassion which they feel for a particular person, a more enlarged compassion which they feel for mankind” (TMS II.ii.3.7, 88-89). Such then is Smith’s attempt to ennoble compassion through virtue in context of liberal modernity. Whether all of this works remains an open question, to which I will now turn.
Assessing Smith’s Compassionate Rhetoric

Smith, like Rousseau before him, responds to the emergence of the liberal commercial society, and the problems that it poses for human happiness, by appealing to compassion. Insofar as this society reflects the project of modern political philosophy, which was predicated on a rejection of authoritative standards derived from a moral order accessible through reason or revelation, both thinkers turn to the natural sentiments, focusing particularly on compassion. As indicated in the previous chapter, Rousseau posits a need for the education or cultivation of compassion; in his view compassion is not simply an innate sentiment that can be assumed to operate spontaneously, but one that must be learned or constructed in some sense. At first glance Smith seems to push back against this claim by affording other-directed sentiments like compassion a more prominent place in human nature. Yet a careful reckoning of the human capacity for sympathy reveals the limitations of compassion; while it may be true that compassion is an innate aspect of human sociality, it is limited by nature to operation within a narrow sphere, and thus it does not help us much in the context of a large open commercial society. In the end, Smith finds himself in a position very similar to Rousseau, wanting to ground modern morality on a compassionate foundation, yet aware that sentimental compassion requires a great deal of un-sentimental assistance to provide such a foundation. Compassion alone cannot liberate us from the need for virtue, which must be educated or habituated on the basis of a kind of wisdom.

I have attempted above to draw out Smith’s account of how the weaknesses of compassion might be overcome, and the liberal commercial society embellished and improved, through moral virtue. Unfortunately, that account is not entirely persuasive, in part because of its
vagueness. Smith does not provide us with a precise educative blueprint for how exactly the
habituation of compassion into noble beneficence can be carried out. To raise children to be
“kind and affectionate,” he advises, “educate them in your own house,” where the bonds of
sympathy are naturally strongest; beyond this he provides little direct guidance (*TMS* VI.ii.1.10,
222). There is no equivalent to Rousseau’s *Emile* in his work, and we are left with only a
general outline of the process that leads to the final product he wishes to give us. On the whole,
Smith’s treatment of virtue appears highly rhetorical, employing portraits and images more than
it does reasons and arguments. Thus, while he paints a beautiful portrait that shows what an
elevated and ennobled form of compassion might look like, he does not tell us with certainty
how this portrait can be realized. When we look behind this portrait and attempt on our own to
determine how it might be realized on his terms, it appears that Smith’s own philosophical
commitments—those which underlie his ultimate endorsement of Enlightenment liberalism—are
not entirely commensurable with the claims he makes on behalf of virtue.

As we have seen, Smith’s account of noble beneficence is couched in appeals to
transcendence; that is, it is predicated on the recognition of a moral framework that transcends
considerations of self-interest or sentiment to arrive at what is praiseworthy in itself. However,
Smith’s own metaphysics—or more accurately, his lack thereof—cannot support such a
framework. The wise and virtuous man, the man whose compassion is no longer problematic but
rather is a spur to the pursuit of virtuous other-directed action, is a contemplative type. We are

47 “Domestic education is the institution of nature; public education is the contrivance of man” (*TMS* VI.ii.1.10).
48 The rhetorical character of *TMS* has been commented on by many; see e.g. Jerry Z. Muller, *Adam Smith in His
Time and Ours* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 55, 147-150; Griswold (1999), 40-75; Fleischacker
told that he grasps the divine idea or archetype of moral perfection because “he has studied” it with “the utmost care and attention” (TMS VI.iii.25, 247). Yet elsewhere Smith repeatedly disparages the contemplative life as inferior to the social or political life, because nature has made man for action (e.g. TMS II.iii.3.3; VI.i.3.6; VII.i.1.45-46). He is dismissive of metaphysical contemplation because “after a few very simple and obvious truths, the most careful attention can discover nothing but obscurity and uncertainty, and can consequently produce nothing but subtleties and sophisms” (WN V.i.f.,28, 771). Thus, it seems that the portrait of the wise and virtuous man raises more questions than it answers, particularly questions regarding what links ordinary life experience with the transcendent moral framework that is described. In this regard it is worth quoting at length the apt assessment of Charles Griswold:

Smith’s theory of the passions provides no explicit place for philosophy, in the etymological and edifying Platonic sense of the term. To be sure, in its natural proclivity to enter into and understand the situation of another, to take interest in and weave together the other’s story, the sympathetic imagination resembles the urge to comprehensiveness and unity tied to eros in Plato’s Symposium and Phaedrus. But of course for Plato, eros also binds together mortal and divine, providing a “ladder” ascending from the ordinary (such as another’s physical beauty) to the extraordinary (such as the Forms). The highest of these steps is philosophy; in gathering together and ordering the passions of the soul in a unifying and perfecting vision of the divine, philosophy overcomes the division between theory and practice. No such account is possible for Smith.49

Without a principle that can bridge the socialized moral order and the divine moral order, Smith’s account of virtuous beneficence is not fully realized. While he acknowledges a need to embellish modern life and to approximate the best society through recourse to a transcendent moral framework, his teaching as a whole “reins in the urge to transcendence.”50 Although he indicates that religious belief is of fundamental importance in facilitating the pursuit of a shared moral framework, his ultimate concern with religious belief seems to be the negative aim of

49 Griswold (1999), 147-148; for more on this point, see also 56, 73, 149-155, 246-249, 286-292; cf. Hanley (2009), 74.

50 Griswold (1999), 155.
tempering it in order to avoid the “delusions of enthusiasm and superstition, which, among ignorant nations, frequently occasion the most dreadful disorders” (WN V.i.f.61, 788). It would appear that Smith looks forward to the secularization of political life in the name of “humanity,” through a modernizing historical process that will “reduce the doctrine” of religion to “that pure and rational religion” (WN V.i.g.8, 793). In this Smith signals his agreement with the general project of modern political philosophy, in spite of the degree to which it might undermine his commitment to a recovery of such premodern ideals as greatness, virtue, and nobility which are central to his account of beneficence.

Regardless of the plausibility of his moral teaching, Smith ultimately concludes that compassion is not a feasible principle on which to support modern political life. The sheer size and complexity of modern society requires a degree of coordination for which “mere love is not sufficient,” as our other-directed sentiments and inclinations are strong only under certain conditions, within narrow relational spheres (LJ(A) vi.44-45). Our selfish sentiments and inclinations are a good deal stronger and therefore they must serve as the touchstone of social order in a large and teeming society where most men are strangers to one another.51 Such considerations ultimately compel Smith to turn to economics and the science of self-interest, and he sees in a particular mode of commerce—free trade facilitated by the system of natural liberty—the best available means to achieve something that approximates a “bond of union and friendship” among disparate individuals and nations alike (WN IV.iii.c.9, 493).

By his own reckoning the liberal commercial society that embraces this system will not be “happy and flourishing” without the widespread exercise of compassionate beneficence, but it

51 On this point see Fleischacker (2004), 95-97.
is not the business of politics to instill or legislate compassion (see e.g. *TMS* II.ii.1; *LJ(A)* i.14-15). In Smith’s view, well-intentioned efforts to institutionalize compassion are likely to create abusive patterns of direct dependence that are ultimately more problematic from the perspective of human happiness than the ills that such measures are intended to alleviate.\textsuperscript{52} From the perspective of politics, “the peace and order of society, is of more importance than even the relief of the miserable;” as a result “the relief and consolation of human misery depend altogether upon our compassion,” the compassion of individuals acting in their private capacities, which in turn depends largely upon their habituation to virtue (*TMS* VI.ii.1.20, 226; cf. II.ii.3.3). “All government is but an imperfect remedy for the deficiency” of “wisdom and virtue,” but it is not a proper vehicle for the cultivation of wisdom and virtue (*TMS* IV.2.1, 187). Smith thus recognizes the claims of moral excellence, but insists that politics is not integral to the pursuit of excellence; he believes, or at least wants us to believe, that we need not sacrifice excellence or nobility for the sake of freedom.\textsuperscript{53} On the whole, Smith’s own sympathies appear to be somewhat divided. Contra Hobbes and Mandeville, he wants to maintain that virtue is necessary; contra Rousseau, he wants to maintain that virtue does not require a rejection of liberal commercial society.

It seems then that much like Rousseau’s teaching in the Profession of Faith, Smith’s teaching on compassion and noble beneficence is a salutary message that he believes to be necessary and useful for ordinary modern men living in a modern commercial society. Aside from his own concerns about the stultification of the human being, and the loss of nobility and

\textsuperscript{52} This can be seen in Smith’s account of how “charity” and “hospitality” were centralized in the authoritative rule of feudal lords and the medieval clergy, and became tools of oppression that enabled rulers to consolidate their despotic temporal and spiritual power (*WN* V.i.g, 801-802); see Rasmussen (2008), 124-129.

\textsuperscript{53} Cropsey (1957), 112.
greatness attendant upon liberal modernity, Smith too was driven by his own compassion for the poor and needy, for those who are overlooked or “left behind” by the progressive advance of commercial society.\(^{54}\) As Samuel Fleischacker points out, one of Smith’s most novel contributions was to change British attitudes toward the poor in his own time.\(^{55}\) He accomplished this through his compassionate portrayals of their plight and through his portrayal of noble beneficence as an elevated form of compassion and the pinnacle of praiseworthy character. Yet precisely in this similarity we can observe a major difference between Rousseau and Smith. Whereas Rousseau’s compassion for the poor is tied to his belief in the fundamental illegitimacy of commercial society, Smith’s compassion for the poor is tied to his desire to incorporate them more fully within the relational spheres of commercial society.\(^{56}\) This rhetorical convergence on compassion by thinkers of such divergent political commitments prefigures the ubiquity of compassion in contemporary political life, where it has spread across the existing political spectrum. But Smith’s compassionate rhetoric also reveals the deep tensions inherent in liberalism’s relationship to compassion. In his work we can observe clearly both the extraordinary need for compassion in liberal modernity, but also the incredible difficulties involved in securing, within the confines of liberalism’s philosophical assumptions and commitments, the necessary framework of moral beliefs that is needed to overcome the natural limitations of sentimental compassion.

\(^{54}\) On Smith’s sympathy with the poor and his deep concern with alleviating poverty, see Muller (1993), 72-73; Fleischacker (2004), 201-208; Evensky (2005), 12-16; and Rasmussen (2008), 101-108; and Rasmussen (2016).

\(^{55}\) Fleischacker (2004), 208; he also points out a few pages earlier (201) that it was Smith’s own students and admirers who proposed the most ambitious political programs for publicly funded assistance to the poor in late eighteenth-century Britain.

\(^{56}\) See Orwin (1997a), 314.
In attempting to dignify and ennoble compassion, Rousseau and Smith were speaking to the emerging reality of the liberal commercial society and its deleterious effects on human happiness and social relations. They were not responding to liberal democracy, the pervasive political form that the new commercial society would ultimately take. The existing societies they observed belonged wholly to the old regime and combined certain liberal principles—a commitment to commercial enterprise, or to private life over public life, for instance—with a social condition that remained essentially aristocratic and inegalitarian. Democracy was not yet a reality, nor did it seem a realistic possibility, during their lifetimes. Although the problematic relationship between liberalism and compassion becomes visible in their thought, it can only be grasped fully in light of liberal democracy, and for this reason we turn now to Tocqueville.

57 “The ancients… gave the name of democracies to those governments where the people had the same access to the magistracies and offices of state as the nobles. But of these we have none at this time in Europe.” Adam Smith, *LJ(A)* iv.68, 226.
Rousseau and Smith had both grasped that compassion was somehow connected with equality—or at least with the perception or recognition of likeness between oneself and another—and that inequality was major barrier to compassion. On the basis of their observations, one might expect that compassion would flourish most where equality is extended farthest. Tocqueville, with his unparalleled grasp of the nature of democracy, explodes this expectation. As contrasted with his predecessors, Tocqueville conceives of compassion not so much as a natural sentiment that we might seize upon to remedy modern ills, but as a socially constructed sentiment that issues from those very same ills. Modern compassion is a reflection of the democratic social condition, and as a result its status is paradoxical; under conditions of democratic equality, Tocqueville claims, compassion is at once prevalent and powerless.

The fact that compassion is weakest where it is most embraced—namely, in a democracy—turns out to be a pressing problem given democracy’s unique need for affective bonds to keep individuals united and interested in their fellows and their community. The most serious problems which the earlier thinkers had linked with liberal commercial society, the problems that compelled them to turn to compassion, come to a peak in liberal democracy. For Tocqueville, the problem of compassion in liberal democracy points to a more fundamental problem in the nature of modern political life as such. Democratic equality and democratic compassion are both derivative of the previous moral order established by Christianity, which
has been partly rejected but partly retained in modernity. In other words, Tocqueville sees the modern humanitarian sensibility not as a product of enlightenment or modern philosophy, but rather as a lingering relic of Christianity. Yet unlike its modern offspring Christianity provided the ground for a fixed moral order, reflected in a comprehensive system of beliefs, that gave sanction and meaning to other-directedness as exemplified in the virtue of charity. In attempting to maintain Christian moral commitments without the framework that supports them, the modern moral situation is ill-defined and tension ridden, as the paradoxical nature of democratic compassion illustrates. For Tocqueville the shortcomings of compassion do not reflect a failure in our moral thinking that can be corrected philosophically, through the pursuit of a more enlightened morality; instead, they are the inevitable result of the fundamental tension at the heart of modern political life, and they can be corrected only through a recovery of the comprehensive moral order from which compassion has been extracted.

Despite what he has to offer, Tocqueville remains an underutilized resource among political theorists concerned with compassion. And while Tocqueville scholars have extensively explored his treatment of the moral psychology of democracy, they have devoted relatively little attention to his reflections on democratic compassion.\(^1\) Although many have commented on the apparent insufficiency or weakness of compassion in Tocqueville’s estimation, there are surprisingly few sustained analyses of his treatment on this front.\(^2\) This chapter attempts to

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provide such an analysis, and I begin in the first section by situating compassion within the broader context of Tocqueville’s new science of politics which is adapted not to commercial society but to the democratic social state. The second section explores the more problematic tendencies of democracy that threaten to undermine the social bond and that seem to call out for more compassion. The third and fourth sections explain the paradox of democratic compassion as Tocqueville sees it, and the reasons why compassion is rendered powerless to counteract the vices inherent in democracy. The final section examines Tocqueville’s comparative evaluation of democratic compassion vis-à-vis Christian charity, his understanding of the relationship between these two sentiments, and his ultimate belief that we ought to embrace the latter to the degree that is possible in the age of democracy.

The Democratic Social State and the Softening of Mores

Tocqueville’s most focused treatment of compassion is found at the beginning of the third part of Volume II of Democracy in America, in a chapter entitled “How Mores Become Milder as Conditions are Equalized.” There he observes that the spread of democratic equality has produced a “greater mildness of mores” which is manifested in a peculiarly modern, democratic form of compassion: “In democratic centuries, men rarely devote themselves to one another, but they show a general compassion for all members of the human species” (DA II.iii.1, 95). A more focused yet brief account upon which I attempt to build here is provided by Clifford Orwin, “Compassion and the Softening of Mores,” Journal of Democracy 11, no. 1 (2000b): 142-148. Other passing comments about Tocqueville’s views on compassion occur in the context of broader discussions about the inherent mildness of democracy; see e.g. Pierre Manent, Tocqueville and the Nature of Democracy, trans. John Waggoner (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1996), 47-52. Additionally, Paul Franco, “Tocqueville and Nietzsche on the Problem of Human Greatness,” The Review of Politics 76 (2014): 439-467, reads the account of democratic compassion in light of Tocqueville’s Nietzschean concern with the erosion of human greatness.
This concise statement reveals the paradox of democratic compassion: compassion is a general feature of democracy, but democratic citizens are not readily given to acts of selfless devotion, sacrifice, or altruism. In other words, it seems to amount to a claim that wherever democratic conditions prevail, compassion is both present and absent. To understand the nature of this paradox, we must grasp Tocqueville’s account of the underlying dynamics of compassion and the social and psychological effects of democracy.

As indicated by the title and content of the chapter quoted above, Tocqueville follows Montesquieu in positing a close relationship between modernity and a general softening of human relations. But unlike Montesquieu, Tocqueville does not attribute the cause of modern gentleness primarily to the proliferation of commercial exchange; nor does he attribute it to the compassionate rhetoric of modern political thinkers like Rousseau and Smith. Instead, Tocqueville perceives modern gentleness to be the effect of a much deeper transformation in man’s social condition. The innovative point of departure for Tocqueville’s study of politics and the conceptual foundation for the “new political science” that he heralds in the introduction to Democracy is the concept of the social condition or social state (état social). To understand a given people, one must “begin by studying its social state,” which “is ordinarily the product of a fact, sometimes of laws, most often of these two causes united; but once it exists, one can consider it as the first cause of most of the laws, customs, and ideas that regulate the conduct of nations” (DA I.3, 45). The whole of Tocqueville’s social and political thought is grounded in

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his belief that the modern era is distinguished by a seismic transformation in social state which appears as “a great democratic revolution” (DA Intro., 3). The previous aristocratic social state of the European Middle Ages has gradually receded before the progressive march of equality, an ongoing transformative process manifested in the equalization of conditions, the democratization of politics, and the homogenization of societies that is “universal” in scope: “In whichever direction we cast a glance, we perceive the same revolution continuing in all the Christian universe” (DA Intro., 6). Such an all-encompassing transformation of man’s social condition, of course, brought with it an underlying alteration in mores (moeurs).

If the social state is the generative fact or “first cause” of all basic social phenomena, the mores (moeurs) which are fostered by it constitute a narrower category of more proximate causes. For Tocqueville, mores include both “habits of the heart” and “habits of the mind,” which taken together constitute “the whole moral and intellectual state of a people” (DA I.i.9, 275). Sheldon Wolin’s account of mores is particularly helpful in elucidating the cognitive and emotional substructures that support the interpersonal bonds of attachment in any given society.\footnote{Sheldon S. Wolin, 

Mores, as Wolin indicates, can be seen as a precursor to the modern understanding of political culture which Tocqueville did so much to shape. They encompass the “habits and customs, the transmitted experience, which human beings employ in their daily political and social life,” and they crucially include the “engrained feelings and sentiments” that “link men together.”\footnote{Ibid., 223-224; 226.}

Applying this to Tocqueville’s account of democratic mildness, we might say that democracy
breeds a culture of compassion. But it is far from clear, on this basis alone, whether compassion operates as an engrained feeling that links men together.

The Needs of Democracy and the Case for Compassion

In Tocqueville’s estimation democracy is both inevitable and, even if desirable as compared to premodern alternatives, problematic. Tocqueville famously devotes much of the second volume of Democracy to articulating the dangers he perceives to be inherent in the democratic social state, dangers which if left unchecked might lead to the loss of freedom and the emergence of a hitherto unknown kind of despotism. For our purposes, it is remarkable that Tocqueville describes compassion as a general feature of democracy that coexists alongside many of the same democratic ills for which compassion seems a promising remedy, at least to many a contemporary mind. Of the social and political problems that appear most pressing in our time, few were not seen or foreseen by Tocqueville. But whereas we are inclined to view these problems as indicative of a dearth of compassion, or of the need for much more compassion, Tocqueville sees them persisting where compassion is most prevalent. Of the democratic tendencies which concerned Tocqueville, three in particular might seem to cry out for compassion: rampant materialistic self-interest, toxic individualism, and group dynamics facilitated by persistent social cleavages and residual inequalities.

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6 Since the 2016 election of President Trump, several popular books bemoaning the decadence of contemporary American democracy have been written by disgruntled conservatives; each of them explicitly identifies our most serious problems as ones which Tocqueville warned about in Volume II of Democracy in America. See for example Ben Sasse, Them: Why We Hate Each Other—and How to Heal (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2018), 236; Deneen (2018), 173-174, 195-196; and Jonah Goldberg, Suicide of the West: How the Rebirth of Tribalism, Populism, Nationalism, and Identity Politics is Destroying American Democracy (New York: Crown Forum, 2018), 230-233.
The unbridled pursuit of material self-interest facilitated by liberalism and the acquisitive passions it unleashed had worried Rousseau and Smith enough to compel them to turn toward compassionate fellow-feeling in search of a moderating influence. According to Tocqueville, democracy further intensifies “the desire of bettering our condition” which Smith had posited as the animating principle of liberal commercial society. In observing the democratic Americans, Tocqueville is struck by the fact that they pursue material fortune with “a passion stronger than love of life,” and an “avidity” that often comes at the expense of their happiness (DA I.ii.9, 270). What can be observed in America is true of democracy in general: where “ranks are confused and privileges destroyed” by democratic equality, the imagination of each man is inflamed with the hope that he might one day be wealthy. Horizons are constricted as “the care of satisfying the least needs of the body and of providing the smallest comforts of life preoccupies the mind universally” (DA II.ii.10, 506-507). This cannot fail to have a deleterious effect on the quality of social relations. “Men who live in democratic times have many passions; but most of their passions end in love of wealth or issue from it;” as a result, such men are generally “indifferent” toward their “fellow citizens,” such that “it is only by paying them that one can obtain the cooperation of each” (DA II.iii.17, 587). Insofar as it gives a spur to the commercial passions, democracy hollows out interpersonal relations and reduces them to mercenary exchanges.

The universal obsession with acquiring wealth and material comforts is closely related to the Cartesian intellectual habits which Tocqueville believes to be characteristic of the democratic

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7 The intensity of acquisitive passions is intimately related to the general restlessness that characterizes democracy and inhibits happiness; see Dana Jalbert Stauffer, “‘The Most Common Sickness of Our Time’: Tocqueville on Democratic Restlessness,” The Review of Politics 80 (2018): 439-461.
social state, and from which originate a variety of individualistic tendencies. For Tocqueville
“individualism” is different from and more pernicious than the liberal egoism which had
concerned earlier thinkers like Rousseau and Smith. As distinguished from individualism,
“selfishness is a passionate and exaggerated love of self” that causes a man “to prefer himself to
everything;” it is born of “blind instinct” and it is “a vice as old as the world” that “scarcely
belongs more to one form of society than to another.” Individualism, on the other hand, “is of
democratic origin” and “has its source in defects of the mind” which necessarily accompany
“centuries of equality” (DA II.i.2, 482-483). These defects manifest themselves as a reflexive
overconfidence in one’s own capacity for knowledge and judgement. Thus, “in most of the
operations of the mind, each American calls only on the individual effort of his reason… Each
therefore withdraws narrowly into himself and claims to judge the world from there” (DA II.i.1,
403-404). This unreflective Cartesianism is a perpetual source of disunity: “Each then undertakes
to be self-sufficient and finds his glory in making for himself beliefs that are his own about all
things. Men are no longer bound except by interests, not by ideas” (DA, II.i.1, 406; see also AR
Foreword, 5). Insofar as democratic equality has erased the signs of rank and distinction that
characterize social hierarchy, it has also undermined traditional sources of authority that once
provided the ground for shared patterns of thought and belief. The absence of such common
ground produces a state of intellectual anarchy in which each individual is convinced of his own

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8 Tocqueville indicates that Descartes is the most democratic of philosophers and observes that “Americans do not
read Descartes’s works,” but “they follow his maxims” better than any other people in the world (DA II.i.1, 403).
Descartes’s maxims followed upon his individualistic commitment “to search for no knowledge other than what
could be found in myself;” this commitment entailed the rejection of tradition and all received opinions, a purging
from the mind of all that has been acquired through one’s relations or encounters with others (Discourse on Method
I.9). For useful distinctions between Tocqueville’s “individualism” and other senses in which that term is commonly
ability to arrive at a correct understanding of the world through the use of his mind alone. As Tocqueville observed, this conviction turns out to be an illusion. The same individuals who withhold legitimacy from authorities capable of establishing the grounds for a shared sense of meaning and understanding will inevitably bow before the authority of public opinion. Yet the self-deception manifested in the democratic psyche is powerful enough to produce a general lack of concern for the thoughts, opinions, beliefs, feelings, and situations of others.

In “a world where nothing is linked” because habits of the mind have their ultimate foundation in this species of epistemic individualism, the distance that separates individuals from one another continually increases (DA Intro., 12). What is to be feared from this condition is a kind of atomism in which the members of a society “become indifferent and almost like strangers among themselves.” Tocqueville’s innovative treatment of individualisme involves more than just “habits of the head,” as the phenomenon reaches to the heart as well: “each man… turns all his sentiments toward himself alone” (DA II.ii.2, 482-483). His well-known definition of this “recent expression” bears repeating at length here:

> Individualism is a reflective and peaceable sentiment that disposes each citizen to isolate himself from the mass of those like him and to withdraw to one side with his family and his friends, so that after having thus created a little society for his own use, he willingly abandons society at large to itself…Thus… democracy…constantly leads him back toward himself alone and threatens finally to confine him wholly in the solitude of his own heart. (DA II.ii.2, 482-484)

We can see here that individualism does not necessarily entail an increase in egoism or self-love, but a kind of alienation from the social manifested in the penchant for perceiving others merely as external objects rather than fellows to whom one is attached in a joint enterprise. It is a vision of the world that completely abstracts from one’s status as a citizen, and thus leaves no room for the activity of politics. It is more akin to apathy than selfishness.
Moreover, Tocqueville’s description indicates that this individualism is fully compatible with a kind of tribalism. The individual need not be “isolated” in an absolute sense but may still lose touch with the political community by extending his horizon no further than the “little society” of “his family and his friends” that exists “for his own use.” A democratic society may indeed give rise to a plethora of small groups, parties, or associations that are fully are hospitable to toxic individualism insofar as the concerns of the group do not extend to the broader political community. Thus, Tocqueville notes how the Americans self-select “with great care into very distinct little associations to taste the enjoyments of private life.” Even as democratic equality erodes the formal barriers that once separated social classes, “a multitude of artificial and arbitrary classifications are created” and men are “divided by a multitude of small, almost invisible threads” that are in constant flux (\textit{DA} II.i.14, 577-78). “Democracy does not prevent […] classes of men from existing;” new distinctions and hence new inequalities will continue to emerge, among individuals and groups alike, in the very midst of the ongoing equalization of conditions (\textit{DA} II.i.5, 546).

What Tocqueville fears most from these democratic tendencies—materialistic self-interest, individualism, and tribalism—is a general erosion of political life, whereby politics as such ceases to exist. Turning his attention to his native France, Tocqueville summarized these fears in an 1842 speech before the Chamber of Deputies:

But what is much more frightening, in my opinion, at least… is to consider the kind of quietude, I would almost say indifference, which is noted in the mass; it is to see to what degree among us… the mass remains, as it were, impassive and indifferent; it is to see, gentlemen, that every day more and more everyone seems to withdraw into himself and isolate himself; would we not say that every province, every department, every district, every commune sees in political life only an occasion to satisfy its particular interests, and that every citizen considers political life only as something which is foreign, whose care does not
concern him, concentrated as he is in the contemplation of his individual and personal interest?9

Tocqueville indicates that the Americans, as contrasted with the French, have avoided this fate, at least for the moment, because they have had some success combatting democracy’s worst tendencies through the doctrine of self-interest rightly understood. As distinguished from mere selfishness, this enlightened form of self-interest is manifested in and through relations with others, in the various interactions and associations that constitute “civil society” if not political society, and thus seems to leave more room for the exercise of compassion. “American moralists do not claim that one must sacrifice oneself to those like oneself because it is great to do it,” but because such sacrifices are “useful” and “necessary to the one who imposes them on himself”. Tocqueville argues that self-interest rightly understood is “marvelously accommodating to the weaknesses of men” which come to the fore in democracy, where the social state does not instill a taste for “instinctive virtues” or “blind devotions” (DA II.ii.8, 501-503). But while Tocqueville openly praises this doctrine in his published works, his private writings are more skeptical about whether it can truly stave off individualism and atomism, and sustain political freedom, in the long term.10 Even in the pages of Democracy he suspects, like Rousseau and Smith before him, that rational self-interest is insufficient to support the social bonds necessary for political life:

I avow that I do not trust this reflective patriotism founded on interest, and which interest, by changing its object, can destroy… What maintains a great number of citizens under the same government is much less the reasoned will to live united than the instinctive and in a way involuntary accord resulting from similarity of sentiments and resemblance of opinions. (DA I.ii.10, 358)


10 “But to what degree can the two principles of individual good and general good in fact be merged? To what point will a conscience that you could call a conscience of reflection and calculation be able to control the political passions that have not yet arisen, but which will not fail to arise? That is what the future alone will show us” (Democracy in American, Nolla Edition, 509n.); for more on Tocqueville’s doubts, see Zetterbaum (1967).
Tocqueville does not share liberalism’s confidence that “thick” social bonds predicated on instinct, tradition, and custom can be replaced adequately with abstract bonds predicated on reason or rational calculations of interest. The challenge facing liberal democracy is to find a new means for fostering social bonds that are deep and meaningful enough to sustain freedom. “It is necessary to multiply links, to bring men to see each other, understand each other, and have ideas, sentiments in common.”¹¹ Reason does not get us there, and thus it would seem that sentiment has an important role to play. Compassion in particular might seem to be a sentimental mechanism naturally suited to accomplish this task, insofar as it is compatible with an awareness and understanding of one’s fellows.

The bleak picture that Tocqueville paints of a decadent society, populated with individuals who are little more than floating, isolated atoms, equally powerless and equally unconcerned with the plight of their neighbors or the common good, and who are thus willfully ignorant of the demands of political life, is a compelling one.¹² It resonates deeply with those who look hopefully to compassion as a means of escaping this dreary condition. We are told that compassion, given its epistemic and moral functions, can break the habits of the mind that Tocqueville identifies in American Cartesianism. The inculcation of compassion, so the argument goes, teaches individuals to expand the horizons of their concern to include distant others. It is through compassion that we learn how to inform our own thought processes with the lived experiences of others; by cultivating our sensitivity to their concerns and particularly their

¹¹ Democracy in America, Nolla Edition, 923n.m, emphasis added.

misfortune, we come to see the world from a more accurate perspective. This idea is clearly discernible in Martha Nussbaum’s work, particularly in her account of the epistemological function of compassion, or emotional identification in general, which can enlighten us as to the distance between human capabilities and the actual plight of our fellows.\textsuperscript{13}

By thus striking to the psychological source of individualism, compassion would seem to illuminate a path of escape from the atomism and isolation toward which Tocqueville feared democratic equality was naturally inclined. If compassion is capable of shattering the Cartesian illusions and revealing to individuals that their own isolated reasoning and feeling is insufficient for arriving at a correct understanding of the world around them, then it probably would be capable of establishing a source of meaning beyond the self, namely, one located in the wellbeing of others. And if this were the case, compassion, properly inculcated, would motivate individuals to act out of genuine concern so as to alleviate human suffering in its various forms and actively contribute to the relief of man’s estate. In this way individuals might be linked to one another through compassion, not merely in private life but in a way that sustains a robust political life.

It is not surprising that such optimism might be attractive to those who have inherited Tocqueville’s concerns for the deleterious side-effects that accompany the spread of democracy. Insofar as Tocqueville’s description of democracy is compelling, it helps to explain the popularity of compassion as a moral category especially fit for democratic modernity. Yet those who acknowledge Tocqueville’s prescience in diagnosing the ills would do well to examine the grounds on which he did not share this optimism regarding compassion. While he sees

\textsuperscript{13} Nussbaum (1996; 2001).
compassion as a feature of democracy, he does not locate it among the “thousand other causes” that have tended to maintain a free democratic republic in America; on the contrary, he indicates that compassion may thrive alongside democracy’s worst tendencies without ameliorating them. We will now turn to examine why, in Tocqueville’s estimation, strong political compassion was doomed to remain an elusive ideal under the new democratic dispensation.

Tocqueville’s Sociology of Compassion

Like Adam Smith, Tocqueville conceives of compassion as a particular species of sympathy, or a broader and more general capacity for fellow-feeling that is innate in human nature. Yet sympathy for Tocqueville, like many natural human capacities, is malleable enough to be shaped and even distorted by social influences. Just as man’s sociability is natural yet amenable to a variety of manifestations as witnessed in transformations of social state, man’s capacity for fellow-feeling, though ultimately rooted in a natural faculty of emotional identification, is not rooted enough to withstand the shifting tides of social circumstance. As Peter Lawler has argued, Tocqueville’s account of human history owes much to Rousseau in this regard: over time, man has lost touch with those simpler virtues that once arose from natural

14 Tocqueville ponders the nature of sympathy and its various manifestations under different social conditions in his private notes; see Democracy in America, Nolla Edition, 989-990n.f.

15 See Tocqueville’s description of how the men of the democratic revolution in France were distorted by it: “events changed and transformed them without altering their nature,” Ancien Régime, Foreword, 4; cf. DA, I.i.10, 363. As this quote indicates, the status of nature vis-à-vis history in Tocqueville’s thought is difficult to ascertain and remains a matter of scholarly dispute; for an excellent contribution that provides a concise review of this debate, see Sara Henary, “Tocqueville and the Challenge of Historicism,” The Review of Politics 76.3 (2014): 469-494; on distinguishing what is fixed from what is malleable in human nature for Tocqueville, see Alexander Jech, “Man Simply: Excavating Tocqueville’s Conception of Human Nature,” Perspectives on Political Science 42 (2013): 84-93; and Mansfield and Winthrop (2000), xxvi; xxxiv.
In other words, while our other-directed sentiments may indeed be natural, they belong to that part of our natures that can be directed and distorted by mores, which in turn reflect the particular social state to which they owe their existence. If mores are the stuff of political culture, then compassion is primarily a cultural artifact. This helps to account for the difficulties that arise in trying to put compassion to work as a palliative for the social ills that are endemic to liberal democracy. Compassion itself is in some sense a product of the same social forces that generate and sustain the ills we would like it to remedy. To better substantiate these claims, we might examine how exactly the compassionate character of the democratic social state differs from or improves upon sympathetic relations typical of the prior aristocratic social state.

In contrast to the equality of conditions observed in its democratic counterpart, the distinctive feature of the aristocratic social state is hierarchy, a condition in which “all men are ranked in an irrevocable manner according to their profession, their goods, and their birth” (DA II.iii.1, 535). The aristocratic hierarchy perpetuates inequality of conditions by demarcating clear boundaries between social classes. Regardless of the precise contours of these boundaries, the aristocratic social state keeps the distinct classes at arm’s length from one another. At the same time however, it guarantees that ranks will tighten within each class. By virtue of their membership in a class, individuals are artificially compressed, as it were, pushed into close proximity with one another in a way that fosters the sort of in-group cohesion and capacity for devotion which Tocqueville appears to admire at times in the ancien régime.

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Tocqueville affirms that aristocrats, like all men, have a native capacity for fellow-feeling which is even embellished to some degree by their social standing: they “feel a continual and active sympathy for one another that can never be encountered to the same degree among citizens of a democracy,” and “one sometimes sees them lending mutual aid to each other with ardor” (ibid.). The sentimental bonds that attach members of an aristocratic class to one another resemble, but are not identical with, natural bonds of kinship. The strength of hierarchical institutions in the aristocratic social state is sustained by “the spirit of family,” in both a real and a metaphorical sense (DA I.ii.10, 300). Individuals belonging to a clearly defined social rank perceive themselves to exist within a bounded space, much like a family, populated by others of their station, and consequently feel themselves linked to those others by ties that run almost as deep as blood. The proximity which is established by this arrangement lends itself to intense, or “continual and active,” sympathy. Aristocrats can easily apprehend and share in the joys and pains of fellow aristocrats, and the sympathy they feel for their aristocratic brothers is capable of prompting acts of noble “generosity” and “great devotion.” (DA II.iii.1, 536).

Moreover, although this aristocratic sympathy did not extend far beyond the boundaries of one’s class, the aristocratic social state was still conducive to a certain mildness in the relations between classes. The simultaneous coldness and gentleness that Tocqueville attributes to the aristocrats in their attitudes towards the many is perplexing. Indeed, some of his most penetrating insights into the nature of aristocracy can be found in his exploration of this apparent contradiction: “society, amid its miseries, enjoyed several kinds of happiness” deriving from the social hierarchy. In some cases, “the nobles, placed at an immense distance from the people,

17 “When men are divided into castes, they have a fraternal sentiment for the members of their caste” (Democracy in America, Nolla Edition, 987n.a).
nevertheless took the sort of benevolent and tranquil interest in the lot of the people that the shepherd accords to his flock; and without seeing in the poor man their equal, they watched over his destiny as a trust placed by Providence in their hands” (*DA* Intro., 8; cf. *Memoir* I.21). Similarly, Tocqueville marvels at kings who are able to “see into the hearts of the peoples who come before them,” and speaks of “an exchange of sentiments [that is] established between prince and people, the mildness of which recalls to society the bosom of the family” (*DA* I.ii.9, 299).

In the final analysis, however, Tocqueville does not harbor any romantic illusions about the nature of these unequal relationships. Although he sometimes uses the language of kinship and family to describe the relations between kings or nobles and subjects or peasants, the metaphor, when applied where there is inequality, necessarily signifies some degree of cold condescension on the part of the former toward the latter. If the relations of aristocrats toward one another bear the marks of brotherhood and devotion, the relations of aristocrats toward their inferiors entail a kind of paternalistic contempt, accompanied by the temptation and potential for abuse on the part of those wielding paternal authority. Furthermore, while an aristocrat might be induced to act benevolently on behalf of those beneath him, it was not generally on the basis of sympathy or compassion, but because he “judged that his duty and his honor constrained him” to do so (*DA* II.iii.1, 536). This kind of *noblesse oblige*, in other words, aims to uphold the honor of the one belonging to a superior rank; it aims only incidentally at the improvement or relief of the one who is inferior, and it is not predicated on a recognition of their equal standing or dignity. In other words, there is no real fellow-feeling involved.

Tocqueville firmly believes that the inequality of conditions perpetuated by social hierarchy is inimical to genuine fellow-feeling, and that “there is real sympathy only among
people who are alike” (ibid.). The “immense distance” that separates classes is the root cause of “the trouble that aristocratic corps, of whatever nature they may be, have in mingling with the mass of the people” (DA I.ii.10, 328). This distance had grown to extreme proportions in pre-revolutionary France, where the peasant “lived more isolated, perhaps than had ever been the case anywhere else in the world,” and the noble, in relation to his peasant neighbors, “could not feel warm sympathy for their plight, which he did not share, nor could he join them in their grievances, which were alien to him” (AR II.12, 112). Generalizing from this extreme case, Tocqueville observes that social classes or cleavages in themselves constitute obstacles to compassion:

It is only with the utmost difficulty that the upper classes can ever perceive clearly what is going on in the soul of the peasants… But when the poor man and the rich man share virtually nothing in common, neither common interests nor common complaints nor common affairs, the darkness that hides the mind of one from the mind of the other becomes unfathomable, and the two could live forever side by side without ever penetrating each other’s thoughts. (AR II.12, 122-123)

The contradictory tendencies that Tocqueville ascribes to his aristocrats—a capacity for strong sympathy towards fellow members of the aristocracy, and a capacity for coldness bordering at times on cruelty towards all others—are the products of artificial social arrangements on which the whole social state depends. The distance that precludes genuine compassion is maintained by “fictitious” or “imaginary barriers” (DA I.ii.10, 328). In other words, the behavior of the aristocrats, even in the devotion which they show to one another, reflects a conventional arrangement more than a natural capacity for fellow-feeling. In describing the aristocratic social state, Tocqueville calls attention to its essential artificiality: “It is

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18 “Sympathy. It is a democratic word. You have real sympathy only for those similar to you and your equals” (Democracy in America, Nolla Edition, 989n.f).
impossible to imagine anything more contrary to nature and the secret instincts of the human heart,” or anything “so strongly repugnant to natural equity” (*DA* I.ii.10, 383).\(^{19}\) If compassion is assumed to be a defensible principle on the basis of its naturalness, the character of the aristocratic social state and the ease with which its conventions define the contours of fellow-feeling ought to give us pause.

**Democratic Compassion**

Some interpreters of Tocqueville have claimed that in contrast to the *ancien régime*, the democratic social state is a more accurate reflection of nature. Marvin Zetterbaum, for instance argues that democracy is ultimately defensible for Tocqueville on the basis of its naturalness: “As conditions become equal, conventional moral codes will wither away, to be succeeded by a natural morality corresponding to the natural condition of man. Democracy is the only social condition that does not give rise to a conventional code of morality, and in this democracy receives its justification: it alone is in accordance with nature.”\(^{20}\) This may seem to lend support to the case for compassion, as democratic compassion might very well be the realization or the unburdening of a more natural principle—perhaps something like Rousseau’s natural pity—that has been covered over with layers of convention. The proliferation of compassion in the age of democracy might then be taken as a sign that mores are losing something of their artificiality or are coming to reflect more completely human nature in its social or political aspect. Yet the

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\(^{19}\) Cf. *DA* II.ii.1, 536: “It is evident that these mutual obligations did not arise from natural right, but from political right, and that society obtained more than humanity alone could have done.”

\(^{20}\) Zetterbaum (1967), 39; cf. Manent (1996); for a critique of this common interpretation, see Henary (2014).
naturalness of compassion, if granted, does not necessarily speak to its ability to offset other inherent tendencies of the democratic social state such as individualism, atomism, or the restless pursuit of material wellbeing. In fact, the democratic compassion that Tocqueville describes is compatible with all of these penchants.\textsuperscript{21} Even if compassion does reflect a more natural mode of human sociality, we are still confronted with the fact that Tocqueville does not locate it among the “thousand other bonds” that enabled Americans to combat these pernicious tendencies in spite of their social state (\textit{DA} I.ii.10, 394).

But how exactly is it that compassion fails to move beyond the limited horizons of the democratic social state? Tocqueville’s explanation points to the manner in which democracy “spreads thin” our cognitive and emotional resources on which compassion depends. In this regard, there is an affinity between what we might call the paradox of compassion and the “paradox of power” that permeates Tocqueville’s political thought.\textsuperscript{22} For Tocqueville, the democratic social state is steadily torn by two fundamental but contradictory tendencies in the nature of power: as the scope of power increases, its felt intensity decreases. This is most readily apparent in regard to political power. Thus, Raymond Aron summarizes the conclusion of Volume II of \textit{Democracy} in light of this theme: “power is weakened and its sphere of influence is widened,” and this dual movement is manifested in the political realm through “the widening of administrative and governmental functions and the weakening of the political power of decision.”\textsuperscript{23} What Aron describes here is a particular instance of the more general process set in

\textsuperscript{21} Cf. Orwin (2000b); Lawler (2004).

\textsuperscript{22} Wolin (2001), 13.

motion by the democratic social state, namely the simultaneous expansion and softening of the sources and applications of all power. Or as Pierre Manent puts it, “in democratic societies, social power grows in proportion to the mildness of its procedure.” To understand the problem of democratic compassion as Tocqueville did, we need only substitute “compassion” or “sympathy” for “social power.” Tocqueville’s observations and descriptions of this fundamental democratic process are not limited to the expanding and softening of socio-political power, although this is certainly where his primary concerns lie. Because the social state influences the formation of human souls, the phenomenon reaches much deeper, ultimately affecting the powers of the human mind, including compassion. In democratic society “the bond of human affections is extended and loosened” (DA II.ii.2, 483, emphasis added). To borrow Adam Smith’s image, the democratic social state widens and weakens the spheres of sympathy for each individual, and the result is what Tocqueville identifies as democratic compassion. And because compassion is spread thin in this way by the social state, it is rendered a poor candidate for the relief of other democratic ills with which it shares its origin and essence.

The paradox of democratic compassion, then, is that it is both wide and weak. This is indicated by Tocqueville’s formulation: “In democratic centuries, men rarely devote themselves to one another; but they show a general compassion for all members of the human species” (DA II.iii.1, 538). Or, as reiterated in the opening sentence of the very next chapter, “democracy does not attach men strongly to one another, but it renders their habitual relations easier” (DA II.iii.2, 539). Democratic compassion is “wide” thanks to a vast expansion in the scope of sympathy,

24 Manent (1996), 51.
25 Zuckert (1993); cf. DA, I.i.1, 24.
facilitated by the growing equality of conditions that is coeval with the collapse of social hierarchy. The conventional barriers that previously inhibited the sympathy of aristocrats toward their inferiors are levelled by the emergence of the democratic social state that universalizes, at least in principle, the reach of sympathy. “When ranks are almost equal in a people, all men having nearly the same manner of thinking and feeling, each of them can judge the sensations of all the others in a moment… It makes no difference whether it is a question of strangers or enemies: imagination immediately puts him in their place” (DA II.iii.1, 538). In a democratic society where equalization and homogenization are well under way, one looks around and sees only semblables, others who are like oneself and who are thus equal candidates for one’s compassion. It requires little cognitive or emotional effort to feel their pain, insofar as one catches a glimpse of oneself in others; in this way, democracy renders compassion “habitual” and “easy.”

Yet in widening the scope of our compassion, democracy also weakens compassion. If, equality of conditions makes it easier for individuals to place themselves imaginatively in the situations of others, particularly those who are suffering some pain or misfortune, it also renders the ideas formulated through compassion less clear and the feelings less exquisite and more fleeting. In contrast to the “continual and active” sympathy which aristocrats entertain toward their fellows, democratic compassion is shallow and passive, or as Tocqueville puts it, “simpler and easier” (DA II.iii.2, 539). As our compassion becomes generalized and applied to a greater number of others, the powers of the sympathetic imagination are weakened as the mind struggles to fix itself on any particular object of compassion. Looking outside of oneself and seeing only semblables is quite different from doing so and seeing discrete persons or individuals. Yet Tocqueville repeatedly emphasizes that this is what happens in democracy: “the individual
disappears more and more into the crowd” (*DA* I.ii.9, 300; cf. II.iv.2, 642). As the democratic mind tends toward “general ideas” as opposed to particular impressions, democratic man stops perceiving others as individuals; instead they are subsumed within “the immense image of society” (*DA* II.i.3; II.i.18, 464). In keeping with this movement of the democratic mind, compassion struggles to focus on individuals in their particularity. It is severed from that intimacy which Rousseau and Smith had posited as crucial to its exercise, and it is transformed into something as vague and abstract as the “immense image” toward which is channeled.26 Under these conditions compassion generally amounts to little more than an ill-defined awareness of the suffering of others that is easily attained and easily forgotten, lacking the intensity needed to prompt actions of “generosity” or “devotion.”

The weakness of democratic compassion can be seen clearly in Tocqueville’s intimations of what it looks like in action. The culture of compassion that he observes in America arouses neither his ire nor his esteem; it is of a piece with democratic mediocrity. It renders life easier and more pleasant in some respects; for instance, Americans practice “good offices” toward their fellows when they have the chance, and criminal justice is carried out “with more kindness” than in other societies (*DA* II.iii.1, 538). Yet the compassion Tocqueville observes does little to temper democracy’s isolating tendency toward self-interest and individualism; rather, compassion itself was generally subordinated to these tendencies. Thus, Tocqueville indicates that the democratic convention of lending “mutual assistance when in need” is as much the product of “interest” as of compassion; “equality of conditions” generates a new kind of anxiety,

26 Delba Winthrop, “Tocqueville’s American Woman and the ‘The True Conception of Democratic Progress,’” *Political Theory* 14 (1986): 239-261; 248, has noted that Tocqueville’s democratic compassion is more akin to a passive principle or opinion than a deeply felt sentiment towards other persons.
as “all feel themselves to be subject to the same weaknesses and the same dangers” and realize that “some moment almost always arises when they cannot do without” the assistance of others (DA II.iii.4, 545). This nagging awareness of one’s own weakness, exacerbated whenever one observes the suffering or misfortune of others, might occasionally prompt one to act on behalf of those sufferers when no major sacrifice is required. But generally speaking, democratic citizens “scarcely provide great benefits,” “rarely devote themselves to one another,” and “do not hasten to offer services;” compassion exhausts itself in the incidental offering of casual or mundane “good offices” (ibid.). In other words, the kind of compassion that thrives in democracy is that which compels us to lend a hand to the person who has fallen directly in front of us, without really thinking about it; it does not entail a disposition to use our fellow-feeling as the point of departure for a more sustained reflection on the situations of others which might then foster a sense of attachment. Their compassion notwithstanding, Tocqueville’s democrats are not disposed “to think of those like themselves” (DA II.ii.4, 485). They are not led by compassion to apprehend the dignity of other persons as persons and to reformulate their concerns and commitments on the basis of this apprehension. We might say that as the mores of society are softened, compassion itself is softened or made shallow.

If the compassion fostered by democratic equality fails to counteract the tendency toward toxic individualism, it is equally powerless in the face of social cleavages and residual inequalities that manifest themselves as vestiges of a former social state. Although compassion is facilitated by the levelling of barriers which separate groups and individuals from one another, it is incapable of overcoming those barriers on its own.27 Nowhere is the tragedy of compassion’s

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27 This point has been recognized by Annalise Acorn, *Compulsory Compassion: A Critique of Restorative Justice* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2004), 133; and Lisa Pace Vetter, “Sympathy, Equality, and
impotence portrayed more starkly than in Tocqueville’s account of the racial oppression which coexists alongside the gentle mores of the Americans. Democratic compassion is negated when confronted with the “impassable space” that “separates the Negro of America from the European” (DA I.ii.10, 328). For Tocqueville, the continued existence of slavery in America reveals the absolute limits of compassion’s influence: “It is easy to discover that the lot of these unfortunates inspires little pity in their masters, and that they see in slavery not only a fact from which they profit, but also an ill that scarcely touches them. Thus, the same man who is full of humanity for those like him when they are at the same time his equals becomes insensitive to their sorrows as soon as equality ceases” (DA II.iii.1, 538). In short, democratic compassion requires but cannot generate equality. It is a reliable effect but an unreliable cause.

The actual behaviors and actions of Tocqueville’s democratic Americans, then, illustrate the paradoxical nature of democratic compassion. Individuals in democratic societies are more compassionate in the sense that they are conditioned to recognize and proclaim the injustice of suffering and misfortune on the basis of the dogma of equality. Democratic equality necessarily brings the suffering of others into the sphere of our compassionate awareness by widening that sphere. But those perceptions don’t necessarily carry much weight, because on the one hand there are too many such perceptions and our compassion is spread thin; and because on the other hand individualistic habits of the mind continue to predominate and undermine belief in the importance of compassion that would be necessary to prompt acts of devotion and self-sacrifice. Given that Tocqueville’s greatest fear stems from the apathetic “indifference” that reigns in

democracy, and that what is needed is “to get men to see each other” in order “to multiply links” and establish sentimental bonds, then these effects would seem to render compassion unsuited to the task. Democratic compassion is merely another expression of the democracy’s characteristic weaknesses. But at this point we might recall Tocqueville’s claim that religion is useful in precisely those places where democracy is weakest, and we might consider whether religion in his view can transform weak democratic compassion into something stronger (*DA* II.i.5).

From Christian Charity to Democratic Compassion… and Back Again?

In his *Memoir on Pauperism*—a generally overlooked writing published in England in 1835—Tocqueville reiterates that democratic modernity will have an unprecedented need for other-directed actions and sentiments. In the *Memoir* he focuses not on the democratic tendencies described in *Democracy*, but on the problem of wealth inequality and the plight of the poor in liberal modernity. Tocqueville affirms Adam Smith’s claim that economic inequality is inseparable from commercial society, and he advises that “we must look forward to an increase of those who will need to resort to the support of all their fellow men to obtain a small part” of the benefits of modern commerce and the general prosperity it generates (*Memoir* I.25). He suggests further that the best way to provide for this need is through individual action as opposed to state-directed public action, but that this requires a recovery or reinvigoration of the “divine virtue” of Christian charity. As distinguished from charity, Tocqueville mentions “compassion” only once in the *Memoir* by way of giving a concrete example of compassion’s weakness (*Memoir* II.34). It seems that for Tocqueville Christian charity might accomplish what
democratic compassion cannot, and the question of compassion thus points inevitably to the question of religious belief in his thought.

It is generally known that Tocqueville advocates for the social utility of religion in democracy, going so far as to claim that “if [man] has no faith, he must serve, and if he is to be free, he must believe” (DA II.i.5, 419). The usefulness of religion lies in the support it offers to morality, through its provision of a “certain and fixed” horizon in “the moral world” that places certain principles beyond “the discussion and attempts of men.” This fixed moral horizon facilitates “habits of restraint” that temper self-interested passions and it encourages the active commitment to “general duties” toward one’s fellows that combats individualism (DA I.ii.9, 279; AR I.3, 19). Tocqueville consistently maintains that religious belief is needed to establish a “moral bond” among individuals, and especially in democracy where “the political bond is relaxed” (DA I.ii.9, 282). Christianity, on account of its egalitarianism, is recommended as the religion most compatible with democracy, and also one that fosters moral bonds among individuals by making “charity” a personal virtue. The active exercise of this virtue depends on the belief that “one ought to do good to those like oneself out of love of God,” a belief that motivates other-directed action far more reliably than sentimental compassion (DA II.ii.9, 504).

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28 Some have characterized Tocqueville’s religious teaching as falling under the rubric of “civil religion” as previously considered by Montesquieu and Rousseau; see e.g. Sanford Kessler, Tocqueville’s Civil Religion: American Christianity and the Prospects for Freedom (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1992). Others have argued that Tocqueville’s account of religion is untenable, as its commitment to social utility reduces religion to a kind of noble lie or social myth that undermines religious belief; see e.g. Zetterbaum (1967). Among those who defend the consistency of Tocqueville’s account in its striving toward an alliance between religion and democratic politics, or between religious belief and modern philosophy, see Catherine Zuckert, “Not by Preaching: Tocqueville on the Role of Religion in American Democracy,” The Review of Politics 43, no. 2 (1981): 259-280; Aristide Tessitore, “Tocqueville’s American Thesis and the New Science of Politics,” American Political Thought 4, no. 1 (2015): 72-99; and Harvey C. Mansfield, “Tocqueville on Religion and Liberty,” American Political Thought 5, no. 2 (2016): 250-276.
The relationship between charity and compassion is elucidated in an illuminating epistolary conversation with Arthur de Gobineau, in which Tocqueville reveals his deepest thoughts on the nature of modern gentleness and indicates that democratic compassion itself is a lingering relic of Christianity, owing much more to its Christian heritage than to enlightened modern philosophy. According to Tocqueville, Christianity accomplished what Nietzsche would later depict as a revaluation of all values, or a great “revolution” in “all the ideas that concern duties and rights” (Correspondence 191; cf. DA II.i.3, 413, AR I.3). Through its teaching on “charity” it elevated “neighborly love” and transfigured “pity” into a virtue; through its teaching on equality it extended the duties associated with that virtue beyond narrow communities or “certain citizenries” to encompass “all men.” Thus, it was not religion as such, but the particular belief system inherent in Christianity that not only brought compassion to the foreground of man’s moral consciousness, but provided spiritual incentive for compassion to be empowered as an active principle transcending the confines of rank, class, or distinction (Correspondence 191-193).

Tocqueville goes on to posit that even as religion has “lost its empire over souls,” thanks in part to the democratic social revolution and in part to the assaults of modern philosophy, Christian ideas nevertheless remain at the core of the modern moral outlook, albeit in a diluted and distorted form. Modern morality has attempted to rid itself of the Christian religion while


30 See e.g. Nietzsche, Beyond Good and Evil 195, 202; Genealogy of Morals, First Essay.

31 As Tessitore (2005, 2015) has shown, Tocqueville believes that the modern political condition is animated and shaped by the ongoing and irreconcilable tension between philosophy and theology. This tension is a major theme in the political thought of Leo Strauss; see “The Mutual Influence of Theology and Philosophy,” Independent Journal of Philosophy 3 (1979): 111-118; and “Progress or Return?” in The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism: An
holding onto Christian moral commitments. Those commitments that have been retained are now internalized in the democratic social state and its political apparatus, but without the attendant belief system in which they were situated. In Tocqueville’s view, the attempt to separate Christian morality from Christian belief cannot succeed without altering the nature of the former. “Our society is much more alienated from the theology than it is from the philosophy of Christianity. As our religious beliefs have become less strong and our view of the life hereafter less clear, morality has become more concerned with the legitimacy of material needs and pleasures” (Correspondence 192). One example of this is the manner in which charity has been transformed into compassion. As both a “divine” and a “personal virtue,” charity had given “a finer, purer, less material, less interested, and higher character to morality.” By contrast, “our modern morality” has taken this “personal virtue” and tried to recast it as “a social duty, a political obligation, a public virtue” that is not tethered to any principle beyond the provision of “material needs and pleasures.” In the post-Christian world, individuals are no longer committed to charity because they lack the necessary belief structure. But the need for the consequences or effects of charity, understood by modern men as the need for compassion, has not gone away; on the contrary as we have seen, democracy has only made this need more pronounced. The weakening of religious belief thus “makes every eye turn to the State” as the guarantor of the compassion that is not reliably found among individuals (Correspondence 191-193).

To the young Gobineau, who has been won over by the modern morality, this development appears perfectly benign, for Christian charity is actually inferior to the new social morality of compassion advanced by modern philosophy. In a word, charity was too spiritual. Its

fundamental flaw derived from “the vast element of mediocrity in the moral principle of Christianity,” namely its demand that “everything rest on faith.” For Gobineau, the otherworldliness of Christian charity rendered it ineffectual in this world by constantly drawing man’s gaze away from his “actions and duties in this life.” Gobineau thus praises the growing “influence of Voltairian ideas” through which morality “has been brought down to earth.” In the hands of modern philosophers, charity has been transformed from an abstract principle into a concrete science of human suffering and the practical means to eliminate it through technology, and “the result has been more moral, more kind, more merciful than Christians could ever have been (Correspondence 197-201). For Gobineau, the secularization of Christian charity, or the unleashing of compassion from any higher moral principles is a welcome development that is fully in keeping with the ultimate philosophic aim of modern science. Gobineau does not share Tocqueville’s concerns regarding democracy and its self-interest, materialism, individualism, and eroding social bonds; he is even willing to sacrifice intimate other-directedness for the scientific project of eliminating rather than alleviating human suffering. Thus he summarizes the modern “theory” of social compassion: “I shall no longer be moved by the sight of a beggar and give him some help in passing. I shall, as a modern citizen, help put the government in a position to destroy misery.” This theory rests on the foundational principle that “each member of the social body has the right not to suffer from misery and destitution,” and in Gobineau’s view, “the power and dignity which morality has gained by this principle are beyond question” (Correspondence 200).

The distance between Tocqueville and his young interlocutor on the relative merits of Christian charity and modern compassion is vast. Tocqueville concedes that “it is possible” that Christianity is sometimes inclined to “spiritual excesses,” but he does not think this is “a very
great danger” because the “inclinations of the majority of men pull them in a converse direction; they rehabilitate their own flesh without the need of philosophers” (Correspondence 207). It is precisely the otherworldliness of Christian charity that is needed to combat the materialistic and individualistic bent of the democratic mind. Additionally, Tocqueville does not view modern or “social” compassion as superior to or even “more enlightened” than Christian charity (Correspondence 209). The idea that society as a whole, or more precisely the impersonal “sovereign,” should assume all the burdens of personal charity is degrading to the human spirit and especially the spirits of those who will most need to claim such a right. As Tocqueville explains in the Memoir, “ordinary rights are conferred on men by reason of some personal advantage… this other kind is accorded by reason of a recognised inferiority.” As a result, “the poor man who demands alms in the name of the law” is “in a still more humiliating position than the indigent who asks pity of his fellow men in the name of He who regards all men from the same point of view and who subjects the rich and poor to equal laws.” From the perspective of democracy’s need to forge affective bonds among individuals and groups, personal charity is superior in establishing “valuable ties” between giver and recipient: the giver interests himself “in the fate of the one whose poverty he has undertaken to alleviate,” and the latter, “supported by aid which he had no right to demand and which he may have had no hope of getting, feels inspired by gratitude.” Through the exercise of such personal charity, “a moral tie is established between those two classes whose interests and passions so often conspire to separate them from each other.” The same cannot be said for “legal charity” in the form of “public alms;” here, the giver resents being compelled to give, the recipient “feels no gratitude for a benefit which no one can refuse him,” and barriers are raised between the classes of rich and poor. Far from “uniting” these two “rival nations,” modern compassion, informed by the new social theory that Gobineau
praises, “breaks the only link which could be established between them,” “ranges each one under a banner,” and “prepares them for combat” (*Memoir* II.30-31).

Severed from the belief structure which had made a “divine virtue” of it, compassion has not only been depersonalized and institutionalized, but also politicized, transformed into a volatile political passion the dangers of which Tocqueville perceives in the French Revolution. In Tocqueville’s account, the anti-religious zeal that fueled much of the revolutionary violence was coeval with a surge in secularized compassion.32 A kind of political compassion, manifested in rhetorical appeals by politicians and the privileged classes for society to alleviate the misery of the French peasant class, played a causal role in inciting the people to violent cruelty:

> For 140 years, the people had been entirely absent from the political scene, so it was taken for granted that they would never be capable of putting in an appearance. Because they seemed so impassive, they were deemed to be deaf. When their fate began to arouse interest, others began to speak in front of them as if they were not there. Apparently, only those situated above the people were supposed to be able to hear what was said… Those who had the most to fear from the people’s wrath discussed out loud, and in their presence, the cruel injustices of which the people had always been the victims. They pointed out to one another the monstrous flaws in the institutions that had oppressed the people most. They used their rhetorical skills to depict the people’s misery and ill-renumerated labor. By thus attempting to relieve the people, they filled them with fury. I speak not of writers but of the government and its principal agents and of the privileged themselves. (*AR* III.5, 160)

Upon examining parliamentary speeches and royal decrees from the years leading up to the revolution, Tocqueville is particularly struck by the manifest insincerity of those social and political elites who promulgated the rhetoric of secularized compassion. The suffering underclass had “become the object of their sympathy without yet ceasing to be the object of their disdain” (*AR* III.5, 163). “Pity was often expressed for the peasants,” yet “for all this benevolence, there

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32 Among Tocqueville’s numerous criticisms of the French revolutionary project to dismantle religion, see *DA* I.ii.9, 281-282, 287-288; *AR* I.2, III.2; and *The European Revolution* II.iii.17, 110-111. For a more extensive account of the relationship between compassion and violence during the French Revolution, see Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Penguin, 1977), 49-105.
remained a great reservoir of contempt for the wretches” (AR III.5, 162). The politicization of compassion appears fully compatible with a characteristically aristocratic coldness toward those of a lower station and has nothing to do with the enlivening or extension of fellow-feeling. Unable to draw strength from religious belief, compassion easily gives way to affectation, and affected compassion easily masks underlying contempt.

At this point we might recall Machiavelli’s account of political compassion from chapter 2 above, which was also predicated on the rejection of Christian charity, or more precisely a reconceptualization of it with a view to political expediency. Debunking its claims to beneficence or altruism, and conceiving of it as a function of resentment, Machiavelli carved out a role for compassion as a political strategy to be employed in the pursuit and maintenance of political power. The politicization of compassion in France, as documented by Tocqueville, clearly followed a Machiavellian trajectory. The true concern of political elites who appealed to compassion lay not with assisting the needy, but with gaining ground against political rivals. “Down to the end of the monarchy, struggles between different administrative powers regularly resulted in clashes of this sort, in which each of the contending parties accused the other of causing the people’s misery… All of these statements were aimed at the enlightened segment of the nation so as to convince it of the usefulness of certain measures… As for the people it was taken for granted that though they listened, they would not understand” (AR III.5, 161-162).

Political compassion manifested itself not in the demand for protection by the people, nor in the promise of benefit from the rulers, so much as in the accusation, levelled by one faction against another, of being uncompassionate, or the competition between factions to portray themselves as being more compassionate. As Machiavelli’s teaching had previously indicated, political
compassion tends to become something different from compassion simply; namely, a means to the pursuit of purely political ends, most effectively employed the most politically astute.

But Tocqueville sees the French peddlers of political compassion as anything but astute, judging by the terrors they unleashed. “The goal of the privileged classes seems to have been to inflame the passions of the people more than to supply their needs” as they “labored to instill in the mind of the people the idea that their woes should always be blamed on their superiors” (ibid.). The affectation of compassion did not go so far as to provide a blueprint for the alleviation of suffering, although it went far enough to stoke the resentment of the sufferers. Increasingly “acute and imprudent” appeals to “sympathy for the people’s misery” served only to set the country “ablaze with greed, envy, and hatred.” The result “was to enflame each and every individual by enumerating his woes and pointing a finger of blame at those responsible, thereby emboldening the victims by revealing the small number of authors of their woes, piercing their hearts to the quick” (AR III.5, 164). The agitators who railed against the Christian religion, yet continued to appeal to Christian morality via secularized and politicized compassion, unleashed a new flood of suffering and vindicated Machiavelli’s claim regarding the affinity between political compassion and cruelty.

It seems then that for Tocqueville Christian charity cannot sufficiently be replaced with compassion, whether of the politically charged variety of revolutionary France or the soft and mediocre variety of democratic America. But can Christian charity, which presupposes religious belief, be sustained in the modern age? Tocqueville remains ambivalent on this question, although he seems to come closer to answering in the negative. On the one hand, he does not simply accept what is now known as the “secularization thesis,” which predicts that religion will gradually wither away with the spread of enlightenment and freedom; yet on the other hand, he
takes as given that in modern Europe religion has “lost its empire over souls,” and that consequently, “the most visible boundary that divided good and evil is overturned” (DA I.ii.9, 282, 299). He indicates further that religiosity is transformed by the democratic social state, which breeds “an almost invincible distaste for the supernatural” (DA II.i.1, 404; II.i.17, 461).33 Even in regard to America, where religion appears to be thriving in comparison with Europe, Tocqueville discloses his doubts in an 1831 letter to Kergorlay: “either I am badly mistaken or there is a great store of doubt and indifference hidden underneath these external forms.” In America, “generally speaking, religion does not move people deeply,” and extant religious belief is “expiring day by day;” nevertheless, the future of democratic religiosity is difficult to tell: “By what will it be replaced? Here my doubts begin…” (SL 48-50).

Some scholars find reason for optimism in Tocqueville’s affirmations of the universality and permanence of religious longing as “rooted in human nature” (AR I.3, 20).34 Indeed, Tocqueville posits that “the taste for the infinite and the love of what is immortal” are natural to man, resting on an “immovable foundation in his nature” (DA II.ii.12, 510; see also II.ii.15, 520-521). Religion “is as natural to the human heart as hope itself,” and thus “disbelief is an accident; faith alone is the permanent state of humanity” (DA I.ii.9, 284). Yet Tocqueville also provides plenty of indication that these universal longings can be distorted, and that man’s natural hope and faith can be redirected away from the transcendent and toward that “immense image” of social power that dominates the democratic mind. In other words, these deepest human longings


34 See e.g. Sarah Beth V. Kitch, “The Immoveable Foundations of the Infinite and Immortal: Tocqueville’s Philosophical Anthropology,” American Journal of Political Science 60 (2016): 947-957; see also Mansfield (2016), esp. 252, 258, on the importance of Tocqueville’s distinction between material nature and spiritual nature.
can lose their “vertical” orientation and assume a “horizontal” one. This is precisely what transpired during the French Revolution, which “itself became a new kind of religion,” but one “without God, cult, or afterlife” (AR I.3, 21). With the emergence of a new secular religion oriented toward the dogma of equality, the principle of charity was ousted by that of social compassion, a quasi-religious principle fueled by quasi-religious passions. But there is no reason to believe that the quasi-religious can satisfy needs of the heart which are properly religious, and good reason to suspect that unfulfilled natural longings—unfulfilled because they are no longer directed toward their natural end—will ultimately produce misery and suffering, as Tocqueville’s account of the revolution shows.

Ultimately, in spite of many apparent reasons for despair, Tocqueville never abandoned his efforts to sustain religion in the context of democracy, such that in 1853 he could reflect back on his life and declare that his “sole political passion for thirty years” had been to bring about a “harmony of the liberal sentiment and religious sentiment” (SL 295). A similarly persistent theme across his writings is the unprecedented need for other-directedness or beneficence in democracy, along with his conviction that “beneficence must be a manly and reasoned virtue, not a weak and unreflective inclination” (Memoir II.36, emphasis added). Affirming what Rousseau and Smith had understood, Tocqueville saw that compassion alone does not provide sufficient reason for virtuous other-directed action. Certain beliefs are needed for this, beliefs that support beneficent action with fixed reasons that transcend the restless fluctuations of the democratic mind. Thus, one of the great challenges of the democratic age is that of re-establishing “the natural bond that unites […] actions to beliefs” (DA Intro., 10). For Tocqueville

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35 “When religion deserted souls, it did not leave them, as so often happens, empty and debilitated. For a time they brimmed with new feelings and ideas, which temporarily took the place of religion” (AR III.2, 141).
the challenge can only be met through an alliance between Christianity and democracy such that the “divine virtue” of charity is allowed to grow and flourish. The most promising grounds for such an alliance lie at the intersection between democratic self-interest and Christian charity, insofar as the latter places one’s interest in the life to come. “Christianity tells us that one must prefer others to oneself to gain Heaven; but Christianity also tells us as well that one ought to do good to those like oneself out of love of God;” this “magnificent expression” seizes upon self-interest, while at the same time pointing the way beyond self-interest to charity (DA II.ii.9, 504; cf. II.i.5, 422). Yet Tocqueville readily admits that self-interest alone will not suffice for charity: “The doctrine of interest well-understood can make men honest. But it is only love of God that makes men virtuous.”

A genuine longing for God, sustained by substantive beliefs in him and his revelation, is indispensable to the exercise of charity. How this “vertical” longing can be awakened, given that the democratic mind exhibits “an almost invincible distaste for the supernatural,” and whether these beliefs can truly be nourished through an alliance with self-interest remains ultimately unclear.

Like Rousseau and Smith, Tocqueville recognizes the inherent weaknesses of sentimental compassion, but he understands them differently in light of the democratic social state. For Tocqueville, the modern softening of mores from which compassion emerges is not the product of man’s enlightenment or the discovery of “humanity,” but of dissociative social forces which portend the loss of human greatness and perhaps of freedom as well. The recovery of strong

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36 Democracy in America, Nolla Edition, 925; see also Manent (1996), 91.

37 In the words of Owen (2015), 136: “Tocqueville never does affirm that American religion fills the gap left by self-interest well understood oriented toward earthly goods. It remains a grave question for him whether American religion on the whole, being predominantly this-worldly in orientation, is capable of doing so.”
social bonds requires an elevation of man’s horizons of the sort that premodern morality had allowed for. While his predecessors recognized this need, Tocqueville goes further than them insofar as he does not call for a “fixing” of sentimental compassion so much as its replacement through the recovery of Christian charity. Tocqueville thus encourages us to question not just the technical application of a modern moral principle, but the very grounds for that principle. In doing so, he compels us to consider whether the question of compassion in modern political society might be a superficial one that conceals more fundamental questions about the nature of that society itself. The modern democratic society that Tocqueville describes has not broken fully with the past, as the early liberal thinkers had intended; but neither is it self-consciously linked with that past. It is neither Christian nor post-Christian, and as a result its principles and commitments are not coherently integrated. If what Tocqueville suggests is true, then we must reexamine our thinking about compassion and our expectations for what it should accomplish.
CHAPTER 6
BEYOND COMPASSION

I have attempted in this study to raise the question of compassion’s place and value in modern political life, a question of great significance for contemporary political theory insofar as it has tended to embrace compassion without an awareness of its questionable or problematic grounding in modern political thought. Despite the skeptical tone I have adopted throughout, I do not mean to suggest that compassion should be, or for that matter can be, rejected or dismissed. Compassion is here to stay, not only because it is a natural human sentiment, but also because it is thoroughly engrained into the moral consciousness of liberalism. Understanding how and why this is the case, however, should lead us to adjust our expectations as we arrive at a more correct assessment of this sentiment.

Leaving aside matters of psychology for a moment, compassion is bound to have a place of prominence in the liberal conscience for at least two distinct reasons, one historical and the other philosophical. I have posited (with the assistance of Tocqueville in the previous chapter) that the former can be found in the lasting influence of Christianity and an unwillingness on the part of modern man to abandon Christian morality despite rejecting the Christian religion. The Christian heritage of western thought, particularly in its emphasis on the divine virtue of charity, has trained the modern mind to locate morality in the realm of other-directedness. Our readiness to assimilate goodness and morality to compassion owes no small debt to this religious heritage.
The latter and more complicated reason can be found in the fundamental commitments of the modern philosophical project that sought to supersede Christianity and gave birth to liberalism. The thinkers who initiated this project—men like Bacon, Descartes, and Hobbes—identified the ultimate goal or aim of philosophy with the relief of man’s estate, the relief of human misery and suffering, through mastery over nature. In this aim the modern project as a whole shows a limited but nevertheless plausible affinity with the tradition of Christian charity.¹ Insofar as liberalism takes its bearings from the essential premise that suffering and death are the worst of all evils, and that the task of political life and political science is the avoidance, alleviation, or annihilation of such evils, compassion can be understood as a fundamental principle of liberalism as such. It is hardwired into the liberal mind and for this reason will always be politically relevant in liberal society. Thus, when Tocqueville speaks of democratic compassion, he attests to the fact that liberal democracy has thoroughly internalized the fundamental commitment of modern political philosophy, as democratic man identifies suffering or misfortune with injustice. What passes for compassion, or the general culture of compassion that democracy breeds, is really the inculcation and ascendance of this posture that presumes pain and death to be the worst of all evils, and proceeds to derive morality or justice from this presupposition. This “embeddedness” helps to explain why compassion is so readily associated with notions of progress in our time.² Insofar as we might say that the idea of compassion is equivalent with the ultimate aim of modern political philosophy, then any sign of compassion’s

¹ Strauss (1968), 20-21.

² A clear example can be observed in the rhetoric of President Barack Obama, particularly regarding the crucial importance of compassion and empathy for facilitating progress in the Middle East; see e.g. “Remarks of President Barack Obama at Student Roundtable in Istanbul,” Apr. 7, 2009; and “Remarks by President Obama in Address to the United Nations General Assembly,” Sep. 21, 2011.
increase or advance, whether in speech or in deed, must be taken to signify a step in the right
direction toward an enlightened and rational society. Of a kind with “humanity,” or a civilized
and humane sensibility, compassion thus serves as a touchstone for favorable assessments of
liberal modernity vis-à-vis the dark ages of unfeeling and inhuman ignorance.

Yet as I indicated at the beginning of this study, the once fashionable narrative of liberal
progress has increasingly become doubtful and fallen into disrepute. Even as modern philosophy
or science continues to pursue its compassionate aim of relieving man’s estate on earth,
compassion itself appears to be lacking “on the ground” in our political life. That is, there seems
to be a serious disconnect between the infinitely compassionate ideals we have embraced and the
very finite manifestations of real compassion among real people. This tension, which each of our
three main thinkers in this study grappled with in his own way, is inherent in liberalism itself. On
the one hand, the underlying philosophy on which liberalism is grounded aims at the awareness
and relief of human suffering. On the other hand, it posits as the fundamental moral fact the right
of the individual to self-preservation, which quickly expands to include such things as are
deemed conducive to peace and comfort—liberty, property, the pursuit of one’s own happiness,
and eventually, in our time, “the right to define one’s own concept of existence, of meaning, of
the universe.” In practice this means that social morality is understood not as something that is
imposed upon individuals by themselves or others, but something that emerges freely from the
behavior of individuals acting on an enlightened understanding of their passions and desires as
“interests” within a liberal commercial society. Thus, liberalism professes a compassionate or
other-directed aim, insofar as that aim abstracts from private interests to address a human plight

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that is supposed to be universally shared. But in the context of political life, where the ordinary opinions and actions of individuals are concerned, liberalism proposes to reach that aim indirectly through self-referential means. The question of moral education is rendered obsolete in some sense, as good institutional design and the proper structuring of “incentives” and “preferences” are supposed to accomplish the social cohesion necessary for the scientific pursuit of liberalism’s philosophical goal, while also contributing to and reflecting the progressive movement toward that goal.

What this means for compassion and its manifestation among individuals in their social relations is not immediately clear prior to experience. If compassion itself is a species of selfish desire as the ancient philosophers had maintained, we might expect that it should flourish alongside the other passions and desires once their premodern constraints are removed and they are rehabilitated under the guise of interests. Merely debunking compassion by showing its underlying affinity with egoism as opposed to altruism does not necessarily lessen its instrumental value in the context of a social condition that depends upon enlightened egoism. The crucial question is about the relative weight of compassion in the economy of sentiments; that is, whether on balance compassion can be relied upon to prevail when it inevitably runs up against more blatantly self-regarding passions and desires. For Rousseau, Smith, and Tocqueville, the answer is no; it is precisely in such a conflict of competing passions and desires that compassion shows itself to be a relatively weak sentiment. Thus, each of these thinkers anticipated what we observe today: liberal society is riddled with serious problems that are in some way indicative of the absence, or perhaps more precisely the inherent limitations, of compassion.
As these diverse considerations are taken into account, the central problem that comes to light seems to be that liberalism is geared toward deceiving us and frustrating us when it comes to compassion. The philosophical aim which it pursues centers our moral horizon around the problem of suffering and its relief through freedom and mastery over nature, and as a result the liberal mind is conditioned to conceive of moral ends in terms of compassion. At the same time, the social and political arrangements through which liberalism pursues its aim do not facilitate but instead hinder compassion’s influence on our ordinary action or behavior. The “compassion problem” that is inherent in liberalism derives from the gulf between our ideal of compassion and the actual sentiment of compassion. The aim that speaks to us in the language of compassion does not align with what the sentiment of compassion can accomplish in social or political terms.

Hence the frustration that so many denizens of liberal modernity feel toward our present condition. Insofar as we profess to value compassion, this is supposed to be taken as a sign of progress toward an enlightened and rational society that is gaining the upper hand against suffering; but as a mere sentiment compassion is neither enlightened or rational, nor is it particularly strong. Even as we make progress toward the philosophical goal, acquiring ever greater control over nature and suffering, our social and political conditions show signs of regress as individuals and groups grow more divided and dissociated. In the present moment, when no one would suggest that American political life is particularly healthy, it is little comfort to be reminded continually that our lives are longer, safer, and wealthier than at any other time in human history.¹ In the midst of a degraded social condition material progress leaves us

unfulfilled. But might this not suggest that there are sufferings of a kind which the modern philosophical project does not take into account, sufferings that stem from or relate to our status as political beings? Rousseau, Smith, and Tocqueville would seem to indicate that it is precisely this set of human problems, as distinguished from the ordinary needs and desires of our animal nature, for which compassion is of little use.

In its original form the liberal project begins with the thesis that man is asocial by nature. Compassion, insofar as it understood to be natural, challenges this assumption and points to a certain sociability or at least sociality. Yet to reorient modern political philosophy toward the supposition of natural sociability only takes us so far. In the traditional view that originated with Aristotle, to be a social animal is not the same thing as to be a political animal, and compassion seems to be an aspect of social nature but not political nature. It ends at the Aristotelian household or village and does not extend to the political society, and thus as we have seen, Aristotle did not even include compassion in his political teaching as contained in the *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Politics*. The modern thinkers I have examined here would all agree, insofar as their critiques of sentimental compassion converge on its inherent limitations, which constrict that sentiment to narrow relational spheres that correspond to those sub-political or pre-political units.

Insofar as liberalism denies that man is a political animal by nature, the great question that all liberals have grappled with up to the present day, knowingly or not, is on what basis to construct an artificial political life. It is within this context that compassion continually emerges in the conversations around liberal theory over the past century. One strand of neo-liberal thought, typically associated with American conservatism, attempts to maintain a sharp distinction between the micro-cosmos of private or pre-political life and the macro-cosmos of
public or political life, and to relegate compassion entirely to the former. 5 Those who adhere to this strand of thought consciously aim to sever the link between liberalism and compassion, and more generally to downplay the need for strong bonds of sentimental attachment in liberal society. 6 They would remind us that liberalism depends upon a unique social morality that abstracts from natural other-directed sentiments, which belong properly to the small closed society of familial or tribal life which we are attempting to move beyond. The openness of the liberal society requires the repression of instinctive social emotions that operate within narrow spheres, and the willful submission to a purely conventional order of impartial, generalized rules that facilitate peaceful coordination among large numbers of strangers who hold a plurality of divergent beliefs, aims, ends, and commitments.

Those who think along these or similar lines attempt to sustain the original liberal project and its promise that a vibrant political life can be maintained without recourse to other-directed or public-spirited sentiments, on the basis of enlightened self-interest that is only constrained by general rules, particularly those negative injunctions that establish an arena for the most comprehensive exercise of individual freedom that guaranteed to all. Because sentimental compassion cannot be translated into a generalizable rule that is consistent with these aims, the

5 As indicated in chapter 1, in recent years even American conservatives have attempted to embrace compassion as a principle of political action in the public sphere; thus, the strand of thought described here might more adequately be considered as “libertarian” in today’s language.

possibility of anything resembling a “politics of compassion” is precluded. Those who remain committed to this project carve out only a very limited space for the exercise of compassion, which shares the fate of religion: it is a private affair that has no business entering the public sphere. While the liberal order is not structured so as to cater to our other-directed sentiments or inclinations, we are still left free to indulge those inclinations within the narrow spheres of private life, free to establish “thick” bonds of our own with those of our choosing as we see fit. Moreover, even if this social order demands the painful or uncomfortable repression of (or at least abstraction from) our compassionate inclinations in the short term, we can rest assured that it is worth our trouble in the long run: the tangible benefits we seek from compassion will in time be granted to us tenfold by the benevolence of the free and open society itself, through the many material blessings that accrue to it as it progresses toward the goal of modern political philosophy.

The problems with this perspective have already been alluded to here, as they were in the critiques of liberalism that preface the treatments of compassion in Rousseau, Smith, and Tocqueville. Experience seems to belie the conviction that enlightened self-interest can provide for the needs of political life in a satisfactory way, as well as the conviction that the material blessings of liberal commercial society can fulfill the most important human needs. At least part of what we seek from compassion has nothing to do with tangible material goods, but with needs and desires of an intangible, social, relational, and ultimately political sort: a need for stronger bonds or ties that speaks to a nagging awareness of what a political community is meant to be. Precisely because it frustrates this aspect of our compassionate inclination, liberalism finds itself perpetually on thin ice. Human nature revolts against the pure conventionalism or proceduralism that abstracts from those social instincts and moral emotions that motivate and guide action in
our intimate relational spheres. If man is a political animal by nature but is deprived by his social condition of a political life that can fulfill this end of his nature, social emotions like compassion may remind him of that end without pushing him toward it. In the new mode of social existence that is the free and open society, compassion thus tends to be manifested as an indictment of the impersonal and non-teleological liberal order, and thus tends to be expressed through political desires and demands—those for “social justice,” for instance—that often require serious interference with, if not abandonment of, liberalism’s core political principles which are devoted to securing individual liberty through generalized, non-particularistic rules.7

This gives rise to a second discernible strand of neo- or post-liberal thought, more readily associated with American progressivism, which attempts to utilize compassion as both a motive and a guide to reform or restructure liberal institutions and processes in order to remove divisions, conflicts, and inequities among individuals and groups, all while staying true to the broader goals of modern political philosophy. As indicated at the beginning of this study, those who adhere to this strand of thought often take a position similar to Gobineau’s: since compassion only appears to be effective among individuals at the sub-political or pre-political level, it must be transformed from a private sentiment into a political principle, where the insights that sentimental compassion might provide can be used to guide decisions and actions in our institutions. If we cannot rely on there being a prevalence of compassionate individuals in liberal society, this does not preclude the possibility of there being a compassionate government, one that is structured so as to enact compassionate policies or to internalize something like

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7 Hence, doctrinaire liberals of a “conservative” or “libertarian” sort, including many who consider themselves to be “classical liberals,” are inclined to double down on the total exclusion of compassion from political considerations; see F.A. Hayek, Law, Legislation, and Liberty, Vol. 2: The Mirage of Social Justice (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 66-67, 88-91, 110-111, 133-152.
compassion in its procedures. The desire to institutionalize compassion in order to bring about a better condition seems to me to reflect a desire to bridge the gap between the social and the political that is revealed by the limits of compassion and our simultaneous longing to overcome those limits; a desire, that is, to establish a more effective basis for political life than liberalism provides, but without abandoning the central aims of the liberal project.

Rousseau, Smith, and Tocqueville all share something in common with both sides—conservative liberals and progressive liberals—in the ongoing debate over compassion’s place in our society; they saw what both sides see but also saw further. Against those who would now consider themselves doctrinaire “classical liberals,” these thinkers insist that rational self-interest cannot provide a basis for political life that will leave us satisfied, and that compassion, in spite of its serious limitations, can serve a useful function as a counterpoise to the problem posed by self-love in liberal society. Insofar as the aims of liberal morality are limited to facilitating the peaceful pursuit of self-interest, liberal democracy is perpetually threatened by the specter of excessive individualism that might veer off in the direction of making individuals enemies to one another, or in that of completely isolating them from one another. This problem is in no way offset by the emergence of different sorts of problems—uniformity, enthusiasm, tribalism, partisan polarization—that seem to run in the opposite direction of individualism. Rather, the two kinds of problems tend to be mutually reinforcing. Excessive egoism remains an ever-present ailment of liberal society, and compassion can play a limited negative role in curbing this tendency in the interactions of daily life. It is precisely with a view to such threats that Rousseau and Smith in particular employed a rhetoric that aimed to arouse and educate the compassion of their audiences.
Against the compassionate reformers who seek a remedy for liberalism’s ills in a more compassionate government, Rousseau, Smith, and Tocqueville insist that compassion must be an intimately felt sentiment that arises among and toward discrete individuals, and that it ceases to exist as such when it is reconceived as an abstract, impersonal principle belonging to institutions. Tocqueville more than either of his predecessors was sensitive to this problem, particularly in light of how the democratic social state tends to erode the power and influence of mores and mediating institutions, while bolstering the power and stature of the ruling political apparatus. Insofar as this is the case, democratic man feels himself to be left with no other recourse than to turn to the administrative state in search of a mediating power to remedy perceived social problems that stem from atomism, indifference, and separation, problems that are all the more problematic insofar as they fly in the face of liberal democracy’s promise of fraternity through equality. Yet all three thinkers indicate that something must always be lost in the attempt to translate a particularistic personal sentiment into a generalizable political principle. This does not necessarily mean that our political institutions ought to be unconcerned with the plight of the unfortunate, or that the relief of suffering ought not be a serious political concern. But while these may be admirable aims in themselves, they cannot be expected to reach those underlying problems of liberal society which the thinkers examined here understood to be the root causes of suffering and unhappiness, and their effectiveness is likely to be mitigated in the unavoidable process of translation.

For Rousseau, Smith, and Tocqueville, then, harnessing the sentiment of compassion with a view to offsetting liberalism’s more problematic tendencies can only be done at level of individuals, from the bottom up and not the top down. There is no passing this task off to institutions or higher levels of association. Of course, even at the level of individuals,
compassion’s inherent limitations remain, which in turn set definite limits to the social and political effects that can derive from it. The boundaries for our expectations should be determined in large part by compassion’s natural limitations, the most serious of which stem from its dependence on proximity, familiarity, and intimacy, and the manner in which it is weakened and distorted in relations that entail distance or difference. Compassion presupposes but does not produce equality, and therefore is of little use in bridging deep social cleavages or forging new social bonds, particularly where residual inequalities remain.

With a view to those limitations, all three thinkers counsel moderation, and their practical suggestions involve putting compassion in a position to succeed, cultivating and relying upon it where it is naturally strongest: at the level of individuals, families, and small-scale associations. In other words, the best way to maximize the efficacy of compassion may require a commitment to localism that would entail standing athwart compassion’s tendency toward humanitarian universalism, a tendency that is exacerbated under the influence of democratic equality. In this our thinkers align more closely with that dominant strand of American conservatism that has taken up the mantle of “classical liberalism,” which insists that compassion properly belongs to sub-political or pre-political arrangements, to the realm of civil society or private life. Even with the emergence of “compassionate conservatism” in the early twenty-first century, the aim was not to transform the federal government into a direct dispensary of compassion, nor to embrace compassion as an institutional principle for guiding policy. Instead, the emphasis was on mobilizing individuals and local associations, with strong preference given to faith-based

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8 A fundamentally different approach is taken in Martha Nussbaum’s (2019) most recent book, wherein she presents our essential duties as those toward abstract “humanity,” with our localized or particularized duties being derivative of and subordinate to these.
initiatives, to act with compassionate beneficence for the needy and unfortunate in their own vicinity. A similar approach would seem to be recommended by the teachings of Rousseau, Smith, and Tocqueville, who understood that the gentle and humane spirit that first animated the political discourse of liberal modernity was quite different from and should not be mistaken for the strong, heartfelt compassion that is only truly possible among intimates.

As I have already indicated here, this thoroughly liberal and moderate response to compassion’s limited reach—a response that might seem but one step removed from an outright dismissal of compassion—is as unlikely to satisfy us as it is to solve the social and political problems that concern us. A clear awareness of compassion’s limitations does not liberate us from the need to address those problems; it merely shows compassion’s attenuated usefulness in doing so. But Rousseau, Smith, and Tocqueville did not stop at a critique of compassion. This study has brought to light the crucial distinction these thinkers made between merely sentimental compassion on the one hand, which they did not endorse in an unqualified way and of which they were indeed quite critical; and on the other hand an elevated ideal of a strong, noble, virtuous compassion which transcends the limitations of merely sentimental compassion. Each of the thinkers attempted to chart a course from compassion to virtue, to strengthen sentimental compassion by transforming it, using it as the point of departure for an overcoming of self-interest and sentiment alike.

In their efforts to strengthen and ennable compassion, it seems as though these thinkers, with the possible exception of Rousseau, were groping about in search of a way to renew, revive, or at least approximate political life in a liberal context that is corrosive of it. Those efforts emerged from a critique of liberalism, or a shared unwillingness to approach social life as if it were nothing more than a coordination problem that needs no recourse to “politics” as
traditionally understood. Thus, their teachings on the elevation of compassion are predicated on appeals to such considerations as happiness, flourishing, or nobility, that go beyond the more prosaic and characteristically liberal concerns with self-preservation, self-interest, or commodious living. Their critiques of sentimental compassion show its limits to lie in narrow boundaries that correspond to sub-political or pre-political units. Their attempts to salvage or strengthen compassion can be seen as attempts to bridge this gulf between social and political that has been widened by liberalism, to harness the natural sentiment of compassion in order to make man political, or to cover over the fact that he is not political by nature in a better way than liberalism proposes to do. They converge upon compassion as the starting point for this task precisely because they are moderns, operating in the context of an all-encompassing philosophical project that theoretically prioritizes compassion but also provides limited alternative means for addressing the problematic aspects of liberal society. And ultimately, each of their distinct teachings on how compassion might be elevated in order to accomplish this task points far beyond compassion itself, and beyond even the parameters of liberalism itself.

Rousseau, Smith, and Tocqueville indicate in no uncertain terms that any project to empower compassion by overcoming its natural limitations, to transform it from a relatively weak and parochial sentiment into a strong and equitable one that might foster robust bonds among disparate individuals who otherwise share little else in common, will require us to address the deeper moral beliefs that individuals hold. To the extent that these thinkers entertain the possibility of compassion playing a positive role in fostering deep and meaningful social bonds among individuals, it is only insofar as compassion might be situated within a hierarchical moral framework that acknowledges the existence and primacy of higher-order goods that abstract from the natural desires and sentiments. Compassion as such is weak and particularistic, and therefore
from the perspective of political life it is directionless. To be made strong and general, and thus
purposive, it must be guided by the comprehensive vision of a moral order transcending the
interests and sentiments. Each of the thinkers thus attempted to provide such a vision with a view
to elevating compassion for the relief of modern political ills. Their attempts are distinct, and
each must be considered and evaluated in light of the others.

Of the three thinkers, Tocqueville’s proposal, which entails a return to or a recovery of
Christian charity through an alliance between the democratic instinct and the religious instinct, is
perhaps the easiest for us to understand. Tocqueville seems to have seen more clearly or at least
spoken more straightforwardly about what his predecessors were attempting to do with
sentimental compassion: namely, to retain Christian morality in the form of compassionate
fellow-feeling but without the guiding light of the Christian religion, replacing its belief system
with approximations better suited to the modern condition as they understood it. Unconvinced
that this could work, Tocqueville repeatedly stressed the crucial importance of Christianity for
democracy, in part because he was convinced that Christian charity could sustain strong social
bonds in a way that sentimental compassion never could. *Caritas*, grounded not in a natural
sentiment but a transcendent love of God and devotion to him, overcomes the characteristic
weakness of sentimental compassion. It lends compassion a motivational force, a purpose or
intentionality, that is otherwise lacking. Through the divine virtue of charity, compassion is
harnessed to a “good will” that is in turn oriented by God’s will toward active and effectual
neighbor-love.\(^9\) Moreover, charity is not parochial or constrained within narrow spheres of

physical, cultural, social, or political proximity; it is universal and trans-political, and thus better equipped to work across all manner of artificial boundaries that separate men.\textsuperscript{10}

If Tocqueville is correct, and we are misguided to place our faith in secularized compassion, then this suggests that we would do well to resist secularizing it further, and to not only allow but encourage the Christian religion to exercise what influence it still has upon the transfiguration of compassion into a divine virtue that is stronger and more reliable than the sentiment from which it issues. Yet in practical terms the alliance between democratic politics and the Christian religion that Tocqueville worked to bring about throughout his career is not easy to envision, much less to actualize. Tocqueville himself, as we have seen, suspected that the religious impulse was weakening with the progressive advance of equality. By contemporary measures, his suspicions appear to have been vindicated.\textsuperscript{11} Thus, whatever hopes we might attach to the prospect of using religion to harness and strengthen sentimental compassion in a way that might have widespread societal effect seem less justified in our time than in Tocqueville’s. To reinvigorate a traditional religious edifice around compassion seems more hopeful than plausible.

The same could be said of Adam Smith’s attempt to transform sentimental compassion into virtuous beneficence. Like Tocqueville, Smith came to the conclusion that strong compassion would ultimately require a particular kind of belief system, not necessarily


\textsuperscript{11} While America remains among the most religious of liberal democracies, religious belief in general and Christianity in particular appear to be steadily declining; see e.g. Pew Research Center, “In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace,” Oct. 17, 2019; and Jeffrey M. Jones, “U.S. Church Membership Down Sharply in Past Two Decades,” \textit{Gallup}, Apr. 18, 2019. Nevertheless, some contemporary political thinkers are doubting down on religion as the proper solution to the crisis of liberalism, as can be observed in the recent surge of “Catholic Integralism;” see Edmund Waldstein, “An Integralist Manifesto,” \textit{First Things}, October 2017; and Rod Dreher, \textit{The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation} (New York: Penguin Random House, 2017).
Christianity but belief in a comprehensive moral order that reflects a “divine archetype” of moral perfection and that demands from us an active beneficence toward our fellows. As contrasted with the other two thinkers, Smith’s proposal for ennobling compassion draws more heavily upon classical ideas like nobility, greatness of soul, and the “awful” virtues of self-command. Yet as I suggested at the conclusion of chapter 4, this ultimately renders Smith’s proposal less realistic and less plausible perhaps than either Rousseau’s or Tocqueville’s. If a compassionate solution to the social problems of liberal commercial society requires us all to become like Smith’s “wise and virtuous man,” who perfectly combines a humane sensibility with a harsh ethic of self-denial, then it requires a recovery of precisely that which liberalism was intended to leave behind. Smith himself does not provide us with the tools we would need to undertake such a recovery. In the absence of a more precise educative proposal, we cannot help but suspect that Smith wanted to have his cake and eat it too—to salvage the high and noble aspects of premodern morality, while at the same time putting them into harmony with the low and base aspects of liberal commercial morality. Smith himself thus embodies and reveals the deep tensions that arise in simultaneously committing to the pursuit of a liberal society and a compassionate society.

Unlike Smith, Rousseau did not have the positive aim of salvaging liberal society, but the negative one of staving off some of the damage and distortion it wreaks on the human soul; his proposal involves recovering as much of man’s natural goodness as is possible in the context of a corrupt liberal society, while utilizing the Vicar’s religion of sincerity and naturalness to extend and empower compassion for beneficial social effect. For Rousseau, strong compassion relies less ostensibly on a recovery of virtue than it does for Smith; but at the point in Rousseau’s teaching where virtue becomes necessary for taking compassion to the next level, it is facilitated
by a post-Christian religion that is less restrictive and perhaps more accessible to modern man
than the traditional Christianity that Tocqueville sided with. Through the Vicar’s teaching
Rousseau, like his successors, testifies to compassion’s need for a framework of belief in a
transcendent moral order, but the one he supplies for us is calibrated (to the extent that it is
possible for Rousseau) to work in tandem with man’s inner nature as opposed to denying or
mortifying it. His is a belief system that is not predicated on human depravity, but on the clear
and simple voice of conscience that speaks to each of us through the sentiment of compassion if
we will only be true to ourselves and listen for it.

Of the three thinkers, it seems that Rousseau’s teaching has gained the most traction
subsequently, insofar as it might be seen as an inspiration for “new age” ethical movements that
prioritize a synthesis of sincerity and compassion.12 Something like this can be observed in the
recent psychological literature on compassion, which has grown increasingly interested in
grounding “compassionate practices” in a kind of natural spirituality—often focused on gaining
clarity in regard to the “inner self” or “inner voice”—derived from Eastern psychological and
religious traditions, particularly Buddhism and westernized (which is to say, secularized)
derivatives of it such as mindfulness and meditation.13 Although the parallels between this and
Rousseau’s teaching are bound to be limited, the increasing currency of such practices in the
liberal west does point to the lasting appeal of a watered-down, post-Christian religion of
naturalness, sincerity, and compassion along Rousseuaean lines. Ironically, it may be that

12 On this point see Melzer (1997), 274-295.

13 Ringu Tulku Rinpoche and Kenneth Mullen, “The Buddhist Use of Compassionate Imagery in Mind Healing,” in
Paul Gilbert ed., Compassion: Conceptualisations, Research, and Use in Psychotherapy (New York: Routledge,
2005), 218-238; and Nicholas B. Allen and Wendy E.J. Knight, “Mindfulness, Compassion for Self, and
Compassion for Others: Implications for Understanding the Psychopathology and Treatment of Depression,” in
Gilbert (2005), 239-262.
Rousseau, the avowed enemy of liberal modernity, provides a blueprint for elevating compassion that is more faithful to the psychological penchants of modern man, whereas Smith and Tocqueville who were far more friendly to liberal modernity were in fact too reactionary in their similar efforts, gazing backward toward classical and Christian morality, respectively.

Yet even in the case of Rousseau we run into problems which must qualify our evaluation of his teaching, or at least the consequences we can expect from it. The currency or popularity today of “a kind of reflexive and easygoing Rousseauianism” does not necessarily speak to its success in making us more compassionate, or even its desirability for that matter. If we limit ourselves strictly to the parameters of Rousseau’s thought, tensions remain which ultimately limit the social and political consequences that can be expected to result from his teaching. Perhaps the most serious tension is related to the uneasy combination of a self-centered ethic of sincerity and authenticity—“just be yourself, listen to yourself”—with an expansiveness that is manifested in compassionate sensitivity for the unfortunate and suffering. It would seem that the imperative of caring for others must always stand on somewhat shaky ground if people are taught that being true to themselves is the most important thing. Yet as indicated in chapter 3, these problems were not unknown to Rousseau, but reflected the supreme difficulty of his task, the retention of some semblance of goodness for self and others in the context of corrupt liberal society. Rousseau himself believed that even the most educated, elevated, and empowered

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14 Melzer (1990), 292. For a thoroughgoing critique of the various permutations of Rousseau, one would do well to consult Nietzsche, who once described his own task as “my struggle against the eighteenth century of Rousseau, against his ‘nature,’ his ‘good man,’ his belief in the dominion of feeling” (Will to Power 1021; cf. Twilight of the Idols IX.48). Moreover, Nietzsche also predicted the emergence of a westernized and popularized version of Buddhism (see e.g. Genealogy of Morals Pr.5; Will to Power 55); far from enhancing or strengthening political life, he saw this development as a movement in the direction of nihilism and sickness with life: “Buddhism is not the culmination of a thoroughly moralistic development,” but of a “yearning for Nothing” (Will to Power 1; cf. 23).
version of compassion that we can hope to achieve will ultimately provide only marginal benefits in a social condition that remains utterly decadent.

Thus, in the final analysis, it seems that none of these thinkers provides an entirely satisfactory solution to the problem of compassion in liberal society. Each attempt to transform compassion into something other than an unimpressive sentiment proves to be problematic in its own way. This would seem to reflect the fact that what is required to elevate and strengthen compassion is ultimately at odds with the fundamental premises of the liberal regime. Yet this does not mean that these teachings on compassion are without value for us. Grasping what it is that Rousseau, Smith, and Tocqueville were trying to do leads us to a deeper understanding of the problem of compassion and liberalism, and also suggests certain limitations in contemporary political thought, insofar as it has failed to grapple fully with this problem.

It seems to me that much of contemporary political theory, insofar as it remains committed to the liberal project, has grown even more disillusioned with self-interest than the thinkers examined here, or has lost faith in the more rational aspects of liberalism. This is understandable to some extent, as some of the most intractable problems in liberal democracy seem to be those that stem from egoism or individualism. It was precisely the problematic character of rational self-interest, or more precisely a politics based on rational self-interest, that compelled eighteenth-century thinkers to turn to other-directed sentiments like compassion in the first place. But although such critiques are as old as liberalism itself, in the past few decades political theory has taken a more radical turn against reason, or what we might call the rationalistic side of the liberal project. As one scholar has put it, “the demise of liberal rationalism” in recent years is manifested in a loss of faith or confidence in “the original claim that liberalism is grounded in natural right and reason and therefore the claim that it is
I suspect that this has something to do with the enthusiastic embrace of the emotions or sentiments in much recent political theory. This trend, however, does not necessarily reflect the moral and political fruitfulness of the sentiments; on the contrary, it might simply reflect the fact that liberal rationalism has undermined itself to such an extent that it leaves us with no other apparent recourse than emotion or sentiment. In this regard, we might wonder whether recent attempts to recover from the Age of Enlightenment a tradition of sentimental morality and sentimental politics reflects the fact that liberalism has left us few other resources for confronting the political problems of our time.

On a more immediate and practical level, one ostensible reason for bringing the emotions back into political theory is in response to the problem of political apathy that is endemic to liberal democracy, for reasons explained in Tocqueville’s account of the political implications of democratic individualism. It is with a view to this problem, among others, that recent political theorists have drawn upon the history of modern political thought to call for “an impassioned rather than a dispassionate politics.” Insofar as compassion in particular draws us out of ourselves and extends our interests to encompass unfortunate or suffering others, thereby establishing a social bond, it is tempting to embrace a politics of compassion as a counterpoise not only to social fragmentation, but so also to the citizen indifference that is associated with it.


However, given the state of contemporary political life in America and in western democracies more generally, I am inclined to suspect the prudence of seeking out a more impassioned politics. As democracy has progressed universally along the lines that Tocqueville predicted, new concerns have arisen that are quite different from those that led the thinkers examined here toward compassion. In the pre-democratic age of Rousseau and Smith, the primary political problem for which compassion appeared to offer a solution was that of misguided self-love or vanity, the egoism which is transformed into materialistic individualism under democracy. However, as democracy has spread alongside technological progress, mass movements facilitated by previously unimaginable modes of political communication and rhetoric have presented a novel problem that in some respects stands opposite to that of individualism and atomism, and thus seems to require an altogether different solution. In a democratic age where mass collective movements are liable to be manifested as a kind of viral affliction, transmitted with the aid of technology through “emotional identification” or “emotional infection” and manifested in symptoms of enthusiasm and hysteria, we must consider whether the most pressing task for social morality might not be to bolster individuality and maintain the distance between persons rather than seeking to collapse it through a morality of compassion.

Of the thinkers examined here, it was Tocqueville who best understood the challenges that would be posed by mass political movements in the age of democracy, thanks in no small part to the concrete example of the French Revolution.\textsuperscript{17} The experience of this and subsequent revolutions in the age of democracy has proven that compassion, or more precisely the

\textsuperscript{17} Tocqueville’s awareness or anticipation of mass political movements can be seen in his concerns regarding the potential omnipotence of public opinion in democratic society.
politicization of compassion, is fully compatible with brutal outbursts of the most wanton violence. Not all manifestations of unity are conducive to healthy political life, and in some cases the unity which compassion might establish may actually be corrosive of political life as such, insofar as compassion abolishes the distance between men where political matters are located and where *logos* properly resides. This point has been made more recently by Hannah Arendt in her reflections on the affinity between compassion and revolutionary violence in the modern era: “Talkative and argumentative interest in the world is entirely alien to compassion, which is directed solely, and with passionate intensity, towards suffering man himself… it will shun the drawn-out wearisome processes of persuasion, negotiation, and compromise, which are the processes of law and politics, and lend its voice to the suffering itself, which must claim for swift and direct action, that is, for action with the means of violence.”\(^{18}\) In other words, politicized compassion threatens to bypass *politics* altogether; for this reason it has proven quite valuable not only among revolutionaries but also aspiring tyrants who would seek to abolish political life properly speaking. All of this reflects what we can recognize as the Machiavellian aspect of compassion, and it suggests that a degree of caution is warranted before settling on the necessity of a more passionate politics, whether the passion in question is compassion or any other. If, as opposed to the self-interested egoism and vanity that so greatly concerned earlier modern thinkers, a greater danger in our time emanates from the enflamed collective passions that drive men to political violence, then a hard-nosed analysis of compassion along the lines of those given by the thinkers in this study ought to be taken seriously.

\(^{18}\) Arendt (1977), 77.
On a more general level, Rousseau, Smith, and Tocqueville are of great value in leading to us to improve our self-knowledge as the inheritors of modern liberalism. Together they help us to understand that our present way of thinking about compassion stands in a precise relation to the larger historical trajectory of Western political philosophy. Compassion has emerged in our moral consciousness not by accident, but out of the dual conviction that human nature has no higher spiritual or rational end, and that what is low and base in human nature—and such was compassion according to the premodern view—can nevertheless suffice for us. While this conviction may not be flattering to humanity, it is flattering to human self-interest, to the asocial and apolitical aspects of our nature on which liberalism seeks to build society and polity. Premodern political thinkers held with near unanimity the view that democracy cannot function well or sustain itself without a fixed moral framework whereby justice is secured through virtue understood in terms of self-denial, devotion to the common good, and rational control over one’s passions and sentiments. Liberalism posits that this is wrong, that a free democratic society can attain a desirable level of functionality and cohesion without recourse to virtue. If experience has shown us that liberal society has serious needs of its own, it has also shown that we are predisposed to perceive those needs as a general need for more compassion in our political life. It is surely in keeping with our narrow interest to view compassion rather than virtue as the one thing most needed. It is precisely in requiring so little of us by way of self-denial, in proving so compatible with the self-indulgence on which liberal morality is predicated, that sentimental compassion appears all the more charming. It seems to hold forth an easily accessible, more human proxy for virtue, promising to secure the social and political benefits of virtue without the attendant pain or discipline.
The three attempts to strengthen and transfigure sentimental compassion call into question whether any of this is actually possible, whether our preconceptions rest on reasonable grounds. Together they point us back in the direction of virtue and the need for a moral compass beyond the enlightenment of our interests, a moral order that reintegrates some modicum of rational self-denial, self-command, self-control into our primary considerations. The compassionate path forward, as conceived by each of our three thinkers, is really in part an attempted return, or a recovery of something that was lost in the moment that compassion was released from its premodern constraints. What is indicated most unanimously is that in order for compassion to play the role in our society that we would like it to, it must draw strength from a realm of human possibilities, encompassed in moral and religious beliefs that have been progressively eroded in modernity. What would be needed in order to realize a “politics of compassion” is precisely that which is precluded by liberalism. Moral discipline and self-denying virtue are the enemy, to be vanquished through a philosophical project that entails specific political conditions which liberate individuals from the strictures of transcendent morality and virtue alike. To move at all in the other direction, from the perspective of liberalism, would be to regress, to swim against the current not only of the liberal regime as a whole but all of history as understood through the lens of that regime.

Thus, in the case of each thinker compassion turns out to be merely a prelude, an entry wedge for grappling with the much deeper question of liberalism as such and its value for human life. The possibility that comes to light is that the fundamental issue may not be the limitations of compassion, but of liberalism—not this sentiment, but our regime that is in need of serious reconsideration. The ultimate question we are led to confront is whether liberalism is worth it. Are we willing to suffer a degraded social condition, impoverished human relations, political
disharmony, and nagging dissatisfaction for the sake of material prosperity and technological progress that claims to liberate us with increasing efficiency from material pain and suffering?

Given the discontent that is manifested daily in contemporary political life and political thought, the answer seems increasingly to be no. Although liberalism has had its fair share of detractors since it first emerged in early modern political philosophy, skepticism toward the liberal project is of a different sort today, more prevalent and more panicked. It is not without reason that highly successful books of the past few years can bear such titles as *Why Liberalism Failed, How Democracies Die, How Democracy Ends, Suicide of the West, The Road to Unfreedom, Ruling the Void*. Such books gain currency because they resonate on some level with those who are living on the fruits of the liberal project and find themselves unfulfilled by it. The broader philosophical project of which liberalism is an aspect has succeeded in its compassionate aim of reducing material suffering to a degree that would astound any of the thinkers examined here. Yet no matter how many times we are reminded that we live in the most prosperous, efficient, and materially advantageous era of human history, something still rings true about the claim that liberalism has been tried and found wanting on some dimension of human flourishing. If the reason for it is not material, then it must be ideational, psychological, spiritual, moral; a crisis of meaning rather than of matter. The horizon that liberalism provides for us seems to leave out of account the most important human things; insofar as our understanding of compassion and the expectations we attach to it is derived from this horizon, we are bound to be perplexed.

If we are inclined to overestimate compassion’s potential strength, it is likely because liberalism has left us with no other recourse—as the modern philosophical project has succeeded, alternative avenues to a flourishing political life have withered away or faded from sight. This
portrait of our current predicament can be detected in inchoate form in the convictions of Rousseau, Smith, and Tocqueville, convictions that were not necessarily made explicit but were nevertheless revealed as they sought to retain a broader framework of belief in the existence of a moral order in which to situate compassion. In those convictions we can observe an awareness of the need that modern man still has for political philosophy and theology, for reason and revelation, beyond what can be provided for by the sentiments or interests alone. Although eighteenth-century thinkers like Rousseau and Smith were compelled to engage with the sentiments and with compassion in particular, they did so with an intuitive awareness that it would require assistance from these higher sources. In this they were wiser than we are, insofar as we are inclined to simply forget these two primordial influences and then wonder why compassion fails to actualize the political outcomes we desire.

At the end of the day, Rousseau, Smith, and Tocqueville do not give us the easy answers we seek, but they do point us in the right directions, leaving it up to us to take the further steps. The avenue that appears to be more open to us in the present day is the one leading back to political philosophy as the quest for the best way of life. Keeping in mind that compassion only took on a new significance when political philosophy officially abandoned its quest for justice understood as the best political regime, we would do well to consider the possibility that our attachment to compassion has come to reflect, in a starved and attenuated form, a natural longing on our part to make good on that quest. The possibility, that is, that somewhere beneath the perpetual rhetoric of compassion in our political life and discourse, we are likely to find competing opinions about the good life and competing visions of the best political regime. Perhaps by re-engaging with the quest to find the best and worthiest among them, we can
overcome the desperate inquietude that propels us along on the restless pursuit of an illusory
resting place in the morality of compassion.


Abbreviated: *Summa*.


Abbreviated: *Nic. Ethics*.

Abbreviated: *Pol*.

Abbreviated: *Rh*.

Abbreviated: *Poet*.


   Abbreviated: *Conf*.


https://www.pewforum.org/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/


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